

Moral Competence, Personality, and Demographic Characteristics: A Comparative Study

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1. Introduction

Moral development is a multifaceted topic which has evolved since the ancient times. Especially the issue of moral competence emerges as a subject of particular interest nowadays due to the exacerbation of school violence and bullying. Educators and researchers have focused on moral competence in education and its impact on the socio-moral development of a child in an effort to explain not only how morality develops but also the role of the school setting in its evolution.

One of the facets of education that is deemed to have great importance for morality is physical education (PE). According to Bredemeier & Shields (1985) PE is the most important domain in education since it affects not only the children's socio-moral development of but also their personality. PE teachers constitute a role model that students look up to (Jones 2005) while sports constitute a domain where certain behaviors can be accepted that in other domains they would not (Bredemeier & Shields 1985; Guivernau & Duda 2002). In addition, Stoll and his colleagues (1995) found that athletes exhibited lower moral competence than non-athletes and Duquin (1984) showed that moral competence was contingent upon years of participation: more years of sport involvement meant exhibiting less moral behaviors. Moreover, research has shown that in sports athletes use less mature reasoning in contrast with everyday life (Bredemeier & Shields 1984; Bredemeier & Shields 1986; Shields & Bredemeier 1995) and that children's moral reasoning is of lower quality in the sport context than in everyday life (Bredemeier 1995). Therefore it is evident that moral competence in sports differs significantly from that of everyday life and that sports context is a unique domain regarding the exhibition of moral behaviors (Bredemeier & Shields 1984; Bredemeier & Shields 1986; Bredemeier 1995; Shields & Bredemeier 1995; Shields & Bredemeier 2001; Gardner & Janelle 2002).

Much research has also focused on the relationship between living setting and the development of moral competence in people. In their study Hart, Atkins and Ford (1998) found that people living in urban and ghetto settings in the USA are not given enough opportunities to develop their moral identity, leading to the conclusion that the environment can play a crucial role in the development of morality. Nissan and Kohlberg (1982) showed that people who resided in rural settings needed more time to make a moral decision and remained in lower moral development stages. In addition, McCarthy and Horn (1996) indicated that living in rural areas hinders the progress and development of moral judgment, whereas Park and Johnson (1984) found that girls and boys in Korea and USA who lived in urban settings exhibited higher levels of moral reasoning in contrast to their counterparts in rural settings. By contrast Atkins and Hart (2002) exhibited that urban contexts may inhibit young people from civic involvement in their communities due to limited opportunities or as McLaughlin (2000) stated due to lack of community support. Finally Hart, Atkins, Markey and Youniss (2004) showed that the proportion of children in a population and its poverty level can predict civic participation.

Moreover, research has shown that moral competence is affected by changes in a person's personality (Lifton 1985) and the type of living setting (Hart, Atkins & Ford 1998). As far as the relationship between personality factors and morality many studies have tried to find a connection. More specifically, Clover (2001) claimed that moral orientation is affected more by one's personality and not by the person's social roles. In their study Cawley, Martin and Johnson (2000) found that moral reasoning is positively associated with measures of *Openness to Experience*. Similar results were shown by Lonky, Kaus & Roodin (1984), who found that *Openness to Experience* is positively associated to existential and principled moral reasoning and problem-focused coping strategies. In a more recent study by Mudrack (2006), the scores of moral judgment were correlated positively and quite strongly with *Achievement via Independence, Intellectual Efficiency, Tolerance, Responsibility* and *Capacity for Status*, as these were assessed by the California Personality Inventory. Finally, Dollinger and LaMartina (1998) found that moral development is associated positively with *Conscientiousness* since these people tend to be more independent, avoid the strict obedience to the law and can think "out of the box."

Regarding moral competence of the two genders, Gilligan (1977), emphasized the male centered perspective of the initial moral developmental theory as it was presented by Kohlberg and claimed that there are differences between men and women as to their ethical approach in moral situations. More specifically, she maintained that the main feature of women is "caring for others" while of men that of "justice." However, in the majority of previous studies there were no significant differences between genders at different

stages of moral development (Turiel 1976; Walker *et al.* 1987; Friedman *et al.* 1987; Pratt *et al.* 1991; Wark & Krebs 1996), and when these differences did exist, men exhibited a higher level of moral reasoning, due to differences in education and work level (Walker 1984). Other researchers attributed the differences between boys and girls on the one hand to the fact that in every society exist stereotypes, which affect differently the development of each gender and therefore their development of moral judgment (Nunner-Winkler *et al.* 2007), and on the other hand the socialization of children by their parents, who tend to cultivate in girls the social self-concept while in boys the individualistic one (Lollis *et al.* 1996; Walker 1997).

Based on the above it seems that moral competence is affected by many factors, including environmental settings, domain of displaying moral behavior – (e.g. sports or daily life) and personality characteristics. Moreover, it seems that there is a lack of research concerning the question whether factors of personality, demographic characteristics and the social framework (i.e. everyday life or sport) interact with each other and whether they could predict moral competence. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore the effect of the personality factors in conjunction with gender and the geographical area in one's moral competence. Additionally, other objectives of the study were to examine a) the relationship between moral competence and the five basic factors of personality, b) potential differences between ones' moral competence in everyday life and in PE/sport settings, and c) the role of morality in sports, the five basic factors of personality and the type of school (urban, semi-urban and rural schools) as potential predictors of student's morality.

The hypotheses of the study were that: a) The five factors of personality, gender and geographical area would affect ones' moral competence (hypothesis 1), b) *Openness to Experience*, *Conscientiousness* and *Agreeableness* would be correlated positively with moral competence in everyday life, whereas *Extraversion* and *Neuroticism* would be correlated negatively with morality (hypothesis 2), c) there will be differences in students' moral competence exhibited in everyday life and that expressed in PE/sports framework (hypothesis 3), and d) type of school, factors of personality, as well as moral competence exhibited in sports-framework would all be significant factors for the interpretation of a student's moral competence (hypothesis 4).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted with a sample of 331 high school students (160 boys and 171 girls, $Mage = 2.47$, $SD = 0.740$) who were selected according to the setting of their high school – urban, semi-urban or rural.¹

2.2. Instruments

Two questionnaires – the *Moral Competence Test* and the *Moral Competence Test in Physical Education* – were completed by the students themselves whereas the *Inventory of Child Individual Differences* was completed by the participants' parents. Demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, geographical area) were reported as well.

2.2.1. *Moral Competence Test* (Lind 1978–2016) is based on Kohlberg's structural-developmental theory of morality which assesses a person's moral judgment. The participant is requested to confront two moral dilemmas and agree or disagree with the statements which are presented to him/her. The first story dilemma concerns company workers who enter illegally the company's administration offices and the second concerns a doctor who assists a dying patient to take her own life. Students respond to a 9-point Likert-type scale, from -4 (totally disagree) to +4 (totally agree). Every story has 12 statements (6 in favor and 6 against the proposed behavior). Each statement corresponds to one of six stages of moral development, as those were presented by Kohlberg. For example the statement that *the doctor acted according to his conscience because the patient's condition justified an exemption to the moral obligation of saving a life* corresponds to a level 6 of moral competence. On the other hand the statement *the doctor acted wrongly, because he acted contrary to the beliefs of his/her colleagues, because if they are opposed to euthanasia then a doctor should not do so* corresponds to a level 3 of moral competence. The *C-Index* is the most important measurement that is computed and ranges from 1 to 100. It actually measures a person's ability to assess an argument based on their moral quality or, in simpler terms, the degree to which a person allows their personal judgments to be affected by moral concerns or principals rather than their personal opinions and constructions. An extremely low C- index considers scores below 9, scores 10 to 19 are considered low, scores 20 to 29 are considered medium, 30 to 39 are considered high, 40 to 49 very high and above 50 extremely high. People who score high usually pay more attention to the quality of the statements.

2.2.2. *Moral Judgment Test in Physical Education* (Mouratidou, Chatzopoulos & Karamavrou 2008) was designed to assess the students' moral competence in physical education settings. It is considered as supplement to the original

¹ As rural were defined areas with more than 50,000 residents, semi-urban areas with residents between 10,000 to 49,999 and rural as settings with up to 9,999 residents.

Moral Competence Test designed by Lind (1978) and the participant is confronted with a dilemma regarding students who act in an illegitimate way during a high-school championship game. There are 6 statements in favor and 6 statements against the proposed behavior. For example the statement referring to the students acting correctly *because if they had lost the game they would be punished by the coach* corresponds to level 1 of moral competence. On the other hand the response that the students acted wrongly *because any aggressive behavior during a game is considered unacceptable and is assessed negatively by both parents and students* corresponds to level 3 of moral competence. The responding scale is similar to the original questionnaire: a 9 point Likert scale, where -4 corresponds to *Totally Disagree* and +4 to *Totally Agree*. The *C-PE Index* scores range from 1 to 100 and has similar variations with the *C-Index*, for example scores below 9 are considered extremely low, 10 to 19 low and so on.

2.2.3. *The Inventory of Child Individual Differences* (Besevegis & Pavlopoulos 1998). The *Big Five Personality Inventory* was developed by Costa and McCrae (1992). This model was conceived after the careful analysis of all the linguistic terms coined to describe characteristics of personality. The five factors or basic aspects of personality that emerged were *Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness* and *Agreeableness*. Based on those characteristics Halverson, Havill, Deal, Baker, Victor and Pavlopoulos (2003) developed the *Inventory of Child Individual Differences* which correlated the Big Five personality factors to the observations of children's behavior by their primary caregivers. This particular inventory was given to USA, China and Greece and it was found that children, even at young ages, possess those characteristics which formulate the foundation of their future personality development (Halverson et al. 2003). The Greek version of the *Inventory of Child Individual Differences* (Besevegis & Pavlopoulos 1998) was used to assess the personality characteristics of the students participating in the study. It is normed in Greece and assesses personality characteristics of children ages 3, 6, 9, 11 and 13 years old. The inventory's construction was based on 562 interviews with parents regarding their own children. Out of these interviews the researchers later derived 99 statements – characteristics, which were then associated with the five basic personality factors. Cross-national findings have found that in every country around 80% of the statements fit the *Big Five Personality Factors* (Halverson et al. 2003) and more particularly: *Extraversion* 28.4; *Agreeableness* 20.6; *Conscientiousness* 9.6; *Neuroticism* 8.6 and *Openness to Experience* 14.7. The parent is asked to associate each statement with his/her child actual behavior and respond to a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = Not at all and 5 = A lot.

2.2.4. *Procedure*: Each participant was given the three questionnaires mentioned above, along with an informed consent and a demographic characteristics questionnaire. The Moral Competence Tests were completed

by the high school students and the personality inventory by their parents. The questionnaires were distributed either by the main researchers or by the students' teachers. It was explained that participation was voluntary, the answers would remain anonymous, there were no right or wrong answers and the responses would be used only for research purposes.

2.3. Data Analysis

The effect of students' gender, their geographical area, and their five factors of personality on their moral competence was examined with five three-ways ANOVAs. In order to investigate the significance of the differences between the group means the Scheffé test was used. Furthermore, in order to examine the relationship between the students' moral competence and their factors of personality a Pearson's correlation was utilized. In addition, potential differences between ones' moral competence in everyday life and in physical education/sport settings were investigated with paired samples t-test (the final scores of the *C-Index* and the *C-PE Index* were transformed into Z-scores earlier). Finally, in order to examine the relationship between the students' moral competence and various potential predictors, which concerned type of school (e.g. urban, semi-urban, and rural), factors of personality as well as moral competence exhibited in PE/sport settings, a stepwise multiple regression was conducted. One's moral C-index served as the criterion variable. Students' type of school was entered in the first block. In the second block students' morality in PE/sport's framework was entered. Finally, in the third block factors of personality were entered. In all analyses a significance level of $p < .05$ was utilized.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for moral competence in everyday life (*C-Index*) and in PE/sports framework (*C-PE Index*) for the whole sample and apparently for each group of students attended urban, semi-urban and rural secondary education, are listed in Table 1. As it can be seen, morality in everyday life displayed by the children who attended urban schools (M=22.39, SD = 12.73) was higher compared to children attending semi-urban (M=17.41, SD = 12.43) and rural schools (M = 16.32, SD = 15.89).

	Total		Urban		Semi-urban		Rural	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
C-Index (everyday life)	19.27	13	22.39	12.73	17.41	12.43	16.32	15.89
C-Index in Z-scores	0	1	.23	.97	-.14	.96	-.22	1.22
C-PE-Index (sports)	29.18	21.87	26.19	19.33	30.90	22.94	32.71	25.71
C-PE-Index in Z-scores	-.45	.60	-.31	.58	-.54	.57	-.59	.73

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of C- and C-PE-Index.

3.1.1. *Relationship between moral competence and factors of personality:* In order to investigate the relationship between moral competence in everyday life and the five basic factors of personality a Pearson’s correlation was used. Results, which are presented below (see Table 2), showed that only Conscientiousness was low positively associated with moral competence ($r = .144, p < .05$).

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Moral competence	1					
2. Extraversion	-.020	1				
3. Agreeableness	-.028	.156**	1			
4. Conscientiousness	.144*	.237**	.367**	1		
5. Neuroticism	-.001	-.233**	-.421**	-.334**	1	
6. Openness to Experience	.111	.551**	.129*	.606**	-.314**	1

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
 **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Correlations among moral competence and the five basic factors of personality.

3.1.2. *Effect of personality characteristics, environmental setting and gender on moral competence:* Multiple analyses of means with three factors were

utilized in order to assess the effect of personality characteristics, environmental setting and gender on moral competence. Five (5) different analyses were conducted, regarding the five personality factors – Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness and Neuroticism – in conjunction with environmental setting and gender. The results indicated that: a) the combination of Extraversion with gender and the environmental setting does not affect moral competence in everyday life, but only the factor of environmental setting by itself [$F(2, 93) = 6.230, p < .01, \eta^2 = .118$], b) the combination of Agreeableness with gender and the environmental setting does not affect moral competence in everyday life, only the main effect of the environmental setting [$F(2, 87) = 3.956, p < .05, \eta^2 = .083$], as well as the interaction between the latter and students' gender [$F(2, 87) = 6.758, p < .01, \eta^2 = .134$] have a significant effect on ones' morality, c) the combination of Conscientiousness with gender and the environmental setting does not affect moral competence in everyday life, only the interaction between gender and conscientiousness affect moral competence [$F(31, 93) = 1.647, p < .05, \eta^2 = .362$], and d) the interaction between both Neuroticism and Openness to Experience and students' gender and geographical area have no effect on their morality [$F(7, 78) = .978, p > .05, \eta^2 = .081$ and $F(6, 95) = 2.088, p > .05, \eta^2 = .117$].

In the cases where moral competence (C-Index) was affected by environmental factors further analysis with Scheffé test was conducted. The results indicated that there is a significant statistical difference between urban and semi-urban students in their moral competence, with the students living in urban environments scoring significantly higher than those living in semi-urban settings ($p < .01$).

3.1.3. *Comparison of moral competence within different life domains:* In order to assess the data collected from MJT and MJT-PE tests the scores were transformed into z-scores and then were analyzed. The paired-samples t-test analysis indicated that the levels of moral competence in everyday life differ significantly from the ones exhibited in PE [$t(328) = 20.25, p < .001$], indicating that there is a trend in PE/sports domain to display lower moral competence compared to that of everyday life.

3.1.4. *Prediction of moral competence by personality characteristics, geographical parameters and morality in sports domain:* In stepwise multiple regression the students' type of school was entered as the first independent variable, which predicted 2.7% of the variance in moral competence in everyday life [$F(1, 256) = 7.058, p < .01$]. Then, the moral competence exhibited in P.E. was added, which did not appear to be of importance in the regression model [$F(1, 255) = 1.424, p > .05$]. And finally, in the last step, the five personality factors were also added, which seemed to provide an additional 2% of the total variance for students' morality in everyday life [$F(1, 254) = 5.493, p < .05$]. All the results are presented in Table 3.

Factor(s)	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	B	Std. error b	Beta	t	Sig.
1. Type of school	.164	.027	.023	-3.95	1.48	-.165	-2.679	.008
2. Moral competence in sports' framework (C-PE index)	.180	.032	.025	.05	.04	.083	1.348	.179
4. Factors of personality	.230	.053	.042	1.1	.47	.144	2.344	.020

Table 3. Stepwise multiple regression for variables predicting moral competence in everyday life (C-index).

4. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship of people's personality factors and moral competence in everyday life and within the framework of Physical Education.

The first hypothesis was concerned as to whether the five factors of personality, gender and geographical area would affect ones' moral competence. The results indicated that morality in everyday life displayed by the children who attended urban schools was higher compared to children attending semi-urban and rural schools. This was also supported by other studies in the past (Nissan & Kohlberg 1982; Park & Johnson 1984; McCarthy & Hom 1996). Generally, people growing up in urban settings probably have more opportunities to exhibit higher levels of moral competence because of the plurality of stimuli. By contrast, people living in semi-urban or rural settings have fewer opportunities of facing a moral dilemma and may not also have the opportunity to exhibit more liberal moral judgments, due to the restrictions that such an environment imposes on them. It was also found that teenagers living in rural settings tend to be affected by the conservative norms whereas those who live in urban settings are more open and tolerant of alternative thinking patterns (Light 1970).

Our second hypothesis was related to personality factors and their relationship with moral competence. More specifically it was hypothesized that the personality factors Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness would be correlated positively with moral competence in everyday life, whereas Extraversion and Neuroticism would be correlated negatively with morality. The results indicated that only the factor of Conscientiousness was positively related to morality in everyday life and the correlation was low. This was not surprising in terms of Conscientiousness, since people who score high on this factor are governed by logic and

sensibility, are very methodical and efficient when they have a task to complete, hard working and take their time before they decide to take action. In general they follow the social norms and apply them in their every day decision making and they are expected to exhibit a higher level of moral reasoning when they face a dilemma. However, surprisingly no other personality factor was correlated with moral competence which comes in contrast with previous research. Especially since Agreeableness possess some of the “good” traits such as loyalty and being keen on justice and fairness, and together with Conscientiousness, are considered to be the ‘trait morality’ dyad (Colquitt *et al.* 2006; de Raad, Hendriks & Hofstee 1992; Hofstee, de Raad & Goldberg 1992; Saucier & Goldberg 1996). In addition, Openness to Experience is associated positively with higher levels of moral competence as they were represented by Kohlberg (Loevinger 1976; McCrae & Costa 1980). In general people who exhibit high scores in this particular characteristic tend to be more independent and are more imaginative, therefore tend to look for alternatives when they face moral dilemmas. However, it should be noted that in this study participated young high school students and possibly personality traits such as independence have not yet been achieved and may even be hindered due to their young age. Let us not forget that personality traits and characteristics evolve still deep into adulthood and more research is needed before a final conclusion is reached.

As far as the other two personality factors, *Neuroticism* and *Extraversion*, little empirical relationship with moral competence exists. In addition, findings from other studies are contradictory as far as the factor of *Neuroticism*. Addad and Leslau (1990) have found that people high on *Neuroticism* exhibit in general immoral behaviors, while the factor of *Extraversion* seems not to affect one’s morality. In contrast Rushton and Chrisjohn (1981) have found a positive relationship between delinquency and high scores in *Extraversion*, whereas there was no relationship between delinquency and *Neuroticism*. Therefore the lack of relationship is not puzzling. Further research is still needed to clarify the relationship of these two personality factors and moral development.

The third hypothesis of this study stated that there will be differences in students’ moral competence exhibited in everyday life and that expressed in PE/sports framework. The results showed that the levels of moral competence in everyday life differed significantly from the ones exhibited in PE. More specifically, the analysis indicated a trend in PE/sports domain to display lower moral competence compared to that of everyday life. This comes in contrast with previous studies which indicated that PE classes contribute to the moral and social development of students (Bailey *et al.* 2009; Hedstrom & Gould 2004), that the use of fair play norms by the PE educators help in promoting social skills within the class (Vidoni & Ward 2009), or that PE is probably the most important physical activity context for promoting moral

development (Shields & Bredemeier 1995). Phenomena where there are differences between the moral competence in sports and everyday life domains, usually concern professional athletes. The fact that this particular trend of morality was exhibited in Physical Education could be explained that when teenagers participate in sports their main goal is to win and not just for the joy of participating. Also it should be noted that at this young age, as they were our participants in this study, they are rather self-centered and when they participate in sports their main goal is to win at all cost. However, this is something that is expected to change with maturity. Further research is necessary in order to explore further this relationship.

Our final and fourth hypothesis was assessing whether the type of school attended (rural, semi urban or urban), factors of personality, as well as the moral competence, which was exhibited within the sports-framework, would all be significant factors for the prediction of a student's moral competence. The results indicated that overall the type of school and the personality factors account for very low levels of variance (less than 5%) when moral competence is assessed. This stability as far as moral competence in different settings comes in contrast with previous research that indicated otherwise. However, one should consider when interpreting those results that previous research was mostly concentrated on differences between athletes and non-athletes (Bredemeier & Shields 1986; Stoll *et al.* 1995), the acceptance of anti-athletic behaviors (Shields *et al.* 2005), or relating less moral behaviors with years of participation in sports (Duquin 1984). This particular study used non-professional athletes but students who merely participated in PE classes and maybe the students utilized similar approaches when it comes to understanding and solving moral dilemmas.

Overall, it has been shown that morality is affected at this age by the living setting of an individual, and educators should take this into consideration when assessing moral competence. In addition there are many intervention programs which have been implemented in the past and have shown positive gains as far as moral competence in students (for example: Mouratidou *et al.* 2007; Romance *et al.* 1986; Wandzilak *et al.* 1988; DeBusk & Hellison 1989) to name a few. Therefore the creation of intervention programs in the future which would take into consideration the school type of the participants, could enhance the positive outcomes and promote moral competence further within the PE context. In addition, further research is needed to explore in full the impact of personality factors as it is evident that some play an important role in developing moral competence, in this study and in other published literature. This way we can help students reason at higher levels when facing a moral dilemma.

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Moral Competence, Personality, and Demographic Characteristics: A Comparative Study

Abstract. The development of moral competence is affected by both internal and external factors and has been researched by many scientists. The present study investigated a) whether the five factors of personality, gender and geographical area would affect ones' moral competence, b) whether the personality factors Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness would be correlated positively with moral competence in everyday life, whereas Extraversion and Neuroticism would be correlated negatively with morality, c) if there will be differences in students' moral competence exhibited in everyday life and that expressed in PE/sports framework and d) whether type of school, factors of personality, as well as moral competence exhibited in sports-framework would all be significant factors for the interpretation of a student's moral competence. The sample consisted of 331 junior high students (7th and 8th graders) (*Age* = 12.47, *SD* = 0.740), who were given the Moral Competence Test Greek Version (Mouratidou *et al.* 2003), the Moral Judgment Test in Physical Education (Mouratidou *et al.* 2008), and the Inventory of Child Individual Differences (Besevegkis & Pavlopoulos 1998). The results indicated that of the five-factor personality model only Conscientiousness can affect moral reasoning ability in everyday life and that the type of school can account for less than 5% of variance when predicting moral competence in high school students.

Keywords: morality, personality factors, physical education, school setting

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