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Moral reasoning, perceived competence, and adolescent engagement in risky activity*

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Relations among moral reasoning, domain specific perceived competencies, and self-reported engagement in risky activity (substance use and antisocial behavior) were examined with 110 10th–12th grade students. An exploratory model demonstrated that perceived behavioral competence mediated the relation of moral reasoning and engagement in risky behavior such that preconventional moral reasoning predicted perceptions of low behavioral competence, which was associated with engagement in risky activity. The results support contentions of moral theorists that a comprehensive theory of moral development must include self-regulatory mechanisms such as perceptions of competence in order to predict moral conduct.
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Introduction

Engagement in risky activities including substance use and antisocial behavior increases dramatically during adolescence. Social cognitive variables such as moral reasoning and perceived competence may aid in understanding such activity. Moral reasoning has been related consistently with antisocial behavior (Trevethan and Walker, 1989; Gibbs, 1991) and less consistently with substance use (Berkowitz et al., 1995). Preconventional moral reasoning is thought to serve as a risk factor for engaging in risky activities, whereas conventional moral reasoning is thought to protect individuals from engaging in norm violating behavior (Gibbs, 1991).

In addition to moral reasoning, low levels of perceived competence, as measured globally, have been associated with higher levels of antisocial behavior (Levy, 1997) and substance use (Pandina, et al. 1990). Individuals typically do not view themselves as equally competent across all domains; therefore, a domain-specific view of competence provides a richer and more differentiated picture of perceived competence than does a global perspective (Harter, 1988). Although there has been little research on the relations between domain-specific perceived competencies and engagement in risky behavior, research to date suggests that risky behaviors such as substance use and delinquent activity are associated negatively with perceived scholastic, behavioral, and social competence, and perceived general self-worth (Chung and Elias, 1996; Kupersmidt and Patterson, 1991; Lifrak et al., 1997).

The inclusion of moral reasoning and perceived competence in models of risky behavior may hold promise in increasing our understanding of such activity. Bandura (1991) has argued that theories of moral reasoning, which posit that morality is tied to societal norms, are not adequate to explain conduct because external sanctions for transgressions are weak, as most transgressions go undetected. Despite this, individuals tend to preside over their

behavior, suggesting that self-regulatory mechanisms are important in regulating moral conduct. Self-regulation involves self-monitoring of conduct and self-efficacy, or the belief that personal control can be achieved over one's conduct (Bandura, 1991). Self-efficacy is conceptually akin to perceived competence, or an individual's perception of his or her ability to deal with the environment effectively (Harter, 1988). The notion that self-efficacy in behavioral control is an important component in understanding the relation between moral reasoning and conduct is in accord with the contention by Kohlberg and his colleagues (Higgins, 1989; Power, et al., 1989) that behavior is influenced by both moral reasoning and perceptions of competence, and that all three are influenced and shaped by group interactions. Similarly, Bandura (1991) argues for triadic reciprocal causation whereby behavior, cognition, and environmental influences operate as interacting determinants of one another.

The present study examined the relations among moral reasoning, domain specific perceived competencies, and risky behavior in high school students. An exploratory model was tested whereby perceived competence was posited to mediate the relation of moral reasoning and engagement in risky activity. Because preconventional reasoning is thought to be a risk factor for engagement in risky activity, it was specified as the measure of moral reasoning. Global self-worth, or the overall judgment of the extent to which one is happy with oneself, and behavioral competence, or the extent to which one is pleased with his or her behavior and ability to avoid problematic situations and conduct, conceptually most closely resemble self-efficacy over engagement in risky activities. Thus, global self-worth and behavioral competence were posited to mediate the moral reasoning-behavior relation in this exploratory model.

Method

Participants
Measures were completed by 122 tenth through twelfth grade students from a high school in a suburban community. The final sample consisted of 110 participants (46% female) after the consistency check for the Defining Issues Test was applied (as described below). Excluded participants did not differ significantly from the final sample on any of the measures. Participants predominantly identified themselves as Non-Hispanic White; 11 per cent described themselves as Asian American, 5 per cent as Hispanic/Latino, and 4 per cent as African American. While the sample was homogenous ethnically, it was representative of the affluent suburban school district.

Measures

Defining Issues Test. (Rest, 1986). This measure tapped moral reasoning and yielded scores for preconventional (stage 2; $M = 5.12$, S.D.$=6.00$; possible range 0–100), conventional ($M=42.33$, S.D.$=22.47$; possible range 0–100), and postconventional moral reasoning ($M=35.09$, S.D.$=15.63$; possible range 0–95), reflecting the relative importance assigned to each type of moral consideration in making decisions about moral dilemmas. The DIT also includes an M-score, which reflects the tendency to endorse statements on the basis of pretentiousness rather than meaning. Participants with raw M-scores of 4 or higher (representing 14% of their responses) were removed from the final sample (Rest, 1986).

Because of time limitations, a short version of the DIT was administered, consisting of three vignettes, as suggested by Rest (1986), who reported a 0·93 correlation with the full six-story version of the DIT.

Risky behavior.   The frequency with which participants engaged in antisocial behavior (theft, violence), and substance use (alcohol, marijuana, illicit drugs, and selling drugs) was tapped by self-report on a scale ranging from never (0) to almost every day (6); scores for antisocial behavior and substance use were created by averaging the items. Because antisocial behavior ($M=1\cdot56$, s.D.$=0\cdot80$) and substance use ($M=1\cdot91$, s.D.$=1\cdot08$) were correlated significantly, $r=0\cdot64$, $p<0\cdot001$, the two were summed to create a risky behavior score ($M=3\cdot47$, s.D.$=1\cdot71$).

Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents.   (Harter, 1988). This 45-item measure tapped perceptions of competence in nine domains: athletic ($M=2\cdot71$, s.D.$=0\cdot86$), behavioral ($M=2\cdot93$, s.D.$=0\cdot68$), close friendship ($M=3\cdot38$, s.D.$=0\cdot66$), job ($M=2\cdot99$, s.D.$=0\cdot.57$), romantic appeal ($M=2\cdot47$, s.D. $=0\cdot70$), scholastic ($M=2.93$, s.D.$=0\cdot74$), social ($M=3\cdot12$, s.D.$=0\cdot59$), physical ($M=2\cdot62$, s.D.$=0\cdot79$), and global self worth ($M=2\cdot97$, s.D.$=0\cdot74$). Participants were asked to rate how true each item was for them. After applying reverse-coding to the negatively worded items, average scores for each of the domains were computed; scores could range from 1 to 4.
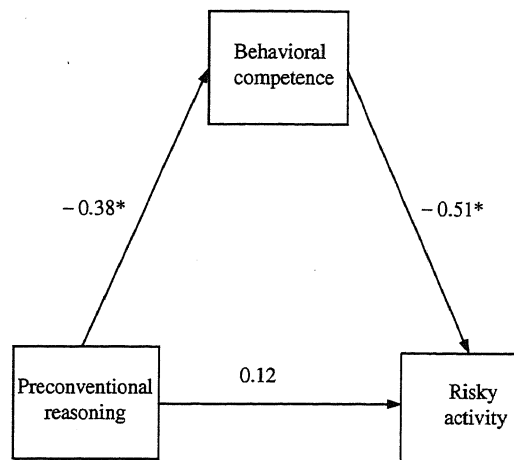
Results

The correlations among moral reasoning, domains of perceived competence, and risky activity are presented in Table 1. As multiple analyses were conducted, a more stringent level of alpha ($\alpha=0\cdot01$) was employed for all significance tests. Engagement in risky activity was associated only with preconventional moral reasoning, behavioral competence, and scholastic competence. Preconventional moral reasoning was associated with behavioral competence, and postconventional moral reasoning was associated with scholastic competence.

Hierarchical regression analyses, as specified by Baron and Kenny (1986), were performed to determine whether perceived competence mediates the relation of preconventional moral reasoning and risky behavior. In light of the correlations indicating that global self-worth was not associated with preconventional moral reasoning or risky behavior, whereas behavioral competence was associated with both, global self-worth was eliminated and behavioral competence was retained in the model, as shown in Figure 1. The first regression analysis demonstrated that preconventional moral reasoning predicted behavioral competence, $\beta=-0\cdot38$, $t=-4\cdot22$, $p<0\cdot0001$. A second regression analysis revealed that behavioral competence predicted engagement in risky activity, after controlling for preconventional moral reasoning, $\beta=-0\cdot51$, $t=-5\cdot86$, $p<0\cdot0001$. Although the correlational analyses demonstrated that preconventional moral reasoning was associated with risky activity, the final regression analysis revealed that preconventional moral reasoning was not a significant predictor of risky activity after controlling for behavioral competence, $\beta=0\cdot12$, $t=1\cdot33$, n.s., suggesting mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

Table 1 *Correlations among moral reasoning, domains of perceived competence, and risky activity*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Preconventional reasoning	—	-0·07	-0·39**	0·16	-0·38**	0·16	-0·11	0·12	0·01	-0·18	0·22	-0·05	0·32**
2. Conventional reasoning		—	-0·43**	-0·11	-0·05	0·01	-0·22	-0·04	0·16	-0·21	0·10	-0·06	-0·09
3. Postconventional reasoning			—	-0·06	0·20	0·10	0·22	-0·04	-0·21	0·38**	-0·16	0·14	-0·14
4. Athletic competence				—	-0·07	0·11	0·06	0·33**	0·28*	0·18	0·46**	0·24	0·01
5. Behavioral competence					—	-0·14	0·11	0·27*	0·12	0·33**	0·04	0·42**	-0·56**
6. Close friendship competence						—	0·13	0·11	0·28*	0·10	0·44**	0·27	0·15
7. Job competence							—	0·22	0·06	0·35**	0·10	0·23	0·03
8. Physical competence								—	0·52**	0·40**	0·41**	0·67**	-0·07
9. Romantic competence									—	0·13	0·54**	0·47**	0·12
10. Scholastic competence										—	-0·02	0·43**	-0·32**
11. Social competence											—	0·38**	0·13
12. Global self-worth												—	-0·13
13. Risky behavior													—

*p<0·01.
**p<0·001.

Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the exploratory model of the relations among preconventional reasoning, behavioral competence, and risky activity. *$p<0.001$.

Discussion

The present results indicate that preconventional moral reasoning and perceptions of low behavioral and scholastic competence may serve as risk factors for engagement in risky activity. Students who demonstrated high levels of preconventional moral reasoning reported engaging in risky activity more frequently than did students who demonstrated low levels of preconventional moral reasoning, in agreement with the literature on moral development (Gibbs, 1991; Trevethan and Walker, 1989). Similarly, students who perceived themselves as less competent behaviorally and scholastically reported engaging in risky activity more frequently than did students who perceived themselves as more competent. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that delinquent individuals demonstrate lower levels of cognitive competence than do nondelinquent individuals (Cole, et al., 1989), and that scholastic competence and behavioral conduct are associated negatively with alcohol use (Lifrak et al., 1997).

Examination of the exploratory model suggests that the link between moral reasoning and engagement in risky activities is mediated by perceived behavioral competence. Preconventional moral reasoning was associated with perceptions of low behavioral competence, which was associated with engagement in risky activity. Judgments of one's relation to society and the collective norms and values of society may influence the perceived control felt over activities that violate social norms, such as substance use and antisocial behavior; perceptions of control may then influence whether one engages in such activity. The present results are in accord with arguments that theories of moral reasoning must include self-regulatory mechanisms such as perceived competence in order to adequately predict conduct (Bandura, 1991).

Given that the model tested in the present study was exploratory, confirmatory analyses are needed to substantiate the observed relations among moral reasoning, perceived competencies, and risky behavior. As moral development theorists have argued that moral reasoning, perceptions of competence, and moral action interact reciprocally as causes and

consequences of one another (Higgins, 1989; Power et al., 1989; Bandura, 1991), prospective longitudinal designs may assist in identifying causal relations among these variables as well as elucidating avenues for intervention.

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