

# Moral Emotion of Adolescents in the Context of Decision-Making

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*Abstract: Adolescents need to have moral emotions as an effort to make moral decisions and anticipate the emergence of moral transgression. The moral emotions as those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent. Some people believe that making the morally right decision makes people feel good. However, not many studies in Indonesia have supported this statement. This study aims to find out the moral emotions that appear in the context of hypothetical moral dilemmas and the patterns of responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas. Methods: Participants were 852 adolescents living in Semarang, aged 11 to 16 years old. Data were collected using a questionnaire survey of hypothetical moral dilemmas with Malti's and Buchmann's instruments. Results: A descriptive analysis of the results showed that there were three forms of moral emotions: positive (i.e., happy, pride, calm, gratitude, sincere, sympathy, and not feeling guilty), negative (i.e., pity, shame, regret, guilty, anxious or worry, and emotional conflicts (there are positive and negative feelings), confuse, and bad feelings) and neutral (neither feeling good or bad). The patterns found in adolescents were 57.2% happy moralist, 26.5% unhappy moralist; 5.9% happy victimizer; 3.6% unhappy victimizer; 5.4% pattern can not be categorized based on moral decisions; and 1,4% can not be categorized based on existing patterns based on selfish decisions. Conclusion. Overall, this study demonstrates that moral emotions develop during adolescence. Moral emotions can function during daily moral decision-making processes*

*Keywords : Moral emotion, decision making, adolescent*

## Introduction

Moral development is critically important, especially in adolescence. This aspect acts as a significant guide for adolescents in finding their identity, developing harmonious personal relationships and avoiding role-conflicts that occur during the transition period (Desmita, 2005). Therefore, it is essential for adolescents to have moral emotions to create moral decisions and anticipate the emergence of moral violations. However, few studies in Indonesia support this statement. Our study aims to explore the moral emotions that arise in the context of hypothetical moral dilemmas and decision making.

Adolescence is a significant time in understanding the relationship between various aspects of moral development. During that period, moral concept begins to integrate with moral emotion, enabling it to cultivate better. It also increases throughout adolescence and early adulthood, developing into more complex forms

as adolescents learn to address specific situations (Krettenauer, Campbell, & Hertz, 2013). However, the problem of moral decadence remains largely discussed because of the rapid increase of immoral behavior cases. Based on our preliminary study on moral violations, we found that 276 adolescents in Semarang experienced cheating, bullying, risky dating, school breaking, violating traffic rules, lying, smoking, denying parents, fighting, watching porn and steal (Pratiwi, 2017).

In the theory of moral development, moral emotion acts as one of the domains in motivating moral behavior (Malti, Gummerum, Keller, & Buchmann, 2009; Tangney & Dearing, 2004). There is a difference between knowing and feeling that something is morally wrong. Emotion involves the structure of meaning and evaluative attitudes from self-objectivity. Moral judgment depends on the way our emotion relates to the situation at hand (Haidt, 2001). Moral choice is more emotionally-controlled than rationality-controlled.

Moral emotion is a product of people's self-evaluation and self-awareness towards their action. It also describes the consequence that their action has on others (e.g., guilt) or appreciation towards other emotions, such as sympathy towards others' interest and wellbeing (Eisenberg, 2000; Haidt, 2003; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Moral emotion depends on one's experience and evaluation of the social world (Drummond, 2012). This self-evaluation process can appear before, or after, the moral decision-making process and behavior occurs. In other words, individuals can anticipate or evaluate moral violations (Malti & Ongley, 2014; Tangney, et al, 2007). Anticipated moral emotion is important in identifying desires of future actions in making moral decisions (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). In some studies, the choice of moral decisions and the emergence of positive emotions do not always co-exist. Many people agree that making moral-conflict decisions evokes emotional reactions (Drummond, 2012). The psychological theory of morality explains that making moral decisions leads to an increase in feeling, consistent with our aspirations about ourselves (Hoffman, 2000; Krettenauer & Johnston, 2011) and tends to lead to positive feelings (Kristjansson, 2010).

Emotions provide important information about how adolescents interpret the affective consequences of decisions taken in moral-conflict situation (Malti & Latzko, 2012). Hypothetical moral dilemmas scenarios are used as a way to trigger emotions. This study uses two stories from different contexts to determine the emotions and decisions taken by adolescents in dealing with moral dilemmas, when personal desires contradict existing norms and rules.

## **Method**

This research used a survey method by answering open-ended questions, starting by firstly giving an induction in a form of a hypothetical moral dilemma story from Malti and Buchmann (2010). These were adapted to Indonesian context. The study participants were 852 adolescents in Semarang. There were two moral dilemmas that involve temptation to violate moral rules for their personal interests. Participants were asked to read the story and, after finishing each story, participants were instructed to answer the following questions: (a) What they will do (moral decisions), (b) How they feel when they will do this (emotional anticipation), and (c) Why they do it and why they feel that way (justification). All responses given by participants will be coded and grouped to form decision-making patterns and moral emotions.

## **Results and Discussion**

Moral emotions serve as a motivation to act in accordance to moral norms, playing a significant role in decision making and moral behavior (Cushman, 2013; Eisenberg, 2000; Krettenauer, Jia, & Mosleh, 2011). Individuals can anticipate what emotions will be felt, by both the offender and victim, before a moral offense is committed (e.g., guilt, regret, sadness, anger). Experience and anticipation of moral emotion are considered as indicators of internalization, commitment, and adherence to moral norms, even in situations where moral actions conflict with selfish desires or norm violations do not involve external sanctions (Keller, 2004).

**Table 1.** Moral emotion and pattern emotion formed

Moral decision			Selfish decision				
Positive moral emotion		quantity	%	Positive moral emotion		quantity	%
<i>Happy Moralist</i>	Happy	298	35,0%	<i>Happy Victimizer</i>	Happy	40	4,7%
	Proud	63	7,4%		Innocent	4	0,5%
	Calm	83	9,7%		Calm	3	0,3%
	Grateful	17	2,0%		Proud	1	0,1%
	Sincere	16	1,9%		Grateful	1	0,1%
	Sympathetic	4	0,5%		Safe	1	0,1%
	Innocent	6	0,7%				
<b>total</b>		<b>487</b>	<b>57,2%</b>			<b>50</b>	<b>5,9%</b>
Negative moral emotion		quantity	%	Negative moral emotion		Quantity	%
<i>Unhappy Moralist</i>	Pity	95	11,2%	<i>Unhappy Victimizer</i>	Shy	6	0,7%
	Shy	60	7,0%		Regret	5	0,6%
	Regret	19	2,2%		Guilty	5	0,6%
	Guilty	14	1,6%		Feeling bad	3	0,4%
	Anxious	15	1,8%		Disappointed	2	0,2%
	Emotion conflict	10	1,2%		Emotion conflict	4	0,5%
	Feeling bad	10	1,2%		Pity	2	0,2%
	Confuse	3	0,4%		Confuse	1	0,1%
					Sinful	1	0,1%
					Scared	1	0,1%
			Feeling unpleasant	1	0,1%		
<b>result</b>		<b>226</b>	<b>26,5%</b>			<b>31</b>	<b>3,6%</b>
neutral	Feeling nothing	46	5,4%	neutral	Feeling nothing	12	1,4%
<b>result</b>		<b>46</b>	<b>5,40%</b>			<b>12</b>	<b>1,4%</b>
<b>total</b>		<b>759</b>	<b>89,13%</b>			<b>93</b>	<b>10,9%</b>

This study found that most adolescents have happy moralist patterns. Teens are happy to make decisions that are consistent with moral norms because they recognize negative consequences for the third-parties involved in moral dilemmas (Oser, 2000). Our findings support the results of Keller's research (2004) which shows that most adolescents feel happy when acting in line with moral norms. Positive emotions that arise in adolescents with happy moralist patterns are emotions of happiness, pride, gratitude, sincerity, sympathy, and not feeling guilty. Adolescents feel happy when doing good deeds and feeling useful to others. Prototypes of moral emotions with positive valence are pride, gratitude, and elevation (Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007). Adolescents feel proud when they are able to help others instead of pursuing their own interests. Pride plays a very important role in psychological functions, including strengthening prosocial behavior, increasing self-esteem, and having adaptive functions (Tracy & Robins, 2007). On the other hand, lack of pride is related to aggression and antisocial behavior. Gratitude is a pleasant emotional state, such as feeling free from debt regardless of obligations and unpleasant feelings (Tangney et al, 2007). Feelings of gratitude can be a result of moral behavior (e.g., prosocial, helping), and could lead to motivation to behave morally (e.g., prosocial behavior) (Jourdeuil & Petit, 2015; McCullough,

Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Grateful people are often motivated in responding to prosocial situations. Gratitude does not only benefit to aid providers but also others. According to adolescents, being grateful will allow them to receive a reward from God for bringing happiness to others.

Another emotion that adolescents feel is sincerity. Adolescents are sincere when, for an example, they show a truly strong desire to help someone who lose their wallets. They also show sympathy. This is seen when they are being understanding of what someone experienced, allowing them to agree in waiting a little longer for the person to arrive. According to Haidt (2003), sympathy is a moral foundation. Humans have the nature to feel uncomfortable when other people suffer, sometimes eliciting the initiative to help. Some researchers attempted to revive the term "sympathy", an older term, which refers to an emotional reaction based on the concerns of others' emotional state or condition. This involves feelings of sadness or concern for others. Even the word sympathy refers to the tendency of two things to move together, "the tendency to think or feel the same". Sympathy (feeling concerned about others) and empathy (feeling how others feel) regulates many social interactions in humans.

Adolescents experience the phenomenon of unhappy moralist. It arises when individuals feel

unhappy or negatively for making a decision to behave in a certain way based on their moral standard (Oser, Schmid, & Hattersley, 2006). The negative emotion that appears are products of self-evaluation (e.g., shame, guilt) that adolescents use to make decisions that are in line with the moral norm. However, negative emotion arises because adolescents felt that their decision have sacrificed their own needs, causing them to feel unhappy for not violating the rules. We predict that unhappy moralist appears because of the lack of motivation to sacrifice one's hedonistic drive that relates to the moral option (Oser et al, 2006). Unhappy moralist arises because individuals feel unhappy with decisions that does not conform to their choice. Adolescents feel that they are torn between two conflicting value systems, orientation towards success and preventing injustice.

Moral emotions that appear in unhappy moralist are, among others, pity, shame, regret, guilt, anxiety, emotion conflict, feeling bad, and confusion. The moral emotion prototype for negative valence include guilt, shame, and pity (Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007). Pity appears when the cause of the negative event cannot be controlled. For example, adolescents will show pity for someone who lost their wallet by thinking of how sad and confuse the person must feel. Adolescents also shows anxious feelings. Those who feel anxious will typically also feel confuse, unsure, defensive, and burdened. Adolescents feels anxious when there is an internal conflict between their heart and mind. For example, some adolescents reported that returning someone's wallet and fulfilling promises are a form of responsibility. In reality, adolescents are confused because they feel happy for finding large amount of money, but also disappointed for not getting what they want because they conformed to the social norm.

Shame appears as an emotion that encourages adolescents to do good deeds according to moral values. Shame plays an important role in a person's moral life (Tangney & Dearing, 2004). Embarrassment arises when someone commits an action that violates internalized norms and feeling like he or she failed at meeting the norms of society. The anticipation of shame acts as a regulator of good behavior. Shame is usually compared to guilt. Both emotions are negative self-aware emotions. Shame is triggered by the awareness that others consider themselves to be individuals with shortcomings. Guilt is the natural emotional tendency that someone experience after making a mistake.

Guilt is characterized by anticipating bad feelings before committing an act of violation (Tangney & Dearing, 2004; Tangney et al, 2007; Tangney, Stuewig, Mashek, & Hastings, 2011).

Guilt can lead to prosocial behavior, improvement in relationships, motivate someone to do good and avoid violations, minimize injustice and emotional distress (Roos, 2014; Xu, Begue, & Shankland, 2011). Individuals with no guilt have destructive properties that could lead to antisocial behavior (Xu et al, 2011). Guilt usually motivates the improvement of actions to ease any tension created by unacceptable behavior (Tangney et al., 2007). Guilt is also associated with attempts to deal with anger and reduced levels of aggression (Tangney & Dearing, 2004). Adolescents with lack guilt are characterized by patterns of aggressive and antisocial behavior (Frick & White, 2008). Although guilt is considered as a negative emotion, it could also encourage people to conduct good deeds (Xu, Bègue, & Bushman, 2012). Adolescent scan feel both negative and positive emotions simultaneously (e.g., happy and sad, sorry and happy, relieved and worried, hesitant and sincere, relieved but uneasy, relieved and disappointed, happy and disappointed, etc.). Mixed emotions can consist of two or more positive and negative emotions, reflecting the existence of Arsenio's moral conflict (2014).

The results of this study also gave rise to the phenomenon of happy victimizers. Adolescents should no longer exhibit this pattern because we expect them to understand how third-party feels. According to Gummerum, Lopez-Perez, Amrbona, Rodriguez, Dellaria, Smith, and Wilson (2015), the pattern of happy victimizer is found in children. Children will feel happy when they do an act that violates the rules because it is morally wrong to push friends from the swing and "victims" feel unpleasant emotions (negative emotions). However, as we get older, the feeling of happiness will decrease. Adults believe that the perpetrator of violence will feel guilty or ashamed for moral offenses (unhappy victimizer).

We also found that some adolescents felt nothing (neutral), both when making good moral decision and immoral decisions. According to a small number of adolescents, doing good or bad behavior is normal. This indicates that there is a possibility for adolescents to ignore or be unable to identify their emotion. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the development of moral emotions in adolescents in more depth.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that moral emotions can arise depending on the situation at hand. Moral emotion can encourage prosocial or altruistic moral decision making, namely the decision to help others for the benefit of that person. Most adolescents believe that making the right moral decision can be based on positive emotions (e.g., happiness, pride, gratitude, sincerity, sympathy,

and not feeling guilty), allowing happy moralist pattern to appear. However, negative emotions (e.g., pity, shame, regret, guilt, anxiety, emotion conflict, feeling bad, and confusion) can also anticipate unhappy moralist. Happy victimizer and unhappy victimizer patterns also appear in adolescents. In addition, adolescents will experience emotional conflict and feel uncomfortable when faced with mixed positive-negative emotions. In this study, a pattern arises that cannot be classified into existing patterns because adolescents feel normal and do not feel any emotion when making moral and immoral decisions.

Based on our findings, further qualitative and quantitative research on moral emotion is needed. Additionally, this research only used two types of moral dilemma case which might have limited the various moral emotions that could be triggered. Thus, future studies are advised to create various complex moral dilemma cases based on the daily problems of adolescents.

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