

ETHICAL POSITION AND EMPATHY, PREDICTORS OF PROSOCIALITY AND PENALIZATION OF OFFENSES AND CRIMES

LUCAS MARCELO RODRÍGUEZ Y JOSÉ EDUARDO MORENO

Extended summary

Individual variations in moral judgments can be described considering relativism and idealism (Forsyth, 1980; Schelenker & Forsyth, 1977). Relativism can be defined as the fact of rejecting the possibility of relying on universal moral standards to draw conclusions from moral judgments; while others make use of moral absolutes to make judgments (absolutist). As regards moral relativism, research has shown that people with high relativism were not more prone to deceptions than people with low relativism (Forsyth & Berger, 1982). Contrary to this, recent research has shown that the rise of moral relativism and the decrease of absolutism relaxes good customs and generates predisposition to immoral behavior (Rai & Holyoak, 2013). While research shows controversies between personal ethics and moral behavior, it has been empirically shown that moral realism (as opposed to relativism) is positively associated with increased donations to good causes, which is considered a prosocial behavior (Young & Durwin, 2013).

Prosociality comprises aid behaviors or the ones that benefit others, independent of the intention to be achieved with this aid (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). From adolescence, and later in the life cycle, empathy is considered a part of the prosocial dimension (Paciello, Vecchio, & Pepe, 2005). Empathy has become very important both as an individual developmental variable as well as its relationship with other variables such as sociomoral development and prosociality.

Depending on the ethical position that the subject adopts, taking into account the level of relativism, the variation of the penalty offenses or crimes people may

commit is estimated. That is to say that moral character or value judgment made on the faults or crimes can vary according to ethical positions.

In relation to offenses and crimes it has been theorized that empathy is essential for the decisions taken by judges, because they need to experience empathy to deliver fair trials and provide unrelenting verdicts (Slote, 2013, quoted by Samamé, 2016). This empathic attitude, understood as cognitive and affective empathy, harmonically addressed to those potentially affected, would enable good judgments (Samamé, 2016).

The relativistic ethical position can influence moral behavior, particularly prosociality and penalization of offenses and crimes; being empathy an important mediating variable.

We believe that from the degree of relativism that adolescents have, with the presence of empathy as a mediator variable, the consequences in ethical or moral actions will vary, particularly in prosocial behavior and offenses penalization. It is from the above that the present work aims to test a variable interaction model, taking relativism and absolutism as predictor variables, empathy as a mediating variable and prosocial behavior and penalization of faults and offenses as dependent variables.

The participants of this study were 515 adolescents between 17 and 20 years old, and they had a mean age of 17.49 years ($SD = 72$); 166 men (32.2%) and 349 women (67.8%). Teenagers had middle socioeconomic status, living in Entre Rios and Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is a nonprobability sample.

The *Ethical Position Questionnaire* (EPQ) was used to measure relativism and nonrelativism. This instrument was created by D. Forsyth (1980), to measure the two factors that are the basis of individual moral judgments namely relativism and idealism. For this investigation, only one of the 10-item scales was used, the one that measures relativism and nonrelativism, and we calculated scores separately: relativism and absolutism (non-relativism). The Garaigordobil Empathy Questionnaire (2000), based on the Merhabian and Epstein Dispositional Empathy Questionnaire (1972), was used to measure empathy. Scale Prosociality of Caprara, Steca, Zelli and Capanna (2005) based on the scale of prosocial behavior for children (Caprara & Pastorelli, 1993), was used to measure prosocial behavior, to measure the penalization of offenses and crimes Penalization of Faults and Crimes Scale built by Lopez Alonso and Rimoldi (1973, Lopez Alonso, 1977) was used. This scale is based on a list of criminal actions taken originally from Sellin and Donnelly and used in the measurement of psychological variables by Moreno (1991).

Prior to the testing of structural equation model Pearson correlations between variables were performed. The highest significant correlations were obtained between prosocial behavior and empathy (.616); between the penalization of offenses and crimes and empathy (.253); between relativism and no penalty offenses and crimes (.238) and between prosocial behavior and offenses and crimes penalization (.238). In addition, not significant correlations between relativism and prosocial behavior (.209) and to a lesser degree among nonrelativism and empathy (.180) were obtained. Meanwhile, there exist negative significant correlations between relativism and three variables: relativism (-.188), prosocial behavior (-.114) and offenses and crimes penalization (-.173).

In the variables interaction model proposed the predictors were relativistic and non-relativistic ethical positions, the mediating variable was empathy and the dependent variables were the prosocial behavior and the offenses and crimes penalization. This model was tested using the structural equation model.

The results showed a good fit between the proposed model and empirical data. The assessment of model goodness of fit is based on multiple indicators: the chi

square statistic $X^2(1) = 2.55$, $p = .11$, $X^2/df = 2.55$, GFI = .99, AGFI = .97, CFI = .99, all of them showing goodness of fit. Finally, as error measurements the Root Mean Square Residual, RMR = .005 and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation RMSEA = .055, such were calculated. As it is known, values below .10 indicate an acceptable error, and values around .06 indicate a very good fit (Kline, 1998). The R^2 values of the mediator variable and the dependent variables were as follows: empathy = .03; offenses and crimes penalization = .12 and prosocial behaviors = .40.

The highest significant correlation between empathy and prosocial behavior, which is to be expected considering that from teen age, empathy is part of prosociality (Paciello et al., 2005). This finding is agreeable with empirical studies that confirm this relationship between empathy and prosociality (Mestre, 2014; Moreno & Fernandez, 2011). Besides, the correlation between empathy and offenses and crimes penalization was the second highest correlation. Although there aren't any previous empirical studies linking these variables, theoretical jurisprudence studies express the need for empathy to carry out fair trials (Samamé, 2016). So, it would be necessary to empathize with the victims and with those involved in the case to make a good judgment. That is to say, the greater empathy the greater offenses and crimes penalization, which would mean that the participants of this research would empathize with the victims of each of the offenses and crimes.

Finally, there are significant correlations between offenses and crimes penalization and absolutism, as well as between offenses and crimes penalization and prosocial behavior. The first of these correlations can be clearly explained as nonrelativistic people use moral absolutes to judge (Forsyth, 1980; Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977), which would raise the level of penalty for offenses and crimes. The second of these correlations, prosociality and penalization, could be linked to the empathy question because at this age prosociality implies empathy. Anyway, we consider that more studies should be conducted about this topic to provide better explanations.

Absolutism as a predictor variable has a positive effect on the penalization of faults and crimes. This pos-

itive effect is enhanced by empathy as a mediating variable between them. Empirical research shows that there is higher consistency between morality and behavior in subjects who have reached higher stages of moral development. There are other variables involved such as empathy and situational variables that add an important motivational component to moral behavior (Etxebarria & Caba, 1998). Empathy could add an important component to the ethical position for the penalization of offenses or crimes, being a key mediator between ethical position and moral judgment.

Relativism has a negative effect on the penalization of offenses and crimes. As relativism implies a rejection of the possibility of relying on universal moral standards to draw conclusions from moral judgments (Forsyth, 1980; Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977), this rejection would not allow the penalization of offenses and crimes, because all judgment is something very particular to each subject in every situation.

Relativism in the model proposed has no effect on empathy.

Relativism and absolutism have not direct effects on prosocial behavior, but they have indirect effects when we consider the mediator variable empathy.

The results of the theoretical model proposed confirm the importance of ethical positions, including relativism variable, on offenses and crimes penalization and prosocial behavior, with an important mediating role of empathy.

One of the limitations of this study is related to measuring only one dimension of Ethical Positions that Donelson Forsyth describes. Future research should incorporate idealism and pragmatism variables. It is also advisable in future studies to evaluate the types of crimes and offenses on which empathy has a higher mediator effect.