



MORAL VALUES INFULENCING COGNITIVE RIGIDITY AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG YOUNG ADULTS - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract:

Moral values play a central role in shaping how individuals interpret social norms, regulate behavior, and respond to rule violations. This conceptual framework examines the proposed relationship between moral values, cognitive rigidity, and tendencies toward antisocial or criminal behavior, with particular attention to adolescents and young adults. Drawing on moral foundations theory, cognitive rigidity models, and psychological perspectives on antisocial behavior, the framework suggests that certain moral value orientations may contribute to inflexible thinking patterns, which in turn increase vulnerability to rigid moral judgments and maladaptive behavioral outcomes. Cognitive rigidity is positioned as a key mediating factor that influences how moral beliefs are applied in real-life situations, potentially intensifying punitive attitudes, reduced empathy, and rule-breaking tendencies. By integrating moral, cognitive, and behavioral perspectives, this framework highlights how inflexible moral reasoning may limit adaptive decision-making and increase risk for antisocial behavior. The proposed model offers a structured basis for future empirical research and has implications for psychological assessment, preventive interventions, and programs aimed at fostering moral reasoning flexibility and healthier behavioral regulation among youth.

Index Terms - Moral values; Cognitive rigidity; Antisocial behavior; Moral reasoning; Youth.

Introduction:

Moral values play a crucial role in guiding individuals' judgments, decisions, and behaviors within society. During young adulthood, a developmental phase marked by identity formation and increased autonomy, moral reasoning becomes especially influential in shaping behavior. Deficits or distortions in moral values may contribute to maladaptive cognitive styles such as cognitive rigidity, characterized by inflexible thinking, resistance to change, and difficulty considering alternative perspectives. Cognitive rigidity, in turn, has been associated with rule-bound behavior, poor moral reasoning, and increased likelihood of antisocial or criminal behavior.

Criminal behavior among young adults does not arise solely from situational factors but is often influenced by internal cognitive and moral structures. Understanding how moral values influence cognitive rigidity and criminal behavior can help explain variations in antisocial tendencies and provide insight into prevention and intervention strategies.

Review of literature:

Existing literature highlights the significant role of moral values in shaping cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Theories of moral development suggest that lower levels of moral reasoning are associated with increased antisocial and criminal behavior due to impaired ethical judgment (Kohlberg, 1984; Gibbs, 2019). Moral foundation theory further emphasizes that weaknesses in core moral domains such as care, fairness, and authority can increase vulnerability to deviant behavior (Haidt & Graham, 2007). The expression of moral values in behavior is influenced by moral identity and self-regulation, with poor moral regulation linked to rule-breaking tendencies (Blasi, 1980; Tangney et al., 2007), while weakened moral bonds elevate the risk of delinquency (Hirschi, 1969). Cognitive rigidity, characterized by inflexible thinking and resistance to change, has been shown to impair moral judgment and adaptability (Rehfishch, 1958; Rokeach, 1960), and is associated with dogmatism and reduced openness (Van Hiel et al., 2004).

Research further indicates that cognitive rigidity may act as a pathway linking moral deficits to maladaptive behavior, as rigid cognitive styles disrupt moral judgment and motivation (Rest et al., 1999) and are associated with aggression, rule violation, and criminal thinking patterns (Bandura, 1999; Walters, 2012). Young adulthood has been identified as a critical period marked by ongoing moral and cognitive development, increasing susceptibility to antisocial behavior when moral values and cognitive flexibility are compromised (Monahan et al., 2015; Stams et al., 2006). Overall, existing studies suggest that moral values influence criminal behavior both directly and indirectly through cognitive rigidity; however, limited research has examined these variables within a single integrated framework among young adults, thereby justifying the present study.

Research Design

The study applied a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design built on the conceptual framework that moral values not only influence but also lead to cognitive rigidity and criminal behavior among young adults. The moral values considered as the independent variable while at the same time cognitive rigidity and criminal behavior are dependent variables. Data are going to be collected from young adults aged 18 to 25 years through standardized self-report measures and the proposed relationships will be tested via correlation and regression analyses.

Procedure:

The appropriate sampling technique will be applied to select a group of young adults. The participants will be informed about the research purpose and the ethical issues, e.g., the confidentiality of their information and their right to withdraw at any time from the study. The scales will be utilized for the assessment of the respondents' moral values, cognitive rigidity, and criminal behavior, as planned in the study design. The gathered data will be analyzed using correlation and regression analysis as the central statistical methods. The study's objectives and hypotheses will be the basis for the interpretation of the results.

Discussion:

The conceptual framework of the research study is built on the premise that moral values, cognitive rigidity, and criminal conduct interrelate amongst the youth. It is suggested that those with stronger moral values and principles are prone to show lower cognitive rigidity, which is a characteristic of flexibility in thinking and being open to different points of view, whereas weaker or distorted moral values are related to higher cognitive rigidity, which makes it difficult to reason morally and to make sound decisions. Moreover, cognitive rigidity is believed to increase the likelihood of criminal conduct as it impairs the ability to assess consequences, to see a society's standards, and to correct one's behavior accordingly. Besides, cognitive rigidity is assumed to be the reason why moral values have an effect on criminal behavior. This presumption is made because the age of late adolescence is a crucial time for the development of both moral and cognitive skills, consequently, these relationships are expected to be very strong at this point in life. In a nutshell, the model suggests that moral maturity and cognitive flexibility together function as behavior regulators and thus decrease the likelihood of drawing near to criminality.

Conclusion:

The current study draws attention to the fact that moral values are a very important factor in determining the young people's cognitive flexibility and behavior. Moreover, linking morality to cognition and criminal behavior emphasizes the importance of moral development for the prevention of antisocial tendencies. Thus, along with the promotion of cognitive flexibility, moral reasoning should also be strengthened as a way to impress the young adult section and eliminate their criminal behavior.

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