

Do Taiwanese Adolescents Believe in the Moral Significance of Effort and School Performance?

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Prior empirical studies have argued that in culturally Confucian societies, academic effort and school performance are deemed role-based morality. Yet these studies have often arrived at their conclusions through inferences drawn from participants' opinions of achievement related acts but not their direct judgement on whether lack of effort or academic performance is immoral. Based on Confucian ethics, Hwang (2012) hypothesized that studying hard and striving for academic achievement are role-based responsibilities and obligatory moral conduct for young learners. Fwu, Wei, Chen, and Wang (2014) further postulated that the role obligation of effort is not only a "positive" moral duty that requires individuals to act, but also an "unconditional positive" moral duty that calls for total dedication without temporary exceptions. Alternatively, under the social-cognitive domain theory, role obligation may simply be regarded as a social convention rather than a moral code. Therefore, this study directly investigated whether Taiwanese adolescents viewed effortful learning (EL) and academic performance (AP) as essential moral duties or only duties arising from social convention. Each type of duty was examined twice, first as an obligation that one had better follow and then as an obligation one ought to perpetually observe without exception (i.e., unconditional positive duties). Because filial piety (FP) has typically been construed as an unconditional positive moral obligation in culturally Confucian societies, belief in FP was simultaneously explored for comparison. Overall, 148 college students and 158 tenth graders from Northern Taiwan filled out three forms of questionnaires addressing the target concepts of EL, AP, and FP. Each questionnaire comprised four subscales: social convention, moral code, unconditional positive social convention, and unconditional positive moral code. Analyses of *t* tests did not support the prior inference that Taiwanese adolescents regarded EL as a moral code. Instead, both high school and college students agreed that EL was a duty arising from social convention. However, from the perspective of Taiwanese adolescents, the social convention aspect of EL was limited, given that it was not accepted as a duty ascribed to unconditional positive social convention. In contrast, the same group of adolescents viewed FP as an unconditional positive moral code that one should observe at all times. AP was construed to be neither a social convention nor a moral duty. In conclusion, no direct evidence supported prior postulations that students in Confucian societies perceive EL and AP as morality-based obligations, not to mention as unconditional positive moral duties. The implications of the findings for Confucian role-based ethics were discussed.

Keywords: *effort, social-cognitive domain theory, morality, Confucianism, academic achievement*

Working hard and striving for excellence have been considered important work ethics related to morality in Western culture (Weiner, 1995). In many East Asian societies, under the traditions of Confucianism and strict examination system, academic effort and achievement have also been linked to morality. However, the rationale underpinning the connection between effort/achievement and morality in East Asia has differed from that in the

West. In East Asian societies, such as China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, effortful learning and the resultant academic attainment have been regarded as important mechanisms for acquiring family fortunes, promoting social status, and glorifying the family name (Chow & Chu, 2007; Kim & Park, 2006; Tsuneyoshi, 2011; Y. C. Wang, 2014; H.-C. Yen, 2014; Yu & Suen, 2005). Consequently, they have become the basic role-obligation

within the family relationship in which a person stands. Since, in Confucian ethics, moral obligations are derived from the roles that define an individual as a person or an agent (Nuyen, 2009), effort and achievement that are regarded in Confucianism as role-based ethics are said to have moral significance.

Fwu, Wei, Chen, and Wang (2014) further postulated that in culturally Confucian societies the role obligations of working hard and striving for academic excellence were moral duties that one must abide by without exception. In other words, the aforementioned moral obligations may not only be a “positive duty” (or “imperfect duty” in the terminology of Kantian ethics) that does not specifically require how many good deeds an individual is supposed to perform. Rather, the obligations may be regarded as “unconditional positive duties,” calling for total dedication regardless of the circumstances. In Confucian heritage cultures, the most often mentioned example of unconditional positive moral obligation is filial piety (Hwang, 2012).

Prior empirical studies in culturally Confucian societies have inferred that academic effort and achievement contain moral properties (e.g., Fwu et al., 2014; Tao & Hong, 2000). Yet these studies have arrived at their conclusions indirectly. For example, in Fwu et al. (2014), parents, teachers, and students were surveyed on their opinions of whether the hard-working/lazy protagonists receiving a good grade in hypothetical stories had fulfilled their duty and whether the protagonists should be praised. However, their design failed to provide for the possibility that judging the degree to which duty was fulfilled, or praises deserved, might have been due to concerns over issues unrelated to morality. In another example, Tao and Hong (2000) demonstrated positive correlations between the rating scores of morality and ability on a series of statements about achievement related acts. Nevertheless, neither of the above studies directly asked participants about the relationship between effort/achievement and morality.

Assuming that role obligation may not be morality-based is justifiable from theoretical perspectives other than Confucianism. For example, according to the social-cognitive domain theory (Turiel, 1983), judgments of a

particular behavior as acceptable versus unacceptable, good versus bad, or suitable versus unsuitable, are sufficient to characterize whether it is a duty based on social convention. However, such judgments are insufficient to determine whether the behavior involves issues of morality. For example, in Fwu et al. (2014), although the protagonist who did not work hard, rarely reviewed what had been taught, and seldom completed homework was judged by the Taiwanese participants as not fulfilling his duty, their judgement could have been merely based on whether the protagonist had violated a social conventional duty but not a moral code as the study concluded. Additionally, as Yau and Smetana (1996, 2003) indicated, adolescents in contemporary Confucian societies (i.e., Hong Kong and China) rarely classify events involving learning behavior or academic achievement as incidents related to either moral or conventional domain. It is thus reasonable to suspect whether adolescents in modern Confucian societies would treat academic effort and performance as a moral constraint or just an obligation arising from social convention.

This study investigated whether the Confucian view or the social-cognitive domain theory better explains Taiwanese students’ domain judgements on effort and achievement. We directly asked Taiwanese adolescents whether they viewed effortful learning (EL) and academic performance (AP) as moral duties or duties arising from social convention. Each type of duty was surveyed twice, once as an obligation that one had better follow (i.e., imperfect duty) and the other time as an obligation that one ought to observe regardless of the circumstances (i.e., unconditional positive duty). Additionally, because filial piety (FP) is typically construed as an unconditional positive moral obligation in culturally Confucian societies (Hwang, 2012), adolescents’ views of FP were simultaneously collected for comparison. Finally, Lin (2007) and Yau and Smetana (2003) suggested that the meaning of academic work from the views of adolescents may change due to different concerns for future planning at different ages. Thus, this study investigated two groups of adolescents, one in high school and the other in college.

Method

Participants

A total of 148 undergraduate students (92 females) from two universities and 158 tenth-grade students (84 females) from two public high schools located in Northern Taiwan were included in the analyses.

Instruments

Three questionnaires testing the target concepts of effortful learning (EL), academic performance (AP), and filial piety (FP) were developed for this study. Each questionnaire comprised four subscales asking whether or not it was proper to view the target concept as an imperfect social convention (three items), an imperfect moral code (one item), an unconditional positive social convention (three items), and an unconditional positive moral code (one item). All items were 6-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. The items on each subscale were phrased in similar formats of “reversed description.” For example, a sample item for the imperfect social convention subscale of AP stated that, “If one performs badly at school, I think he/she should think his/her doing is not suitable.” The item for the imperfect moral code subscale of EL was “If one does not study hard, I think he/she should think his/her doing is not moral.” One item from the unconditional positive social convention subscale of FP stated that, “If one occasionally does not practice filial piety to his/her parents, I think he/she should think his/her doing is not suitable.” The item from the unconditional positive moral code subscale of EL stated that, “If one occasionally does not study hard, I think he/she should think his/her doing is not moral.”

Results

Construing EL, AP, and FP as Social Conventions and Moral Duties

The test-retest reliabilities were between .40 and .81 (all $ps < .01$). The means and standard deviations for each subscale in each sample are shown in Table 1. To

examine whether or not the participants construed EL, AP, and FP as an imperfect social convention, an imperfect moral code, an unconditional positive social convention, and an unconditional positive moral code, one-sample t -tests were conducted to compare the mean score of each subscale with the midpoint of 6-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 3.5).

As shown in Table 1, both 10th graders ($t[157] = 4.66, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.37$) and college students ($t[147] = 4.89, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.40$) agreed that effort was an imperfect social conventional duty (i.e., mean scores higher than 3.5). However, the 10th graders had no specific opinions ($t[157] = 0.24, p = .81$, Cohen’s $d = 0.02$) and the college students significantly disagreed on effort being an unconditional positive duty based on social convention ($t[147] = -2.59, p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = 0.21$).

Regarding the opinions on the moral properties of effort among Taiwanese adolescents, both 10th graders ($ts[157] = -7.79$ and $-12.29, ps < .001$, Cohen’s $ds = 0.62$ and 0.98) and college students ($ts[147] = -10.61$ and $-14.33, ps < .001$, Cohen’s $ds = 0.87$ and 1.18) disagreed on effort being either an imperfect or an unconditional positive moral code.

The mean scores for AP as imperfect social conventional and moral duties and as unconditional positive social conventional and moral duties were all significantly lower than 3.5 among both 10th graders ($ts[157] = -9.77, -26.83, -6.64$, and $-25.22, ps < .001$, Cohen’s $ds = 0.78, 2.13, 0.53$, and 2.01) and college students ($ts[147] = -9.10, -26.53, -6.25$, and $-22.78, ps < .001$, Cohen’s $ds = 0.75, 2.18, 0.51$, and 1.87), indicating their disagreement over AP as any form of duties. In contrast, the mean scores for FP as imperfect social conventional and moral duties and as unconditional positive social conventional and moral duties were all significantly higher than 3.5 among both 10th graders ($ts[157] = 24.95, 15.21, 16.49$, and $8.24, ps < .001$, Cohen’s $ds = 1.98, 1.21, 1.31$, and 0.66) and college students ($ts[147] = 18.37, 16.03, 11.89$, and $6.70, ps < .001$, Cohen’s $ds = 1.51, 1.32, 0.98$, and 0.55), indicating their agreement on filial piety as not only imperfect but also unconditional positive social conventional and moral duties.

Comparing the Construal of EL and AP with FP

To test whether Taiwanese adolescents were more, or less, likely to construe EL and AP as social conventional and moral duties compared with how they viewed FP, a series of paired-sample *t*-tests of the corresponding subscales between EL and FP and between AP and FP were conducted. Results indicated that among the eight paired-sample *t*-tests in each age group, the mean scores for the subscales of FP were all significantly higher than the corresponding subscales for either EL or AP ($-29.91 \leq ts(147) \leq -8.84$, $ps < .001$, $0.73 \leq \text{Cohen's } ds \leq 2.46$), suggesting that both high school and college students in Taiwan do not construe EL or AP as conventional or moral duties to the extent that they believe in FP.

Developmental Differences in Construing Effort and Achievement as Duties

Significant age differences only appeared in one subscale. Specifically, college students disagreed more than 10th graders ($t[304] = -2.03$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.23$) on effort being an unconditional positive social conventional duty. All other developmental comparisons were not significant ($-0.99 \leq ts(304) \leq 0.90$, *ns*).

Discussion

Contrary to the extrapolation made by prior studies (e.g., Fwu et al., 2014; Hwang, 2012; Tao & Hong, 2014) which inferred effort and achievement are morality-based in East Asian societies, this study revealed that, when Taiwanese adolescents were asked directly for their opinion of effortful learning (EL) and academic performance (AP), they significantly disagreed that EL or AP carried any properties of morality. Nevertheless, the results of this study supported the social-cognitive domain theory by demonstrating that both high school and college students in Taiwan viewed EL as an imperfect duty arising from social convention. However, the connection between effort and social convention was still not as strong as Taiwanese adolescents' commitment to filial piety (FP). In addition, from the perspective of Taiwanese

adolescents, the social conventional aspect of EL was limited because it was only accepted as an imperfect duty but not as an unconditional positive duty.

This study adopted the "reversed description" paradigm in phrasing the items in the questionnaires. Using this paradigm made it possible to directly investigate participants' domain judgments while concomitantly increased the cognitive load of the rating scales. The fact that most of the participants significantly agreed with the statement of not practicing filial piety being immoral reflected their ability to correctly comprehend the meaning of items written in reversed descriptions, which, in turn, indicated that the format of the questionnaires was not much a caveat in this study.

In Confucian societies, the cultural concepts of learning, such as diligence, persistence, and concentration, are deeply rooted in children's beliefs since preschool (Li, 2004). Thus, it was not surprising that Taiwanese adolescents of both age groups unanimously agreed that EL was an imperfect social convention. However, Taiwanese college students rejected the idea of EL as an unconditional positive social conventional duty, while 10th graders did not significantly accept or reject the idea. Entering college is a major developmental milestone for adolescents in Taiwan. In high school, "entering the ideal university" is often the mutual goal shared by adolescents and their parents. Thus, 10th graders may ponder whether EL should be regarded as an obligation that one needs to incessantly fulfill to strive for academic excellence. In contrast, Taiwanese college students have been relieved of the pressure from college entrance competition. Furthermore, they are often granted more autonomy in their academic work, which may lead them to firmly reject EL as an unconditional positive duty.

The findings on acceptance of EL as an imperfect social conventional duty suggested that the concept of EL as a role obligation has been more or less preserved among Taiwanese adolescents. Yet the conceptualization may not have been similarly sustained in other East Asian countries. For instance, adolescents in Hong Kong and China have rarely classified events involving learning behavior or academic achievement as incidents related to either moral or conventional domains (Yau & Smetana,

1996, 2003). Therefore, treating effort as a morality-based role obligation in contemporary Confucian societies may be inappropriate. The results of this study also implied that parents in these societies should be cautious. That is, demanding that their children work hard in the name of morality may be useless or even elicit resentment from teenage children.

Contrary to past findings (Tao & Hong, 2000, 2014), in this study Taiwanese adolescents neither agreed with AP as any form or moral code nor accepted AP as any form of duty based on social convention. One reason

for this may be that AP is not fully controllable by the individual. Thus, it is difficult to conceptualize AP as an obligation that must be abided by. Additionally, Taiwan has developed into a pluralistic society that respects different expertise. Consequently, Taiwanese adolescents may no longer view AP as the only means of fulfilling their role obligation. In summary, rather than following the conclusions of prior research by treating academic effort and achievement as role-based morality, the meaning of academic effort and achievement in contemporary Confucian societies should be deliberated and examined carefully.