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PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS IN THE FORMATION OF MORAL VALUES IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN: AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF EMPATHY, MORAL IDENTITY AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Abstract. *The article addresses the problem of how moral values are internalised by children aged 7–10 and which psychosocial factors drive this process. On the basis of a systematic theoretical analysis of Western, Russian and Uzbek research, the author shows that moral values at primary school age are formed through the interaction of three psychological mechanisms: cognitive (understanding the reasons and consequences of norms, distinguishing intentions from outcomes and moral norms from conventions), emotional (affective and cognitive empathy, moral emotions, anticipated feelings) and identity-related (the emerging moral self). These mechanisms are activated and sustained by the social environment, described with the help of U. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory: the family, the school climate, the peer group and the national cultural context. The article proposes an integrative three-level model of moral value formation, formulates criteria for its psychodiagnostic verification and outlines the structure of a social-psychological training programme for primary school children. The results may be used by school psychologists, primary school teachers and specialists in family counselling.*

Keywords: *moral values, internalisation, primary school age, empathy, moral emotions, moral identity, parenting style, school climate, ecological systems theory, Uzbekistan.*

INTRODUCTION

The moral development of children has become one of the central concerns of educational and family policy in a rapidly changing world. Globalisation, migration, urbanisation and, above all, digitalisation have transformed the environment in which

children acquire their values. Recent studies describe a growing gap between the values that young people endorse verbally and their actual behaviour. J. Serrano-Puche calls this phenomenon "digital moral dissonance": people regard themselves as committed to moral principles, but in online environments they act against them. Research on moral disengagement in digital contexts shows that anonymity, social pressure and external rewards such as "likes" weaken empathy and value-based decision-making (Serrano-Puche, 2022:512-529). These findings demonstrate that moral education cannot be reduced to the transmission of knowledge about rules: values must become part of the person's inner motivational system.

In Uzbekistan the upbringing of a harmoniously developed generation has been declared a strategic priority of state policy. The Law "On Education" names the educational character of teaching, humanism and commitment to national and universal values among the basic principles of education (Law No. O'RQ-637, 2020), while the "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy sets goals to strengthen the institution of the family and to raise young people in the spirit of high spiritual and moral values (Decree No. PF-158, 2023). The implementation of these goals requires a sound psychological understanding of how moral values are formed in childhood and what conditions support this process.

Primary school age (7–10 years) is a critical period in this respect. According to E. Erikson, the child at this stage resolves the psychosocial conflict between industry and inferiority, and the school becomes the main arena of social comparison. J. Piaget places the child at the stage of concrete operations, when logical thinking develops but still relies on concrete situations. L. Kohlberg locates most children of this age between the instrumental orientation ("you help me, I help you") and the "good child" orientation, in which approval and recognition become important motives (Kohlberg, 1975:670-677). In Russian psychology D. B. Elkonin and V. V. Davydov describe learning as the leading activity of this age, which restructures the child's motivation and self-awareness. The Uzbek psychologists E. G'. G'oziyev (2010), Z. T. Nishanova (2018), M. X. Xolnazarova and M. Q. Muxliboyev (2014) emphasise that at this age the motive "I want" gradually gives way to the motive "I must," and voluntary behaviour, self-assessment and inner control begin to take shape.

Thus primary school age combines high sensitivity to social influences with the emergence of the first forms of internal moral regulation. At the same time most existing

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studies examine individual aspects of moral development – reasoning, empathy, emotions or the family – in isolation. There is a lack of integrative models that would connect the psychological mechanisms of moral value formation with the psychosocial factors that activate them. The aim of this article is therefore to identify the psychosocial factors of moral value formation in primary school children and to integrate them into a unified explanatory model. The objectives are to describe the psychological mechanisms of moral value internalisation at primary school age; to analyse the role of the family, the school and the peer group as psychosocial factors; to take into account the cultural context of Uzbekistan; and to propose an integrative model and derive its implications for psychodiagnostics and intervention.

MAIN PART

The study is theoretical and analytical and employs analysis, comparison, synthesis and the modelling of scientific literature. The sources were grouped into four blocks: classical developmental theories (E. Erikson, J. Piaget, L. Kohlberg, L. S. Vygotsky, A. N. Leontiev, D. B. Elkonin, A. Bandura); contemporary research on moral emotions, empathy and moral identity published mainly in the last two decades (T. Malti, T. Krettenauer, S. F. Ongley, J. M. Kingsford, I. E. Bilbao, M. L. Hoffman); ecological and social approaches to development (U. Bronfenbrenner, S. Livingstone); and studies by Uzbek psychologists on value orientations, national upbringing and family psychology (V. M. Karimova, G‘. B. Shoumarov, E. G‘. G‘oziyev, M. D. Galdiyeva, A. A. G‘aybullayev, N. M. Musinova, B. E. Parmonov, A. B. Konratbayeva and others). The selection criterion was the relevance of a source to the age period of 6–11 years and to the problem of moral value internalisation.

The analysis allows us to define the formation of moral values at primary school age as a process of internalisation, in which external norms set by adults are transformed into the child’s internal standards of self-evaluation and behaviour. L. S. Vygotsky’s law of cultural development states that every higher mental function appears first on the social plane, between people, and only then on the individual plane, within the child (Vygotsky, 1978). Moral values follow the same path. At first the norm “do not hurt others” exists as a demand of parents and teachers; later it becomes the child’s own criterion, and the child refrains from harming others even when no adult is watching.

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S. Kaur and other researchers describe three groups of mechanisms that ensure this transition: cognitive, emotional and personal-identity mechanisms.

At primary school age children begin to understand moral rules through their reasons and consequences. S. R. Chowdhury and colleagues note that the child moves from the question "Who said so?" to the questions "Why should I do it?" and "How does it affect others?" (Chowdhury, Yesmin & Obaydullah, 2019:473-484). A prohibition such as "fighting is bad" is no longer perceived as a mere rule, but as a statement about harm: fighting causes pain, offends and destroys friendship.

Three cognitive achievements are particularly important. First, children learn to distinguish intention from outcome: as A. Prencipe and C. C. Helwig show, a cup broken on purpose and a cup broken while trying to help are no longer judged in the same way (Prencipe & Helwig, 2002:841-856). Second, children begin to differentiate social domains – moral norms (not harming others, fairness, honesty), conventional rules (raising one's hand in class, standing in line) and the personal domain (choice of games, colours, friends). A. M. Sharp emphasises that this differentiation allows the child to understand where strict moral demands apply and where freedom of choice exists. Third, executive functions develop: S. Özbey links the growth of inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility with the ability to stop, think and consider alternative solutions before acting, and J. S. Leming's review of moral education programmes shows that the comparison of alternative solutions is more effective than the memorisation of rules (Leming, 1981:147-164).

Moral knowledge becomes moral action only when it is supported by emotional experience. B. Sodian shows that at primary school age children begin to understand moral emotions and differentiate them by type, intensity and content (Sodian, 1988:1323-1338). They also learn to name their feelings more precisely: instead of "I feel bad" they say "I am disappointed," "I am embarrassed" or "I am angry," and the expansion of emotional vocabulary reduces the need to express inner tension through aggression.

Empathy includes an affective component – sharing another person's emotional state – and a cognitive component – understanding why the other person feels this way. N. Basyuk emphasises the role of affective empathy as the emotional foundation of moral behaviour, whereas W. F. Arsenio links cognitive empathy with the ability to take another person's perspective. At primary school age the cognitive component develops

especially quickly because children's thinking becomes more flexible. According to M. L. Hoffman, empathic distress, when combined with an understanding of one's own responsibility for the other's suffering, turns into guilt, the key moral emotion (Hoffman, 2000). I. E. Bilbao links higher empathy in school-aged children with three outcomes: a stronger harm criterion, a stronger motive to help and a sharper sense of fairness (Bilbao, 2018).

Moral emotions differ in their consequences. E. A. Vélez García and F. Ostrosky-Solís show that guilt is focused on the act and motivates repair, whereas shame is focused on the self and leads to defensive reactions – denial, excuses, aggression or withdrawal (Vélez García & Ostrosky-Solís, 2006:348-354). T. Malti and M. Keller found that children with externalising behaviour attribute fewer moral emotions to wrongdoers, which points to the regulatory function of these emotions (Malti & Keller, 2009:592-614). Finally, S. F. Ongley, M. Nola and T. Malti show that children's prosocial decisions are strengthened by anticipated emotions: before acting, the child imagines how he or she will feel after helping or refusing to help (Ongley, Nola & Malti, 2014).

Around the age of 7–8 a qualitative change occurs in children's understanding of morality. H. Akram and colleagues note that children begin to treat moral qualities as stable features of a person: "She is honest because she always tells the truth," "He is kind because he helps others" (Akram et al., 2023:607-619). The same logic is applied to the self: "Am I an honest child?", "If I lie, will I become bad?" J. M. Kingsford, D. J. Hawes and M. de Rosnay describe this as the emergence of the moral self (Kingsford, Hawes & de Rosnay, 2018:652-666). T. Krettenauer shows that early moral identity is concrete and rule-based ("tell the truth," "do not fight") and later becomes abstract and principle-based ("be fair," "do not harm others") (Krettenauer, 2022). At the same time the motivation of moral behaviour shifts from external to internal control: the child chooses the right act not out of fear of punishment, but in order to remain consistent with his or her moral self-image. R. Atkins and D. Hart link moral identity with self-regulation and with attachment to school, emphasising that it develops through real social experience rather than through lectures (Atkins, Hart & Donnelly, 2004:77-94).

Although moral values are internal psychological formations, their source is social interaction. U. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory makes it possible to structure the environmental influences on the child's moral development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

E-ISSN 3069-8375

At the level of the microsystem – the family, the class and the peer group – the child encounters models of honesty, care and respect and engages in daily moral practice, while cold, inconsistent or punitive parenting and normalised aggression in the class act as the typical risk factors. The mesosystem, that is, the links between family and school, provides a consistent and integrated value model, and its characteristic risk is the contradictory demands of parents and teachers. The exosystem – the parents' workplace, the mahalla and the local community – indirectly supports emotional stability and social norms, and is weakened by parental overload, labour migration and loose community ties. The macrosystem, comprising national culture, spiritual and religious traditions and state policy, supplies the normative moral framework, whose main risk is the formal, declarative transmission of values. Finally, the chronosystem – historical time and the digital environment – transforms value priorities and brings with it digital moral dissonance and uncontrolled content.

Within the micro- and mesosystems three factors appear decisive. The first is the family. D. Abdukaxarova and G. Mamatova show that a warm, consistent and explanatory parenting style helps children understand the consequences of their actions and accept norms consciously, while a cold, unstable or punitive style hinders the internalisation of norms (Abdukaxarova & Mamatova, 2025:22-25). T. Malti and B. Latzko emphasise that supportive relationships allow the child to separate the act from the self, so that adaptive guilt rather than shame develops (Malti & Latzko, 2010:1-10). In Uzbek family psychology V. M. Karimova (2006) and G‘. B. Shoumarov (2000) consider the style of family relationships a decisive factor in the formation of a child's personality. N. M. Musinova found that parental care and strong emotional ties, combined with cooperation, foster independence, sociability, collectivism and discipline in children (Musinova, 2024), while A. B. Konratbayeva showed that an unfavourable family situation and frequent family conflicts are associated with motives of aggressive behaviour in primary school pupils (Konratbayeva, 2024).

The second factor is the school climate. Q. Kurambayeva notes that a school environment based on fairness, safety, mutual respect and cooperation supports the stable formation of moral values (Kurambayeva, 2025:212-215). The teacher's own behaviour, communication style and fair attitude act as a practical model of moral norms, which, as A. Bandura's social learning theory predicts, is often more effective

E-ISSN 3069-8375

than verbal instruction (Bandura, 1977). M. D. Galdiyeva shows that moral norms, categories and principles serve as social-psychological tools through which the school, the family and the social environment shape the level of upbringing in primary school pupils (Galdiyeva, 2023). Conversely, D. Olweus's research demonstrates that bullying and social manipulation flourish in environments with a "value vacuum" or value conflict.

The third factor is the peer group. Children of this age are highly sensitive to peer evaluation. Classroom norms in which helping, cooperation and fairness are valued make prosocial behaviour stable, whereas norms in which aggression or indifference are normalised weaken moral values. A. B. Konratbayeva's data on the negative influence of the peer group on aggressive motives in Uzbek primary school pupils confirm the importance of this factor (Konratbayeva, 2024).

The national cultural context operates at the macro- and exosystem levels. Values such as respect for elders, care for parents, hospitality, mutual help and solidarity within the mahalla are deeply rooted in Uzbek culture. X. X. Jabborov identifies hospitality, attentiveness, generosity, care and respectfulness as qualities that have acquired a national character and appear prominently in behaviour (Jabborov, 2023). A. A. G'aybullayev shows that national values encourage young people to self-awareness and self-respect and that their main transmitters are the family, education, society and the media (G'aybullayev, 2024). The educational heritage of the Jadid thinkers, in particular Abdulla Avloniy, considered moral upbringing from early childhood the basis of the nation's progress.

This cultural context has two sides. On the one hand it provides a rich normative framework and strong social support for moral behaviour. On the other hand, traditional upbringing often relies on external evaluation – "What will people say?" – and on shaming, which may lead to outward compliance without inner acceptance (Vélez García & Ostrosky-Solís, 2006:348-354). In the author's view the task of psychological work is to preserve the content of national values while changing the mechanism of their transmission: from external control to explanation, empathy and personal choice.

The results make it possible to propose an integrative model of moral value formation at primary school age. The model has three levels. The first level consists of the psychosocial factors: the family, the school climate, the peer group and the

E-ISSN 3069-8375

cultural context, which provide models of behaviour, explanations, emotional support and opportunities for moral practice. The second level consists of the psychological mechanisms – cognitive, emotional and identity-related – which process social influences and transform them into internal structures. The third level is the outcome: internalised moral values that manifest themselves in stable prosocial behaviour, fairness, honesty and responsibility, even in the absence of external control.

The mechanisms of the second level work not in parallel but as a sequential chain. First the child perceives the emotional side of the situation ("What happened to him?"); next the child relates it to his or her moral self-image ("What kind of person do I want to be?"); finally the child evaluates the anticipated inner outcome ("How will I feel afterwards?"). If one link of the chain is weak – for example, the child does not recognise another person's distress or has already accepted the label "bad child" – moral knowledge fails to turn into action. Psychosocial factors influence each link: parents and teachers teach emotional vocabulary, give explanations instead of labels, model fair behaviour and create situations in which the child can act morally and receive recognition.

Each link of the chain can be described by the question it poses to the child, by the factor that supports it and by the indicator through which it can be diagnosed. Emotional perception answers the question "What does the other person feel?"; it is supported by emotional vocabulary and inductive explanations, and it is diagnosed through the level of empathy towards different social objects. The moral self answers the question "What kind of person am I?"; it is supported by the separation of act and person and by a positive moral image, and it is diagnosed through commitment to moral values and self-assessment. Anticipated emotion answers the question "How will I feel afterwards?"; it is supported by the experience of repair and recognition, and it is diagnosed through the child's choice of a moral rather than an egoistic option in life situations.

The model has two practical implications. The first concerns psychodiagnostics. Moral values should be assessed by several complementary criteria: cognitive-behavioural (moral choice in life situations, for example N. E. Shurko's test "Judgements about life experience"), emotional (empathy towards different social objects, for example I. M. Yusupov's method) and motivational-social (socialisation and commitment to moral values, for example M. I. Rozhkov's method). Since the family is the main microsystem,

E-ISSN 3069-8375

the parenting position should be measured alongside the child's indicators, and the data of the child and the parents should be compared.

The second implication concerns intervention. A social-psychological training programme for primary school children should rely on the mechanisms described above rather than on the memorisation of rules. Such a programme may be built from six blocks. The block "The world of feelings" targets emotional perception and works through recognising and naming emotions, "emotion cards" and the discussion of stories. "In the other person's shoes" targets cognitive empathy through role play, perspective-taking tasks and the analysis of fairy tales and folk tales. "Why is it so?" addresses the cognitive mechanism by means of moral dilemmas, the comparison of intentions and outcomes and the search for alternative solutions. "I am a person who…" develops moral identity through positive self-description, a "good deeds diary" and the joint creation of class rules. "How to fix it" works on moral emotions through restorative conversations and the practising of apologies and repair. Finally, "Family and school together" addresses the social environment by means of parent workshops on inductive discipline and joint family–school tasks.

The model is consistent with the approaches of social-emotional learning (T. R. Hoerr's "Formative Five," D. Goleman's emotional intelligence) and with R. W. Greene's idea that children "do well if they can," that is, that problem behaviour reflects underdeveloped skills rather than bad intentions. Its distinctive feature is the explicit connection between the internal mechanisms of moral development and the psychosocial factors of the child's environment, including the national cultural context. The limitations of the study should also be noted: the model is based on theoretical analysis and requires empirical verification. In particular, it is necessary to test the relationships between empathy, commitment to moral values, moral choice and parenting style in a sample of Uzbek primary school pupils, as well as the effectiveness of the training programme in a formative experiment.

CONCLUSION

The analysis leads to the following conclusions. First, the formation of moral values at primary school age is a process of internalisation, in which external norms become the child's own standards of self-evaluation and behaviour. Second, this process is ensured by the interaction of cognitive, emotional and identity mechanisms, which

E-ISSN 3069-8375

form a sequential chain: emotional perception, relating the situation to the moral self, and evaluation of the anticipated emotion. Third, the family, the school climate, the peer group and the national cultural context are the main psychosocial factors that activate and sustain this chain. Fourth, in the cultural context of Uzbekistan it is important to preserve the rich content of national values while moving from shaming and external control to explanatory, empathy-based and participatory forms of upbringing. The proposed integrative model can serve as a theoretical basis for the psychodiagnostics of moral values and for the development of social-psychological training programmes for primary school children.

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