

การปฏิบัติทางพุทธศาสนากับความสามารถทางสังคมของเด็กวัยรุ่นไทย Buddhist Religious Practice and Social Competence of Thai Adolescents

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บทคัดย่อ

เนื่องจากประชากรไทยประมาณร้อยละ 95 นับถือศาสนาพุทธนิกายเถรวาท การวิจัยความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการปฏิบัติทางพุทธศาสนา ความสามารถทางสังคม ได้แก่ การหยั่งรู้ความเข้าใจผู้อื่น ความภาคภูมิใจในตนเอง และการควบคุมอารมณ์ของวัยรุ่นไทย กลุ่มตัวอย่างเป็น นักเรียนมัธยมศึกษาตอนต้นในกรุงเทพฯ จำนวน 239 คน อายุเฉลี่ย 14.02 ปี พบความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างตัวแปรดังกล่าวในกลุ่มนักเรียนมัธยมต้นระหว่างโรงเรียนทั่วไปกับโรงเรียนวิถีพุทธ

Abstract :

Approximately 95% of Thais are Theravada Buddhists. This research was undertaken to assess the relation between Buddhist religious practice and social competence of adolescents in Bangkok. Participants were recruited from public middle and high schools in Bangkok; 239, age average 14.02 years. The correlations between the variables reported separately for public and temple school are discussed.

Keywords : Social Competence, Buddhist Religious Practice

Introduction

More than 30 years ago, Ogbu (1981) argued in a classic paper that children's social competence must be understood within the context of ecological demands of their milieu. Expanding upon this argument, we suggest that social competence is integrally tied to religious involvement for those children who grow up in communities that are characterized by strong and homogenous religious beliefs.

There are scattered reports suggesting that the link between religious involvement and social competence is more pronounced among youth living in homogeneous than in heterogeneous religious communities. This argument is supported by Smith, Weigert, and Thomas's (1979) findings that self-esteem was associated with religious involvement among students in Catholic schools whereas there is little evidence of such a relation emerging from large-scale surveys of U.S. youth (Smith, 2005). Stark (1996), similarly argued that the association between religious involvement and desistance from delinquency is more pronounced for youth who live in communities with large number of religiously involved peers. He argued that, if religious adolescents interact with other religious adolescents, religious values will typically enter into discussions about whether or not to break rules, whereas if they interact with non-religious peers, it is less likely that such discussions will occur. This hypothesis was supported by Stark's (1996) findings that the relation between delinquency and religiosity/spirituality varied in direct proportion to the percentage of individuals in the geographic region who regularly attended church.

Two recent studies converge in their findings that religious involvement is related to social competence within communities characterized by strong and homogeneous religious involvement. Elder & Conger (2000) assessed youth development within small Midwestern U.S. rural communities where the church plays a central role in the lives of youth. They found that multiple aspects of youth competence, including academic success, self-confidence, peer popularity, and involvement with non-deviant peers were associated with

religious involvement among youth living in these communities.

French, Eisenberg, Vaughan, Purwono, and Suryanti (2008) assessed the relation between religious involvement and social competence among Muslim 13-year-old adolescents living in Indonesia. Religious involvement (as indexed by parent and adolescent reports of spirituality and religiosity) was associated with peer group status, self-esteem, academic achievement, pro-social behavior, and low antisocial and problem behavior. The authors attributed the consistency and strength of these findings to the possibility that religious involvement reflects social competent behavior within this homogenous and highly religious Muslim community and as such is integrally related to other aspects of competence.

In the present study, we extend the research on religion and social competence to Buddhist adolescents living in Thailand. Hughes, Suwanbubha, and Chaisri (2008) interviewed eighty Thai youth and found that all were identified with religion and considered it an important foundation for morality.

Thailand and Buddhism

Approximately 95% of Thais are Theravada Buddhists. Thai culture and national identity are integrally connected with Buddhism. This is seen as one of the three pillars of Thai life (Podhisita, 1998) and most Thais report that religion is an important influence on their lives (Kapur-Fic, 1998). Thai youth are involved with Buddhist rites and ceremonies throughout their life cycle. Central to Theravada Buddhism is karma. Accumulated merit may be associated with consequences either in this life or the next. One may also accumulate demerit as reflected in the Thai proverb: "Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil" (Podhisita, 1998).

There are individual differences in the extent to which Thai lay adolescents are involved in Buddhism (Bunnag, 1973; Hughes, et al., 2008). There is considerable variability among Thais in their understanding of Buddhist religious principles, and the extent to which their religious involvement is primarily directed

toward traditional doctrines versus spirit worship which is intertwined with Buddhist beliefs (Kapur-Fic, 1998). In this study, we explored how these individual differences in involvement in prescribed Buddhist behavior were associated with four aspects of social competence; i.e., emotional control, sympathy and perspective taking, self-esteem, and involvement with non-deviant peers.

In this study of Buddhist beliefs and practices as an element of socialization among Thai adolescents, Buddhist belief is evaluated as the amount of agreement in three areas : belief in sources of religious dependence, belief in the rule of karma, and belief in Nabbana or the ultimate goal which can be achieved by human beings. Buddhist practice is defined as actions or restraints appropriate for a good Buddhist, the three major areas of Buddhist practice being: first, the act of giving and forgiving; second, the Five Precepts which are the sins of commission by words and deeds; and third, praying and meditating. This research focused on the effects of religious socialization through family, educational institutes, Buddhist temples and local community on Thai Youths. Familial influence was found to be most evident among elementary and secondary school students, but the influence of educational institutions and Buddhist temples were found to be stronger in high school and university students (Bhanthumnavin, D. & Bhanthumnavin, D. 2008)

Emotional Control. Effortful control is an aspect of temperament that serves to regulate individual differences in reactivity, including emotionality (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). It includes processes such as the abilities to focus attention and to inhibit and activate behavior as required by the context, processes that appear to be affected by both genetics and socialization (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). In a variety of studies, these regulatory processes have been linked to adjustment, social competence, and moral aspects of functioning such as sympathy and conscience (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Kochanska & Knaack, 2003; Rothbart & Bates, 2006).

Emotional control is a central focus of Buddhism. One of the major tasks of meditation is the control over negative emotions, which includes some emotions (e.g., attachment) that might be considered positive in the West. The Dhammapada, a presentation of Buddhist ethics, contains numerous sections detaining the need to control anger, happiness, and affection. The salience of emotional control in Thai culture is illustrated by the value of maintaining a cool heart (*chai yen*) (Podhisita, 1998). It includes the ability to control emotions such that one does not become anxious, angry or overly excited, or even overly joyous and to maintain calmness in social interactions (Klausner, 1993; Podhisita, 1998).

Sympathy and Perspective Taking. Compassion towards others is one of the major thrusts of Buddhism. For example, one Buddhist meditation technique involves focusing on loving-kindness towards others, including enemies (Brown, 2001). Altruism is also fundamental to Buddhism (Lewis, 2006). Helping others is presumed to reduce karmic burden both in the present and in future lives.

Self-esteem. Hewitt (2002) suggests that self-esteem is a social construction and in part relates to how people perceive themselves in reference to the standards of their group, family, friends, and self. We hypothesize religious involvement is associated with self-esteem to the extent that religious beliefs are homogeneous and prominent in the community. The major support for this hypothesis comes from the Smith, et al. (1979) findings that religious involvement was positively associated with self-esteem for 16-year-old students attending Catholic schools in four countries. The authors explained these results by suggesting that within these Catholic school subcultures, the cultural scripts that define success include religious commitment. Consistent with this finding, Elder and Conger (2000) found that religious involvement was positively associated with self-confidence in adolescents living in religious rural Midwestern U.S. communities. In contrast to these findings, however, researchers assessing large heterogeneously religious samples have found little evidence of a connection between

religious involvement and self-esteem (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Hood, 1992). We expected that in this religiously homogeneous society self-esteem would be related to involvement in Buddhism

The Present Study

We assessed adolescents enrolled in public schools in Bangkok, Thailand to assess the relation between involvement in Buddhism and aspects of social competence including emotional regulation, self-esteem, and sympathy toward others.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from public schools in Bangkok. Middle school participants (96 male and 143 female) were enrolled in grades seven, eight, and nine and their ages ranged between 9.75 to 16.75 years ($M = 14.02$).

Participants came from schools that served a predominately middle class population. The diversity of this population was reflected in fathers' education levels: 20.0% did not graduate from elementary school, 17.8% had some technical educations, 13.3% held a high school degree, 14.7% graduated from college with a bachelors degree, 25.7% completed graduated from elementary school, and 8.5% had unknown educational levels. Similar diversity of educational level was evident for mothers: 23.3% did not graduate from elementary school, 13.7% had some technical education, 13.0% graduated from high school, 15.2% held a bachelors degree, 27.9% completed graduated from elementary school, and 6.9% had unknown educational achievement.

Measures

Local faculty members and graduate students fluent in Thai and English translated measures into Thai. These were then back-translated from Thai to English to assess translation adequacy.

Buddhist religious practice. We constructed an 11 item scale to assess the extent to which adolescents participated in Buddhist religious

practices on a regular basis, defined as actions which are appropriate for good Buddhists. Sample items included: "How often do you observe Buddhist precepts?"; "How often do you give food to the Buddhist monks"; "How often do you meditate?"; "How often do you listen to Buddhist teachings?". Each item was rated using a four point scale indicating the frequency of the actions, i.e., every day, once or twice a week, once or twice a month, and less than once a month. The internal consistency of this measure was .71.

Thus the principles of Buddhist practice for the youths were posited as giving, observing precepts, and meditation. In constructing this measure, Thai researchers consulted with Thai monks to assess expected behavior. Focus groups composed of university faculty, teachers, and parents were also held. On the basis of their feedback and pilot testing with adolescents, the measure revised.

Emotional Regulation. Adolescents rated their regulation using items tapping effortful control/ regulation from the Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire (Capaldi & Rothbart, 1992). The 15-item scale included items from the inhibitory control such as: "Able to stop him/herself from laughing at inappropriate times" and the attentional control subscales, e.g., "Finds it easy to really concentrate on a problem". Participants answered questions using a five-point scale and the internal consistency of the measure was .67.

Sympathy and perspective taking. Participants completed the Davis' (1994) Interpersonal Reactivity Index, consisting of two subscales that were combined to yield a 14 item measure. Empathic concern was defined as a tendency to experience feelings of warmth and concern for others and included items such as "I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." Perspective taking was defined as the tendency to adopt the point of view of others; e.g., "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective." Items were analyzed using a seven-point rating, and the internal consistency of the measure was .71.

Self-esteem. Adolescent self reports of general self-worth were obtained using Harter's (1988) adolescent self-competence scales. The items in this measure (e.g., "Some children always do things fine"), were answered using a four-point scale. The internal consistency for this 17 item scale was .60.

Procedure

The research protocol was approved by the Illinois Wesleyan University IRB. Signed parent consent and adolescent assent to participation were obtained prior to the assessment.

Students were assessed in classroom groups. Measures were administered by graduate students.

Results

We first assessed sex and grade differences in Buddhist practice. There was no significant sex, $F(1, 234) = .94, p = .33$; grade, $F(1, 234) = .27, p = .60$, or sex by grade interaction, $F(1, 234) = .01, p = .90$.

We then assessed the relation between Buddhist practice and multiple indices of social competence. These correlations, reported separately for public and temple school students are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Correlations between Buddhist practice and multiple aspects of social competence

	Total	Public school	Temple school
Emotional Regulation	.27** (234)	.34** (118)	.19* (116)
Self-Esteem	.26** (234)	.41** (118)	.06* (116)
Sympathy	.39** (234)	.33* (118)	.39** (116)

**and* Correlation is significant at 0.01 and 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Discussion

Our findings of the lack of either grade or sex effects in engagement in Buddhist practices is somewhat surprising when compared with other research yielding such effects. These results may be a function of the centrality of Buddhism within Thai society.

Consistent with our expectations, we found that religious involvement was associated with multiple aspects of social competence including self-esteem, emotional regulation, and sympathy and perspective taking. These results are consistent with research on Indonesian Muslim youth (French, et al., 2008) and U.S. Christian youth (Furrow, King, & White, 2004; Thomas & Carver, 1990) that religious involvement is associated with increased social

competence. It is noteworthy that the strongest sets of effects appeared for sympathy and perspective taking, aspects of competence that are most closely emphasized in Buddhism.

Another major aspect of Buddhism involves compassion toward all creatures (Mills, 1999), and thus, we expected that youth who regularly practiced Buddhism to report higher levels of sympathy and perspective taking than youth. These values are conveyed to children by their parents and well as through instruction in Buddhist principles. Performing wholesome actions are presumed to lead to merit. Compassion is further emphasized by teaching individuals to give the merit to others rather than hoard it for themselves (Mills, 1999). Compassion is also developed through

meditation. Davidson (2005) reported that some monks were capable of generating a state of “pure compassion” through meditation.

The relation between self-esteem and practice of Buddhism in this study was small, but nonetheless statistically significant. We expected that a relation between religious involvement and self-esteem would exist among youth living in homogeneous religious environments. The present results add to prior findings that are consistent with the argument that self-esteem is associated with religious involvement for youth living in communities within which religious views are salient and homogenous; Smith, et al. (1979; Catholic schools), Elder and Conger (2000; small Midwestern communities), and French, et al. (2006; Indonesian Muslim communities).

It should be emphasized that the results above came from comparison of self-report measures. As such, these are subject to

distortions introduced by shared reporter bias including halo effects, response sets, and social desirability. The effects can be quite large and may distort our understanding of the relation between religious involvement and aspects of social competence. Batson, Anderson, and Collins (2005) for example notes that whereas it is has been a consistent relationship between religious involvement and “reports” of helping others, it is not clear that religious involvement is related to actual helping. Thus, present findings might reflect a relation between involvement in Buddhism and views of desirable behavior rather than an association between religious involvement and actual behavior. Further research exploring the relation between Buddhism and social competence would benefit from using a multi-method and multi-agent assessment strategy measurement strategy (French et al., 2008).

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