

ПЕДАГОГІКА, ПСИХОЛОГІЯ, МЕТОДИКА

УДК 37.01

ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE FORMATION OF MORAL CULTURE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

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This article presents an analytical review of foundational theories and contemporary empirical research on the formation of moral culture of university students. Drawing on classical frameworks of moral development and integrating recent empirical findings and conceptual advances, the review identifies the primary theoretical directions, pedagogical approaches, and institutional factors shaping moral culture. The analysis highlights persistent challenges, including conceptual fragmentation, measurement limitations, and the gap between institutional policy and student experience. The review concludes with recommendations for future research focused on interdisciplinary integration and holistic, institution-wide strategies for cultivating moral culture in universities.

Keywords: moral culture, moral development, theories of moral development.

Introduction

The formation of moral culture of university students has become a prominent topic within educational research, policy debates, and institutional development strategies. Universities are increasingly viewed not only as centers of knowledge transmission, but also as moral communities responsible for cultivating ethical reasoning, civic responsibility, and prosocial behavior. Recent global shifts – including digital transformation and geopolitical tensions in academic and corporate contexts – underscore the need for empirically grounded models of moral development within higher education settings.

This review synthesizes key research directions and empirical evidence concerning the development of moral culture among university students. It examines foundational theoretical contributions, contemporary empirical studies, and emerging interdisciplinary approaches. The overarching research question is: How do modern educational environments influence the formation of moral culture of university students, and what theoretical and methodological frameworks best capture this process?

Main Body

The study of morality is a foundational project within psychology and pedagogy, fundamentally concerned with a quality central to our conception of what it means to be a person. This pursuit has followed a distinct intellectual trajectory, evolving through a series of theoretical correctives that have progressively deepened our understanding. The field has moved from foundational, stage-based theories that prioritized the abstract architecture of moral reasoning toward more holistic, integrated models. These contemporary frameworks seek to capture the moral person in their entirety,

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encompassing the dynamic interplay of personality, identity, social context, and, increasingly, neurobiology.

In characterizing the main directions and results of the study of the process of formation of moral culture of students, first of all, we will present the main theories and conceptual foundations of the moral development of the student's personality. The basis for research on students' moral development remains Kohlberg's stage theory, with its emphasis on ideas of fairness and cognitive moral judgment (L. Kohlberg, 1981). Lawrence Kohlberg developed a theory of stages of moral development, known as the theory of moral-cognitive development. The theory focuses on the thought processes and representations through which people construct reality and meaning. Unlike traditional psychology, which focused on the content of moral behavior, Kohlberg's theory focuses on its structure. The structure of moral judgment reflects the organization and process of moral thinking, and how moral principles are applied in specific situations. L. Kohlberg postulated that the stages form an invariant sequence. He argued that simple stages logically precede complex ones. Social factors can only accelerate or slow down development, but not change its sequence. Each stage forms a structural whole that unifies an individual's evaluative behavior, suggesting that moral orientations should emerge as a logically and empirically related cluster of responses. L. Kohlberg identified six stages, grouped into three levels. Each level is determined by the "socio-moral perspective" that an individual adopts when making decisions on socio-moral issues [1].

The work of Georg Lind played a significant role in the development of the theory of moral-cognitive development. His theory of moral development is based on a cognitive-structural approach, which developed under the significant influence of the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget. G. Lind and his colleagues made important contributions to the study of the psychology and philosophy of moral judgment and education, particularly in German-speaking countries (Germany, Switzerland, Austria) in the late 20th century. While L. Kohlberg viewed the "structural integrity" of moral judgment as an empirical hypothesis, G. Lind proposed viewing it as a methodological criterion. This criterion is used to assess the theoretical validity of measures of moral competence. To empirically test his ideas and overcome the shortcomings of Kohlberg's method, D. Lind developed a new instrument: the Moral Judgment Test, which he called the Experimental Questionnaire [2].

James R. Rest's approach represents a significant refinement of Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory, shifting the focus from narrow moral reasoning to a multivariate understanding of moral functioning. This approach, often called Neo-Kohlbergian, provided robust tools, like the Defining Issues Test (DIT), that made the cognitive study of ethics empirically applicable, especially in university and professional settings. Rest expanded the conceptualization of moral functioning through two primary contributions: the Four-Component Model of Moral Behavior (FCM) and the development of the DIT for assessing moral judgment development.

J. Rest proposed the FCM to broaden the scope of morality beyond the assessment of moral reasoning, acknowledging that moral behavior requires more than just judgment. The FCM describes **four distinct psychological processes** that must be coordinated for a moral action to take place effectively:

Ethical Sensitivity (Moral Sensitivity): This is the ability to perceive and interpret a situation in moral terms. It involves quickly and precisely **discerning the elements of a moral situation**, taking the perspectives of others, and determining what role they might play. Researchers like Muriel J. Bebeau and Steven P. McNeel, working within this tradition, have developed tests to measure this capacity, distinguishing it from mere moral judgment.

Ethical Judgment (Moral Reasoning): This involves determining which course of action is morally justifiable. It is the process of **accessing multiple tools for solving complex moral problems** and developing a rationale for one course of action over another. This component aligns most closely with Kohlberg's original focus on assessing the sophistication of moral reasoning stages.

Ethical Focus (Moral Motivation): This refers to the prioritization of moral values and commitment to moral goals. It requires the cultivation of an **ethical identity** which makes moral considerations central to one's self-concept. When moral identity is deeply rooted in commitments, the motivation for moral action springs from a sense of fidelity to oneself.

Ethical Action (Moral Implementation): This component involves knowing how to **maintain focus and possess the necessary perseverance** and ego strength to carry out the ethical action, including overcoming internal and external obstacles [3; 4].

An important foundation for research is the ethics of care and relational approaches. Carol Gilligan (1982) [5] and Nel Noddings (1984) [6] argue for the centrality of care, empathy, and relational responsibility. Their perspectives shift the focus from cognitive reasoning to relational moral functioning, shaping contemporary work on university teaching practices, mentoring environments, and inclusive pedagogies. These approaches developed in response to Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-structural theory of moral development.

In studies of moral culture, one can distinguish integrative and neurobiological approaches. Darcia Narvaez has developed a comprehensive approach to moral development known as Triune Ethics Theory (TET), which incorporates neurobiological and evolutionary influences. This approach, based on evolutionary developmental systems theory, describes how moral dispositions are rooted in neurobiological structures that are biologically and socially shaped by early experiences. D. Narvaez argues that morality spans the entire spectrum of life, and our moral values are shaped by a multitude of factors, including our heredity, our habitual actions, and the perceptual sensitivities and capacities we develop through upbringing. D. Narvaez introduces a neurobiological and evolutionary perspective, emphasizing early relational experiences and socio-emotional regulation as predictors of moral orientation. Although less frequently applied within higher education, these insights offer promising directions for examining how university environments interact with students' developmental histories [7].

We have identified the main trends in research into the moral culture of students (2019–2025):

1. Character and virtue education in universities.

J. Arthur (2024) has advanced an explicit framework for integrating character education within university contexts, arguing that universities must adopt intentional, institution-wide strategies rather than isolated ethics modules. His work emphasizes intellectual virtues, civic character, and moral identity formation. J. Arthur emphasizes that character development cannot be a haphazard process; it must be an intentional and critically reflective endeavor. The basic principles of character development of student youth according to J. Arthur are presented below.

- **Integral Purpose:** Character education is integral to the core research, educational, and civic purpose of universities.

- **Dual Approach:** Universities must ensure that character is “caught” (e.g., through role modeling) and “taught,” but ultimately must be “sought” by students themselves.

- **Student Autonomy:** Students must have the freedom to critically decide how they will develop their character and apply virtues in practice.

• Contribution to the Common Good: Character development contributes to human and societal flourishing and is therefore not solely a student’s private concern [8].

Arthur’s concept, based on Aristotelian ethics, views character development as an inevitable and desirable process that should be intentionally structured within university culture to prepare students to flourish and live lives oriented toward the common good, using practical wisdom to navigate between the various virtues. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, under the direction of James Arthur, has developed a robust conceptual framework for character education rooted in this tradition. This framework organizes virtues into distinct but overlapping categories relevant to holistic human development (table 1).

Table 1 – Framework for higher education by James Arthur

Virtue Category	Description	Examples
Intellectual Virtues	Relate to the pursuit of truth, knowledge, and understanding.	Critical thinking, intellectual humility, open-mindedness, curiosity, patience.
Civic Virtues	Concern engagement in local, national, and global contexts.	Service, civility, hospitality, citizenship, charity.
Moral Virtues	Relate to ethical awareness, a sense of purpose, and commitment to the common good.	Justice, courage, honesty, humility, compassion.
Performance Strengths	Character traits with instrumental value in enabling the other virtues.	Resilience, determination, motivation, teamwork, confidence, perseverance.
Practical Wisdom (Phronesis)	The integrative meta-virtue that guides the other virtues in practical action, navigating competing demands to discern the best course of action.	

Central to this framework is the concept of Phronesis, or Practical Wisdom. Considered an intellectual meta-virtue, Phronesis integrates and guides the application of all other virtues. It is the capacity to discern the right course of action when the demands of two or more virtues collide, navigating competing values and situational pressures to achieve an outcome conducive to personal and societal flourishing.

E. Brooks and his colleagues also believe that character development should be a deliberate goal of higher education. The core ideas of E. Brooks and his colleagues in the field of moral education of students are based on the philosophy of virtue ethics and character development [9; 10]. Thus, the work of E. Brooks and his colleagues in higher education focuses on the shift from narrow specialization to a holistic approach, where the development of moral identity and the acquisition of a meaningful purpose are the central purpose of the university. Many universities’ mission statements and policy documents already express a commitment to a holistic, socially engaged vision, using terms like “fulfilling potential,” “flourishing,” and “well-being.” They aim to develop “graduate attributes” and “21st-century skills” that prepare students to lead purposeful lives as citizens and professionals. This demonstrates that the education universities provide is understood to impact who students become, not just what they can do.

2. Large-scale analytical and bibliometric studies.

J. Chen, D. Liu, J. Dai, and C. Wang (2023) conducted a comprehensive visual knowledge-graph analysis of global moral education research. Their findings indicate rapid

growth in studies addressing moral culture, digital citizenship, and virtue ethics in higher education, while also highlighting fragmentation across disciplines and regions [11].

3. Empirical studies on educational impact.

X. Tian et al. (2025) demonstrate that structured moral education programs have measurable long-term effects on students' psychological well-being, moral awareness, and social responsibility. These results support the view that systematic interventions – not merely incidental learning – are required for sustained moral development [12].

4. Purpose, identity, and civic commitment.

K. C. Bronk and colleagues (2023) focus on purpose formation and moral identity, revealing that young adults' civic motivation and ethical commitments are strongly linked to reflective dialogue, supportive mentoring, and community engagement experiences in universities [13].

5. Institutional cultures of integrity.

Sectoral analyses by Universities UK (2022) highlight the importance of institutional climate, academic integrity policies, and research ethics training for shaping moral culture. These studies identify structural factors – such as transparency, academic role models, and institutional trust – as critical determinants of students' moral orientation [14].

Based on the results of the analytical work, we identified three methodological approaches to studying the problem of moral development of university students.

- Quantitative measurement tools: Defining Issues Test (DIT-2); Moral Identity Scale; Civic Engagement and Purpose inventories; Institutional integrity climate surveys. These instruments enable large-sample comparative studies, but may oversimplify complex moral behaviors and cultural nuances.

- Qualitative and mixed-methods approaches. Interviews, narrative identity analysis, focus groups, and ethnographic observation uncover deeper insights into students' lived experiences, moral conflicts, and perceptions of university culture. Mixed-methods designs are increasingly common, offering triangulated perspectives.

- Bibliometric and knowledge-graph analyses. Emerging computational approaches (J.Chen et al., 2023) allow mapping research landscapes, identifying clusters, and tracking conceptual evolution across decades.

Analytical work has identified key issues in research conducted over the past five years on the moral development of university students:

- The role of the curriculum. Ethics courses, service learning, civic engagement modules, and interdisciplinary programs foster moral reasoning and prosocial attitudes when they are: sustained; experiential; reflective; contextually relevant. Fragmented or purely theoretical instruction shows limited impact.

- The moral climate of the university. Institutional norm – academic integrity policies, faculty moral leadership, and student governance structures – shape students' perceptions of ethical expectations and acceptable conduct.

- Digital environments and moral culture. The rise of digital learning environments brings new challenges: academic dishonesty, online behavior norms, and the shaping of digital moral identity.

- Identity formation, community, and belonging. Purpose development (K. C. Bronk, 2023) and relational belonging (N. Noddings, 2010) are fundamental drivers of moral commitment and socially responsible behavior.

The current body of research suggests that moral culture formation is a multidimensional process shaped by cognitive, relational, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. A major challenge is the fragmentation of theoretical models and methodological

approaches. Cognitive theories dominate assessment practices, whereas relational and affective models remain under-operationalized. Furthermore, many universities adopt piecemeal ethics courses without embedding moral culture into organizational structures, limiting long-term effects.

Recent empirical studies provide promising evidence that structured, holistic approaches – including character education frameworks, community-building practices, and integrated ethics curricula – have positive and lasting impacts. Nevertheless, the field lacks longitudinal research that could capture developmental trajectories across students' academic careers.

Future research should prioritize:

1. Longitudinal studies tracking moral development across the entire duration of university education.
2. Institution-wide intervention models, integrating pedagogy, mentoring, institutional policy, and campus culture.
3. Cross-cultural comparative studies addressing global variability in moral norms and educational traditions.
4. Neurobiologically informed approaches linking socio-emotional development and moral functioning.
5. Digital ethics research exploring how online platforms shape moral reasoning and behavior.

These directions may advance theoretical integration and practical improvements in the cultivation of moral culture.

Conclusion

The formation of moral culture of university students is a critical component of higher education mission. Foundational theories provide robust conceptual tools, while recent empirical studies highlight effective mechanisms and institutional influences. Yet the field requires more integrative, longitudinal, and context-sensitive research to fully understand and support moral development within complex educational environments. Strengthening moral culture in universities demands coordinated efforts across curricula, institutional structures, and interpersonal relationships – ensuring that higher education not only imparts knowledge, but also cultivates ethically responsible citizens.

The essential contributions of the primary theoretical paradigms are clear. The cognitive-developmental approach established the critical importance of the internal structure of moral thought. Virtue ethics recentered the discourse on the agent's character and the cultivation of virtues necessary for human flourishing. The concept of moral identity provided the crucial bridge between judgment and action, grounding morality in the core of the self. Finally, modern frameworks of ethical expertise and neurobiology offer powerful integrative models that synthesize these insights into a more comprehensive picture of moral functioning.

The most promising future directions for research lie in continued interdisciplinary work. To build a more complete and ecologically valid understanding of moral functioning across the lifespan, the field must deepen its integration of insights from developmental science, social-cognitive psychology, personality theory, and affective neuroscience. By breaking down the silos that have traditionally separated these domains, researchers can better account for the dynamic interplay of factor – from early attachment relationships to the accessibility of moral schemas and the wiring of neural circuits – that collectively shape who we are as moral beings.

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Received by the editors on 01.12.2025 г.

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**Снопкова Е. И., Ли Ли. АНАЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ
ПО ФОРМИРОВАНИЮ НРАВСТВЕННОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ СТУДЕНТОВ ВУЗА
В ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОМ ПРОЦЕССЕ**

В данной статье представлен аналитический обзор основополагающих теорий и современных эмпирических исследований формирования нравственной культуры студентов университетов. Опираясь на классические концепции нравственного развития и интегрируя современные эмпирические данные и концептуальные достижения, в обзоре определяются основные теоретические направления, педагогические подходы и институциональные факторы, формирующие нравственную культуру студентов в образовательном процессе университета. Анализ выявляет сохраняющиеся проблемы, включая концептуальную фрагментацию, ограничения в измерениях и разрыв между институциональной политикой и опытом студентов. В заключение обзора даются рекомендации для будущих исследований, ориентированных на междисциплинарную интеграцию и целостные институциональные стратегии формирования нравственной культуры в университетах.

Ключевые слова: нравственная культура, нравственное развитие, теории нравственного развития.