Moral Competence and Social Behavior – Clarifying a Confused Relationship

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Experimental Moral Psychology: Conceptual Parsimony

“Concepts should be multiplied without necessity.”

William Occam

“Where can and should we start with improvement through education?”

Anonymous
Moral Orientations and Competence

✓ “But if this be affirmed, then the desire of good is common to all, and one man is no better than another in that respect?

✓ And if one man is not better than another in desiring good, he must be better in the power of attaining it?

✓ Then, according to your definition, virtue would appear to be the power of attaining the good?”

Socrates (469 - 399 B.C.E.).
Plato: Dialogue with Meno (abridged).
Overview

- The Controversy
- Clarification of Concepts
- On Hypothesis-Testing
- The desire to Be Good is Universal
- Experimental Evidence is Unambiguous: Moral Competence Facilitates Social Behavior
- Conclusion
"Plato's view [is] that to see the Good is to choose it."

Thomas E. Wren, from: Caring about morality. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 155
Contra: Morality is Irrelevant for Behavior

- “The force exerted by the moral sense of the individual is less effective than social myth would have us believe.”
  - Milgram (1974, p. 6)

- "Moral reasoning is usually an ex post facto process used to influence the intuitions (and hence judgment) of other people."
  - Haidt (2001, p. 814)

- The scores in Kohlberg’s test “hardly correlate significantly with moral behavior.”
  - Schulman & Mekler (1985, p. 16)

- "The correlation is not large. At average it is r = 0.30" [Blasi, 1980]
  - Uhl (1996, p. 100; my translation, GL)

- “One need not score at Kohlberg's highest stages in order to exhibit high degrees of moral commitment and exemplary behavior.”
  - Colby & Damon (1992, p. 328)
Need for Clarification - Still

- “For in psychology there are experimental methods and conceptual confusion. The existence of experimental methods makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and methods pass one another by.”

- "The research on morality is in considerable disarray, largely because so many of these authors fail to appreciate the philosophical dimensions of the psychological positions they have argued for (and from)."
  - Thomas Wren (1991): Caring about morality. (p. 3)
Internal morality or external norms: What are we talking about?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>External</th>
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<td>Desire (content)</td>
<td>Social Norm</td>
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<td>Rights, Laws, Orders, Norms, Contracts, ...</td>
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<td>Power (structure)</td>
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<td>Ability to solve conflicts on the basis of formal and informal norms through institutionalized procedures.</td>
<td>Ability to solve dilemmas on the basis of moral orientations through thinking and discussion ...</td>
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Moral Competence: A Definition

- Moral competence is *the ability to solve problems and conflicts on the basis of moral principles through thinking and discussion instead of through violence, deceit, and force.*
The gap

“By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart.”

Confucius

“The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions.”

Albert Einstein, from Letters to a minister, 1950.
Dual-Aspect Theory: Moral competence bridges the gap between moral orientations and behavior

Even criminals desire the Good (moral orientations)

Sources: Prisoner studies with the Moral Judgment Test
4. N=2014 Comparison with university students; Lind, 2002

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The prediction: Moral competence is a strong factor of social behavior
Predicting social behavior: Experimental evidence

- Break a contract
- Misbehave: Deceit, not whistle blowing ...
- Help
- Resist power abuse
- Engage for democracy
- Reject violence
- Substance use
- Make swift decisions
- Learn facts
- Get good grades
- Teach well
- Reject an absolutist ethical stance
On hypothesis-testing: Choosing the right statistics

- **Statistical Significance** tells us only whether the *sample size* is large enough to detect a certain difference.
  - In a huge sample, even meaningless differences become “significant.”

- Coefficients of *correlations* do not depend on sample size, but on form and size of the distributions of the causal variable(s).
  - If there is no variation there can be no correlation.
  - $r = 0.30$ can mean a strong relationship!

- Absolute effect size like differences in scores and percentages do not depend on sample size and form of distribution, but on variance of the causal variables.

http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:352-217760
Breaking a contract

Sample: 31 college students
Criterion: Not sending the questionnaire back
Effect size: r = .57
Source: Krebs & Rosenwald, 1977
Moral Stage (MJI, Kohlberg)

- Moral Stage 1
- Moral Stage 2
- Moral Stage 3
- Moral Stage 4
- Moral Stage 5

Sources
From Sprinthall et al., 1994, p. 190
Original studies
1 - 3 from Kohlberg & Candee, 1984
4 Krebs & Rosenwald, 1977
5 Brabeck, 1984

Experiment
1 Cheat vocabulary test
2 Cheat language test
3 Covering up
4 Breaking contract
5 No whistle blowing

Percentage of Misbehaving Ss
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
1
2
3
4
5
Moral Stage (MJI, Kohlberg)
Helping behavior and civic protest

Moral stage (Kohlberg, MJI)

Percentage of Helpers

Experiment

① Arrested for civil protest
② Helping under duress
③ Intentions to help
④ Refuse to administer shocks

Original studies:
① Haan et al., 1968
②- ③ McNamee, 1977
④ Kohlberg & Candee, 1984
Rejecting violence as a means to change society

Source: Special Research Unit 23, Research Project “Socialization in Higher Education.”
University students, 1st semester ca. N = 2000
Ability to learn

**Intervention:** A 15-minute video on organ transplantation.

**Measurement:** Gain of knowledge test about organ transplantation before and after the video.

**Independent variable:** Moral judgment competence (MJT, C-score).

**Participants:** 9th graders

**Finding:** Correlation between moral judgment competence and ability to learn (test score gain)

\[ r = 0.22 \]

Better grades in last high school year (Poland)

F(3,329)=2.05; p<.01; N=370 (Source: Nowak, 2008)

Better teaching

Moral Judgment Competence and Learning:
"How Often Have You Used Cooperative Learning?"

Teachers (N=15)

Source: Own data
Moral competence is better predictor of decision-making time than motivation

The higher S's moral competence, the shorter is the time they need to reach a decision

The longer the Ss need for a decision the more stress they feel

None of the experimental motivation variables shortens decision time substantially

Many life burdens and *low* moral competence: High risk of dysfunctional behavior (substance use)

- **Behavior:** Substance use
- **Factors:**
  - Moral competence
  - Life burdens
- **Source:**
Ethical absolutists prefer high moral principles (DIT) but have low moral competence (MCT)

Closing the gap between moral ideals and behavior: Fostering the moral competence of prisoners

Conclusion

- Moral competence has a strong impact on social behavior; it is a key competence for living together peacefully in a democracy.

- Basic moral orientations (moral feeling, principles etc) are inborn and need not to be taught.

- Moral competence can be taught and needs to be taught.
References

- Cont’d
References (cont’d)


More references: Http://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/