

Georg Lind

Why Do Juvenile Delinquents Gain Little from Moral Discussion Programs?

1994

Contact:

Prof. Georg Lind

University of Konstanz

FB Psychologie

78457 Konstanz

E-Mail: Georg.Lind@uni-konstanz.de

For further information and publications on this topic see www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/b-publik.htm

**Psychology of Morality &
Democracy and Education**

© Georg Lind

Why Do Juvenile Delinquents Gain Little from Moral Discussion Programs?

Georg Lind¹

Kohlberg-type moral dilemma discussion programs have generally shown to be effective in fostering adolescents' moral judgment competency, even if the program comprised as few as three or four 1-hour sessions (Lind, 2000). However, with some groups, especially with juvenile delinquents, the effects have been rather low or little durable, or have been achieved only through rather extensive educational efforts.

This study was designed to clarify two of the hypotheses advanced by different researchers as to why young inmates sometimes fail to profit from educational intervention programs based on Kohlberg's original method: First, the hypothesis that real life dilemmas have a greater effect than hypothetical dilemmas, and second, the hypothesis that delinquents may show higher resistance to moral educational programs because of their "anti-social" posture which has to be overcome first. The subjects were 48 young male inmates, from 15 to 23 years, randomly divided into an experimental group (N=30) and one control group (N=24). The experimental group was divided in four smaller groups for treatment, each having four sessions of one hour each, i.e., a total of four hours. For intervention dilemmas were taken from *real* prison life. Pretest and post-test measures were taken in all groups (see Huber, 1993). In addition the gain scores from an intervention program for trainees (HASMU, See Oser & Althof, 1992), being of a similar age, are used for *comparison*. In order to test adequately the second hypothesis, measures for S's moral attitudes and their moral competencies were obtained with the *Moral Judgment Test* (MJT) by Lind (cf. Lind & Wakenhut 1985; Lind 2000).

Findings

- a) At the beginning, the juvenile inmates showed *no* anti-social moral *attitudes*; they prefer principled moral thinking as much over conventional and pre-conventional morality as other adolescents have been found to do. But delinquents showed a very low moral judgment *competence*. The mean competence score (MJT) was 18.8 and 20.5 for the experimental and the control group respectively. (An almost identical mean MJT-score, of 19.7, was found in juvenile inmates by Wischka, 1982, p. 139). This corroborates the general finding that delinquents have a much lower ability to apply their moral principles to the discussion and solution of concrete moral dilemmas, than non-delinquents (cf. Blakeney & Blakeney, 1991; Jennings *et al.* 1983; Powell *et al.* 1991).
- b) The inmates' moral judgment competence did not improve during the intervention even though, or maybe because, real prison life dilemmas were used.

Conclusion

While, as many studies show, short intervention programs, using hypothetical moral dilemmas, consistently have a marked effect on adolescents moral judgment competence, this 4-session intervention using real life dilemmas failed to produce any effect. In our study real life dilemmas impeded the development of moral judgment competencies as these dilemmas created anxiety and made the participants reluctant to enter any discussion. Maybe hypothetical dilemmas are, like story tales for kids, a better way to create an optimal learning situation. On the basis of our and other findings one can rule out the hypothesis that inmates have an averse, "anti-social" moral attitude which needs to be (re-) socialized. It seems that the moral development of this group of persons is primarily hindered by their generally very low moral competencies, and by the premature moral climate which reigns such groups. This would explain why the rather extensive program (15 hours and more) are needed to achieve marked effects in delinquents.

¹ In collaboration with Rudi Huber on whose thesis research this paper is based (Huber, 1993). The author takes up all responsibility for data analysis and conclusions. Author's address: Department of Psychology, University of Constance, D-78434 Konstanz, Germany. Fax: +49-7531-882899, e-mail: Georg.Lind@uni-konstanz.de; Web: <http://www.uni-konstanz.de>.

In general, moral dilemma discussions and related moral-cognitive programs seem to be a very effective way of fostering juvenile delinquents moral judgment competence and, subsequently, their ability to cope with life problems in a non-violent, non-criminal way (see also *Jennings et al.*, 1983; *Powell et al.* 1991). Competence-oriented education, rather than (re-)socialization, seem to be the most appropriate way of dealing with juvenile delinquency (Blakeney & Blakeney, 1991).

Fostering juvenile delinquents' moral competencies may also prove to be a preventative for their conduct as adults – and, possibly, for their children's delinquency. Moral competencies seems to be promoted the more effectively the younger they are (*Powell et al.* 1991, p. 199). This coincides with the finding that non-delinquent adolescents also gain more from dilemma discussion sessions in their young ages than later, or as adults, as studies have shown using Colby and Kohlberg's *Moral Judgment Interview* and our *MJT* for the measurement of effect size (*Lind*, 1993). However, moral *attitudes* seem to be more easily changed in older S's, as studies have shown using moral attitude tests, such as the *DIT* (*Schläfli et al.*, 1985; for a methodological discussion of this finding see *Lind*, 2000, pp. 208-214; *Lind & Wakenhut*, 1985). There is evidence supporting our thesis: The fostering of (future) parents' social and moral competencies has shown to be positively related to their offspring's moral development (*Hudgins & Prentice*, 1973) and pre-natal education of parents has shown to be positively related with children's non-delinquent behavior (*Zigler et al.*, 1992).

References

- Arbuthnot, J., Gustafson, K., Kaplan-Reiss, P., Botthardt, J. & Swanson, D. (1987): When sociomoral development intervention fails: some commonalities and non-commonalities. *Moral Education Forum* 12, 25-28.
- Blakeney, C.D. & Blakeney, R.A. (1991). Understanding and reforming moral misbehavior among behaviorally disordered adolescents. *Behavioral Disorders* 16, 120-126.
- Huber, R. (1993): Zur Förderung der moralischen Urteilsfähigkeit. Evaluation einer Intervention bei jugendlichen Strafgefangenen. University of Constance, Germany, *Diplomarbeit* (thesis).
- Hutchins, W. & Prentice, N.M. (1973). Moral judgment in delinquent and non-delinquent adolescents and their mothers. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 82, 145-152
- Jennings, W.S., Kilkenny, R. & Kohlberg, L. (1983). Moral-development theory and practice for youthful and adult offenders. In W.S. Laufer & J.M. Day, eds., *Personality Theory, Moral Development & Criminal Behavior*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, pp. 281-355.
- Lind, G. (2000). Can morality be taught? Research findings from modern Moral Psychology. (in German: Kann Moral gelehrt werden? Befunde der modernen moralpsychologischen Forschung.) Berlin: Logos.
- Lind, G. & Wakenhut, R. (1985). Testing for moral judgment competence. In: G. Lind, H.A. Hartmann & R. Wakenhut, eds., *Moral Development and the Social Environment. Studies in the Philosophy and Psychology of Moral Judgment and Education*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Precedent Publishing Inc./Transaction Books, pp. 79-105.
- Powell, R.E., Locke, D.C. & Sprinthall, N.A. (1991). Female offenders and their guards: a program to promote moral and ego development of both groups. *Journal of Moral Education* 20, 191-203.
- Oser, F. & Althof, W. (1992). *Moralische Selbstbestimmung. Modelle der Entwicklung und Erziehung im Wertebereich*. Stuttgart: Klett.
- Scheurer, H. (1993). *Persönlichkeit und Kriminalität*. Regensburg: S. Roderer Verlag.
- Schläfli, A., Rest, J.R. & Thoma, S.J. (1985). Does moral education improve moral judgment? A meta-analysis of intervention studies using the Defining Issues Test. *Review of Education Research* 55, 319-352.
- Wischka, B. (1992). *Moralisches Bewußtsein und Empathie bei Strafgefangenen*. University of Marburg, Germany, *Diplomarbeit* (Thesis).
- Zigler, E., Taussig, C. & Black, K. (1992). Early childhood intervention. A promising preventative for juvenile delinquency. *American Psychologist*, August 1992, 997-1006.

Attitudes Toward the Six Kohlberg- Stages of Moral Reasoning

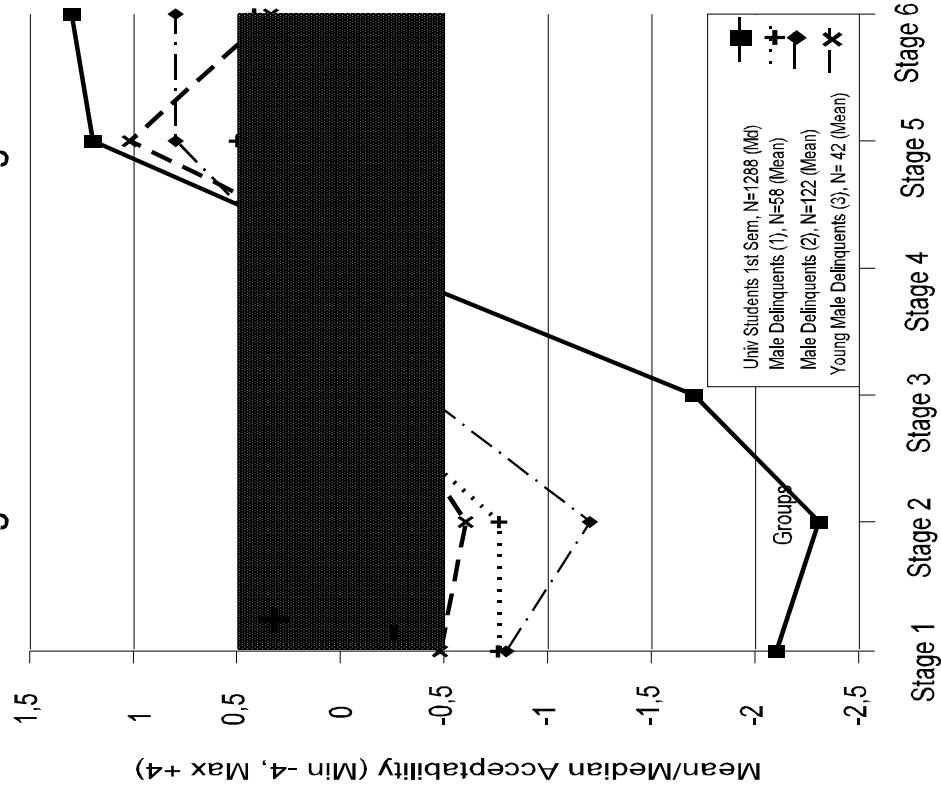


Fig. 2

References

- University Students: G. Lind (1985), Inhalt und Struktur des moralischen Urteils.
- University of Constance (Unpubl. dissertation).
- Male Delinquents (1): B. Wischka (1982).
- Male Delinquents (2): H. Scheurer (1993).
- Young Male Delinquents: R. Hubert (1993).

Stimulation of Moral Judgment Competence in Young Male Prison Inmates

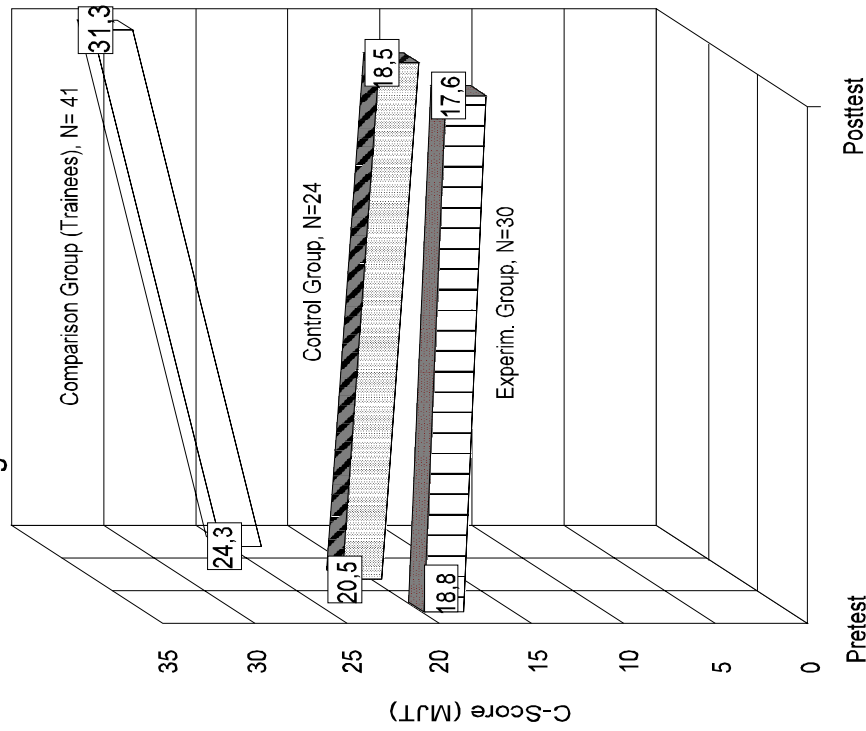


Fig. 1

References

- Experimental and Control Group: R. Hubert (1993).
- Comparison Group (Trainees, HASMU-Project): F. Oser & W. Althof (1992).
- Data-analysis and graphics by G. Lind.