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Why Do Juvenile Delinquents Gain Little from Moral Discussion Programs?

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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.
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 proof 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 offsprings' 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

Attitudes Toward the Six Kohlberg-Stages of Moral Reasoning

Fig. 1

Stimulation of Moral Judgment Competence in Young Male Prison Inmates

Fig. 2

References

University Students: G. Lind (1985), Inhalt und Struktur des moralisch-lichen Urteils
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Data-analysis and graphics by G. Lind.