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A cross-cultural study on possible causes of
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**Psychology of Morality &
Democracy and Education**

Off limits - A cross-cultural study on possible causes of segmentation of moral judgment competence¹

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Summary

Kohlberg (1984) assumed that an individual's moral competencies develop step-by-step, from one level to the next, across various tasks. Recent research (e.g. by Wakenhut, 1982; Lind, 1985; Krebs, 1991; 2000) indicates that there are situational differences in person's moral attitudes and values. For this phenomenon, Wakenhut has coined the term „segmentation." Yet, we still do not know causes this phenomenon and whether those differences pertain only to moral attitudes or also to moral judgment competence as defined by Kohlberg (1964) in his early writings?

Several explanations for this difference are reviewed: different interpretations of the situation, closeness to everyday-life, personal experience, gender role, institutional pressure/adaptation, and ideological barriers to autonomous judgment.

In a recent publications, Wark and Krebs (2000) conclude: “In this research we were unable to determine what it is about different individuals that leads some to interpret dilemmas in similar ways, and others to interpret different dilemmas in different ways” (p. 18).

This study tries to shed more light on this question by re-analyzing cross-cultural data from studies of university students in Germany, Italy and Mexico. These countries were chosen for analysis, because complete data sets on the MJT for university students of about the same age and level of education are available and because these countries represent different religious cultures: the students in Mexico have a strongly spiritual (Roman-Catholic) background,

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the students in Italy have also a rather strong Catholic background, yet with less church-orientation, and Germany students have a mixed Catholic-Protestant background with very low church attendance and little church influence.

These studies were chosen also because they used the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) by Lind (2000a; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985) for measuring moral judgment competence, because this tests allows us to measure both moral attitudes and moral competencies. The MJT is explicitly based on Kohlberg's (1964) original definition of moral judgment competence, and it contains two different types or contents of moral conflicts: a) mercy killing (doctor dilemma) and b) arbitrary law (workers' dilemma). It's index for competence is the C-score.

A first look at the findings show that German university students have considerably higher C-scores than students from Italy and Mexico. Different possible explanations for these differences come to mind. It could be that these differences are caused by the fact...

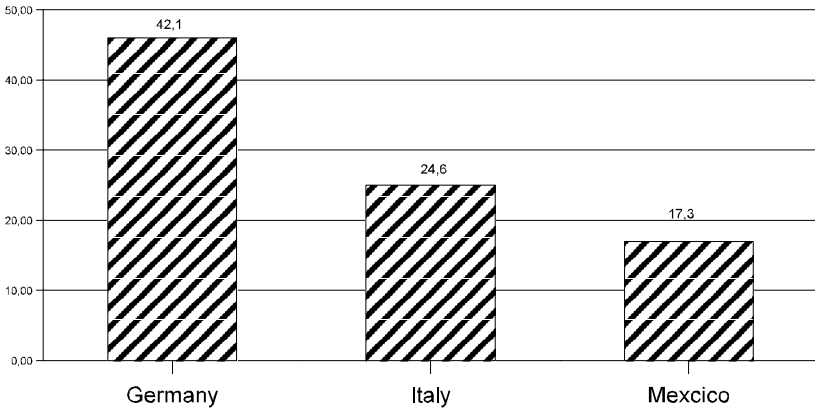
- that students in Germany interpret these dilemmas differently
- that students in Germany are more used to deal with hypothetical dilemmas, whereas students in Italy and Mexico would do better on every-day life dilemmas
- that students in Italy and Mexico have very different personal experiences from students in Germany, in which this test was originally constructed
- that institutional pressure is of different kind in these countries or/and
- that ideological difference are operating, i.e., that the religious culture of these students affect the level of moral judgment competence.

When discussing these findings with scholars in Mexico, these explanations have been closely examined on the basis of the works of Kohlberg (1984), Wakenhut (1982), Oser (1980), Rest et al. (1999) and others. Finally, my colleagues and I focused on the possible explanation that different personal experiences could cause these different levels of moral judgment competence on students from different cultures. Prof. Cristina Moreno (personal communication) has had her students analyze the MJT items closely. She and her students hypothesized that especially the workers' dilemma (content: arbitrary law) was to remote from the life experience of the Mexican subjects, who mostly came from affluent upper middle class background and had hardly any experience in the world of workers. So our hypothesis was: the Mexican

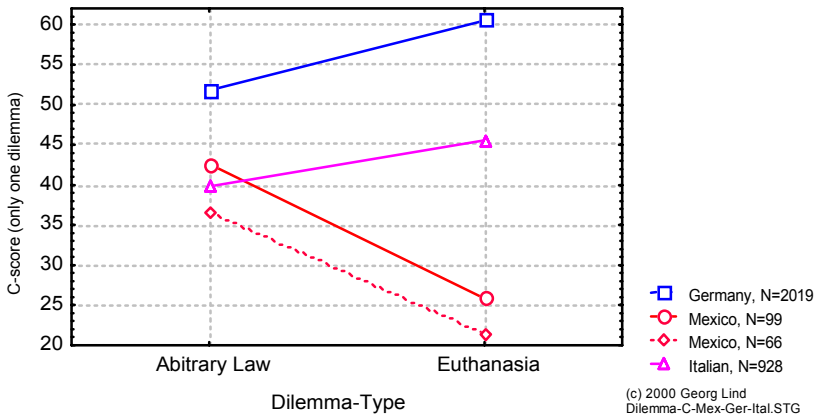
students' low C-score were mainly due to low competence on the workers' dilemma.

A closer analysis of data brings about a surprising finding which gives rise to new explanations of the causes of "segmentation". The findings show that, in contrast to our hypothesis, in regard to the workers' dilemma, only small differences between Mexican and German students occur, however, big differences occur in regard to the mercy-killing dilemma. The Mexican students get a C-score of nearly zero on this dilemma. Interestingly, mercy-killing is an issue on which the Roman-Catholic church takes a very strong stance, whereas on the other dilemma content, no such clear stance has been taken by the church. The account for this finding, we propose a new explanation: Religiously oriented subjects suppress their autonomous moral judgment on dilemma contents, on which the church takes a strong stance. The segmentation phenomenon seems to indicate that internalized rules (super-ego) rather than external social pressure constrain the use of autonomous moral judgment.

Moral Judgement Competence by Culture
Mean C-score (MJT)



Moral Judgment Competence by
Dilemma-Type and Culture



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