The Importance of Role-Taking Opportunities for Self-Sustaining Moral Development

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While sufficient evidence is available showing that educationial processes in family, schools, universities and vocations are most important for the development of moral and democratic competencies, we still know little about the specific aspects of education which impact moral development. The article investigates the impact of opportunities for role-taking (or responsibility taking) on the development of moral judgment competence of 271 university students. The findings clearly show that role-taking opportunities (in combination with opportunities for guided reflection) correlate with gains in moral judgment competence. This finding speaks against some current trends to shorten the time of study for a degree and thus squeeze out opportunities for role-taking, which are typically to be found in extra-curricular activities.

Modern developmental psychology has pointed out the phenomenon of life-span development. As it turns out, the impression we once had that development of interests and competencies generally stagnates or erodes at the end of adolescence is false. It was caused by our lack of understanding and adequate instruments for measurement. Learning in various domains continues after people have completed their formal education.[1]

The domain of moral learning, it seems, makes no exception. While in former times we believed that morality was inborn or instilled in infancy, we now have convincing evidence that it continues in adolescence and even in adulthood. In his over 20-year-long longitudinal study, Kohlberg found students to develop well beyond the completion of their college and professional school education (Kohlberg & Higgins, 1984).[2] This finding is confirmed by a longitudinal study of university students in East and West Europe (Lind, 2000a), and by a longitudinal study of college students in the US (Rest, 1986; Rest & Thoma, 1985).

However, self-sustaining moral-cognitive development has so far been demonstrated only for people with a "high track" educational career. People whose education ends prematurely, here called "low track" people, usually show not only a lower level of moral competence but also signs of competence erosion afterwards. This is shown by a representative cross-sectional survey of adolescents in Germany who graduate from middle school (Hauptschule or Realschule) at the age of 15, and become apprentices or students in vocational schools (which means that they work four days and attend school one day a week), or join the labor force (Lind, 2000a). After the completion of their education, these "low track" adolescents gradually lessen in their moral judgment competence, while their peers, who continue schooling, show steady gains even beyond their graduation.[3]

The cross-sectional study of twenty to eighty-year-old persons by Niemczynski et al. (1988) shows hardly any loss of moral judgment competence for male subjects with a university degree, whereas those males with less education had considerably greater losses. The data for females seem to show much greater losses across the life-span, but these losses may be largely accounted for by cohort effects: Older, traditionally raised women were often excluded from important career and educational experiences.

So we know now that education is important both for fostering self-sustaining moral-cognitive development. Yet we still know little about the features of the educational environment that account for this effect. For example, are opportunities of role-taking important for promoting moral judgment competence? (see Piaget, 1965; Kohlberg, 1984; Sprinthall, 1994). Or are, as advocates of character education suggest, direct teaching and guidance more important? (Lickona, 1991; Ryan, 1996; Wynne & Ryan, 1993).

In this paper I will first describe a theory of self-sustaining moral development that takes place when the individual has acquired a critical level of moral judgment competence. This point of development is what Piaget (1965) called moral autonomy. If this point is not yet attained, people will avoid difficult moral tasks and fail to develop their skills further. As a consequence they will gradually decrease in their moral competencies. However, if moral autonomy is reached, the person will seek rather than avoid morally difficult situations, and will grow by coping with them.

Moral autonomy is best achieved when the individual has been provided with sufficient opportunities for role-taking and for guided reflection. So we hypothesize that

giving the adolescents opportunities to assume real responsibilities is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for reaching the point of self-sustaining moral development. Another necessary condition is the availability of competent advice and of opportunities for reflection. The opportunity for guided reflection is especially important when inevitable problems arise from responsible decision-making processes.

In cognitive-developmental theory, both terms, "moral judgment competence" and "moral autonomy" are used interchangeably. Kohlberg (1964) defined moral judgment competence "as the capacity to make decisions and judgments that are moral (i.e., based on internal principles) and to act in accordance with such judgments" (p. 425). So persons are called morally competent to the degree to which they base their judgments on their principles rather than on other considerations.[4] Moral autonomy is more than just an orientation or an attitude, it is a cognitive competence that develops and requires sophisticated instruction and long practice.

Development means something different from mere change. Attitudes or scores on attitude tests, for example, can change back and forth within a short period. Overall, development proceeds slowly, though sometimes, in periods of developmental crisis, quick upward changes may happen. However, we believe that moral competence can also erode and that the idea of cognitive development, as distinct from attitude change, is very useful even when we allow for regression (Lind, 1985; 2000c). Besides being defined through the speed of change competence in contrast to attitudes, cannot be enhanced by simple instructions like the instruction to fake test scores upward. It must be developed through sophisticated instruction and enduring practice.

Besides development, moral autonomy or moral judgment competence is probably one of the most misunderstood terms of moral psychology and education. Some believe that the term "moral competence" is a contradiction in terms these terms belong to two mutually exclusive categories (Bloom et al. 1956). Morality belongs to the "affective" domain, while "competence" belongs to the "cognitive" domain. However, Bloom and his colleagues have themselves considered the possibility that this classification of human behavior into two separate cognitive domains is misleading. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) explain, when behavior is studied with cognitive aspects we are concerned with its structures; when behavior is considered in its affective aspects, we are concerned with its energetics. While these two aspects cannot be reduced to a single aspect, they are nevertheless inseparable and complementary" (p. 21).

In modern societies, the idea of morality has become dissociated from ideas like norms, laws, and conventions (Durkheim, 1961/1902) and our perceptions of these notions have become distinct (Turiel, 1983). However, this does not mean, as some seem to believe, that each child constructs his or her own moral values. If each child had to construct all his or her moral values and competencies from scratch, society would be in a state of chaos.

Persons who are in total opposition to social norms are not called autonomous but amoral, which means, lacking moral sensibility and not caring about right and wrong. Individual moral autonomy is essential for maintaining, and sometimes also for correcting, the social order. As Durkheim (1961/1902) showed, the order of modern complex societies can only be maintained by individuals who take ownership in, and have learned to apply competently, the moral principles on which this society is based. Not all values are moral and not all carry the same obligations. Many values are merely conventions concerning the status or function of a person, and the particular culture or subculture in which this person lives. A person usually wants to live by these non-moral values otherwise his or her behavior will be socially disapproved or will have negative consequences. Yet he or she may not take ownership in these non-moral values, and still function well as a member of our society.

However, if a democratic society is to prevail, it seems necessary that all citizens take ownership for basic democratic principles like social justice and respect for human dignity. That is, that they become morally autonomous and, for example, resist unethical conventions like racism and abusive authorities (Milgram, 1974; Kohlberg & Candee, 1984). Only moral autonomy or "moral courage," as Staub (1996) writes, "leads group members to question policies and practices that are potentially destructive to other groups, or to their own group, or are contrary to essential values" (p. 129).

Only if a person becomes morally autonomous, he or she is also competent to take responsibility for others and for him- or herself. This competence includes self-sustaining moral-cognitive development, that is, the ability to solve moral problems, without the guidance by other people. One caveat is in turn. Moral competence is not an all-or-none variable but a matter of degree, and moral competencies can vary within a person from one area of life to another.

Obviously, moral autonomy is something very difficult to be achieved. Sometimes, basic physical drives and needs like hunger and sexual desire, fatigue and want for sensation, are stronger than our moral principles. Cialdini and Kenrick (1976) found with young subjects (six to eight years of age) that they were less altruistic when they were in a negative mood than in neutral conditions. Still, "This relationship progressively reversed itself until in the oldest group [15 to 17 years of age], the negative mood subjects were significantly more generous than neutral mood controls" (p. 907).

At other times socialized tendencies prohibit moral reasoning. The most powerful seems to be the tendency to "save our face," that is, to keep our arguments always in line with our decisions and publicly expressed opinions. Keasey (1974) found that young children strongly agree with any argument that supports their opinion on a particular issue, and disagree with any argument opposing it. He called this tendency "opinion-agreement." Only as the children get older, he found, they start to view arguments not merely as a means to "rationalize" their opinions, but as a basis for evaluating their ethical value.

We developed an experimental test of moral judgment competence, the Moral Judgment Test, MJT (Lind, 2000b; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985) which is designed as a multi-factorial experiment rather than a traditional psychometric test. Subjects are presented with a series of arguments about moral dilemmas (mercy killing, and breaking the law for a good reason). They are asked to evaluate arguments along two dimensions: a) stage of moral reasoning and b) opinion-agreement. In the MJT, moral conscience is pitted against the powerful tendency to "rationalize," that is, to instrumentalize moral values to support opinions.

Some subjects rejected responding to arguments in with which they were in disagreement. "I am against mercy-killing, so what sense does it make to rate these arguments?" asked one subject. When pressed, most of these persons became distressed, some angrily and even depressed. Many judged only the arguments in favor of their own opinion but skipped over the contra arguments. Other subjects rated all arguments but rated the pro-arguments consistently high and the counter-arguments consistently low.

On the highest level of moral autonomy, subjects are able to evaluate their opinions using their own moral principles, and to reject or accept an opposing argument only on ethical grounds. Only when the individual has developed the skill of symbolic reasoning and formal operational thinking (Kuhn et al., 1977; Kohlberg, 1984) does moral knowledge seem to become a psychological "necessity" for his or her behavior.[5]

The MJT indexes the degree to which subjects consistently apply their own moral values and norms. Moral competence does not reflect opinions on specific issues, acceptance or rejection of social standards, nor particular moral values and attitudes. It is a measure of moral competence (Lind, 2000b). A person can prefer Stage 1 to Stage 6 reasoning and still get the highest possible score on the C index. The MJT allows us to detect dilemma-specific moral attitudes without giving up the idea of moral judgment competence (e.g., Wark & Krebs, 1996). Because of this feature, the MJT is more culturally fair than most other tests. If a Non-Western moral philosophy prescribes a particular opinion on some issue, or a level of moral discourse below Stage 6, subjects adhering to this philosophy could still can get the maximum C score of 100 (Lind, 2000b).

Lind (2000a) found that, regardless of gender, age, socio-economic status, political belief or cultural background, moral judgment competence shows the same pattern of correlations with moral attitudes. This pattern can be predicted on the basis of Kohlberg's hypothesis of affective-cognitive parallelism: Preference for Stage 6 reasoning correlates positive with moral judgment competence; while preference for Stage 1 reasoning correlates negatively with C scores.

So far, deviations to this pattern have been found only in regard to different types of dilemmas (Lind, 1978; 2000a). Some dilemmas can be optimally solved employing moral reasoning on levels lower than Stage 6. Morally mature or autonomous action can take place on each stage. Which stage is chosen seems to depend on the type of dilemma.

Educators linked to the character education movement argue that the achievement of moral maturity requires close guidance and direct teaching during most of childhood and adolescence and, perhaps also during early adulthood (Lickona, 1991; Wynne & Ryan 1993): "Character educators assert that a fundamental mission of the schools is to indoctrinate children with the community's very best values" (Ryan, 1996, p. 81). Direct teaching and indoctrination, as often practiced in traditional moral education, may foster high levels of moral expectations for others and themselves. Still, these methods can fail to enhance children's moral competencies and their behavior and cause severe damage in children. They may lead to a cleavage between moral values on the one hand and abilities to act upon them in real-life situations. This cleavage in turn can lead either to feelings of insufficiency and depression, or to moral anger and hate – to a kind of "Unabomber-syndrome."

Developmentalists point out that education should focus more on the development of moral thinking and judgment. They argue that methods like indoctrination and traditional schooling seem inappropriate.[6] Moral development is fostered if school provides opportunities for taking real roles and responsibilities (Piaget, 1965/1932; Kohlberg, 1980; Neill, 1960). They recommend substituting much, if not all, of traditional schooling with "service learning" or "community education."[7] They point out that no subject can be taught without some role-taking. Children can learn mathematics only if the teacher provides them with mathematical problems for practicing their skills and for taking up responsibility for their solutions. They would hardly learn anything if they would just have to memorize the basic mathematical axioms and some theorems. Students must assume the role of a mathematician in order to learn mathematics.

Analogously, in the field of moral learning, the teacher must treat *the child as a moral philosopher* (Kohlberg & Gilligan, 1971) to challenge his or her moral competencies. Opportunities for role-taking and responsible decision-making are also important conditions for sustaining and developing moral development after the completion of education. The "experience of moral decision making and job responsibility following an advanced or professional education, rather than education itself, leads to Stage 5 reasoning" (Kohlberg and Higgin, 1984, p. 459). Such responsibilities can include moral-cognitive conflicts that require a person to take the perspective of others and the system as a whole. "These experiences aid the development of principled thinking." Role-taking-opportunities are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the development of moral judgment competence. A condition for learning is some optimal discrepancy between the learner's moral judgment competence on the one side and the difficulty of a moral task or role. If this discrepancy is too small, the learner will hardly feel challenged and may learn little because of a lack of motivation and because the progress of learning is slowed. If this discrepancy is too large, the learner may fail to cope with a task and cease to develop at all. On a low

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stage of development, learners are not yet able to estimate the difficulty of a moral task enough to chose the right ones for practicing their skills. The children depend on the guidance of experienced persons.

Role-taking can only stimulate moral development if learners get adequate feedback about their success and failure. If they are young, children can hardly avoid such feedback, yet the quality of that feedback may vary considerably depending on whether it comes from persons with more or less moral competence. When the learner becomes more autonomous, and is able to evaluate the outcomes of his or her moral decisions, moral development becomes self-sustaining.

Role-taking can fail to promote moral development when children grow up without reaching a critical level of moral competence before they obtain a high social status. The higher their status the greater their power, and there is "not an automatic relationship between holding a position of power and responsibility and having one's capacity for and use of principled thinking stimulated. We will inevitably recall Bryce's dictum, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely " (Kohlberg and Higgins 1984, p. 479).

It is clear that we cannot expect that guidance and direct teaching alone or role-taking opportunities alone are optimal strategies for fostering moral competencies. We should expect a combination of both to have the greatest effect (Reiman & Parramore, 1993; Sprinthall, 1994). The question of the right mixture is still unanswered. Yet research gives us some rough guidelines. The right mixtures depends on the learner's age. Direct teaching and guidance should play a greater role in childhood than in adolescence. The use of role-taking, on the other side, should get more extensive as the child grows older.[8] Of course, the right mixture depends also on the field of learning. In some fields the child may profit already at a very early age from role-taking, whereas in another fields he or she may long benefit from direct teaching (see Herberich, 1996).

To clarify some assumptions about the importance of role-taking and guided reflection for moral development of students in higher education, we conducted a survey of 271 German university students. Participants represented four different fields of study, which provide different opportunities for moral learning.

The dependent variable, moral development, was assessed with the *Moral Judgment Test* (MJT) (see Lind, 2000b; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985). The main index derived from the MJT is the C index (Range 0-100). It is the percentage of variance of an *individual's* total response pattern that can be attributed to the moral quality of the arguments being judged. For assessing the two independent variables, we constructed the ORIGIN/u questionnaire ("Opportunities for Role-Taking and Guided Reflection in College and University Students"). The ORIGIN/u is based on the theoretical distinctions made by Dippelhofer-Stiem (1983) and on the cross-national longitudinal research into higher education by Peisert, Bargel and their colleagues (see Dippelhofer-Stiem & Lind, 1987).

Here the individual assesses attributes of the learning environment. This information tells us which opportunities are really available to the students. If the teacher-student ratio is high but the professors are mostly absent and hardly available for the students, they cannot provide much guided reflection.

The ORIGIN/u is scored through summation, that is, for each domain of the learning environment (syllabus-bound, syllabus-related, extracurricular, non-curricular) and for each type of opportunity (role-taking, guided reflection) the responses are summed and averaged. With the ORIGIN/u we assess learning opportunities that stand out. A zero score here does not mean that the students do not have any opportunities for guided reflection.

Findings

Moral judgment competence increases with the amount of role-taking opportunities. The more role-taking opportunities a student had the higher was his or her moral judgment competence.

Students who had opportunities for guided reflection, got yet even higher C scores than those who just had role taking opportunities. The additional gains seem small when compared with the impact of role-taking opportunities. However, the impact of this variable is more obvious when we look at the data for low and high track groups. The differences between the low and high track groups suggest that a combination of both types of opportunities produce a much higher gain in moral development than role-taking alone.

These findings are supported by a Mexican study on 85 students of a Mexican private university. Patiño (1999) found that the C-score of the MJT was substantially correlated with role-taking opportunities and opportunities for guided reflection ($r = .33$ and $.29$, respectively). For more details see http://www.unl-konstanz.de/ag-moral/pdf/selfsust.pdf.

Conclusions

Our findings support the argument that role-taking as well as guided reflection are necessary for moral development. Both conditions require each other to be optimally effective for developing self. The more persons are developed, it seems, the less they are dependent on externally guided reflection. Our findings show that university students profit from opportunities for taking real responsibilities and from the availability of external advice and guidance.

These and other findings on the moral-cognitive development of students have important implications for educational policy making and curriculum design in higher education. Three deserve special mentioning: First, we have the methodology and the data to show that higher education not only enhances professional skills but also fosters socio-

moral competencies.

Research suggests that moral development is mainly stimulated through unscheduled, independent activities rather than through direct teaching in the classroom. These activities are less obvious and may take place outside the classroom and often outside the campus. For the public, opportunities for role-taking and guided reflection may sometimes seem unrelated to the curriculum and as "wasted time." Therefore, educational policy makers often feel under pressure to shorten the time of study, or fill those "spare" times with more direct learning. They "squeeze out" time for important learning activities, resulting in a loss of moral-democratic competencies so badly needed today. Some fields of university study hardly leave time for role-taking opportunities and provide virtually no guided reflection. Medical students were the only group which showed a stagnation and even a regression of moral judgment competence (Lind, 2000c). Such regression was also found in Finnish medical students (Helkama, 1987).

Children who do not pursue a high track educational career also need to be prepared for the life in a highly complex, democratic society. As for the development of their moral-democratic competencies we have reasons to be concerned. These youths leave school prematurely, when their level of moral judgment is not mature enough to sustain their moral development without the guidance of an education. So at the age of 15 their moral competencies start to decrease while those of their peers increase. This enormous cleavage of moral literacy in our society seems inconsistent with the basic moral principles of democracy, and, as Kozol (1985) points out, causes tremendous costs for all citizens. On the basis of the present study, one may argue that it is essential not only for the welfare of each individual but also for the survival of democratic societies that all children get a good education for at least 12 years and that opportunities for moral role-taking and guided reflection are a core part of their education.

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Footnotes

[1] For a thorough critique of the theories that learning discontinues on the completion of college education or even before that, see Theis-Sprinthall & Sprinthall (1987). The new insight is accompanied by a growing amount of research into adults' development (see Alexander & Langer, 1990; Baltes, 1987; Commons et al., 1990; Kuhn, 1991; Kitchener & King, 1990; Sternberg, 1990).

[2] Kohlberg and Higgins (1984) report a study by L. Bakkan who showed "a continued increase in the development of principled or Stage 4/5 and 5 reasoning after completion of formal higher education" (p. 459). While Bakkan found no principled or 4/5 and Stage 5 reasoning among 28 to 36 year old subjects, subjects who were forty to fifty years of age argued predominantly on the level of moral principles.

[3] Surprisingly, medical students also show such an erosion of moral competencies. For methodological reasons, this was not discovered until recently (Helkama, 1987; Lind, 2000b). Some time ago, we replaced the dogma of no development in adulthood, with the opposite dogma of continuous, invariantly upward development. Some of the old methods of measurement preluded the detection of adult development, some new methods now make it difficult to detect regression. This seems to be especially true for Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview (Colby et al., 1987). Its scoring rules (e.g., the so-called "upward stage inclusion rule" and the fact that "invariant sequence" was chosen as ultimate criterion for its validation, makes this method insensitive for the erosion of moral competencies (Lind, 1989). So it is particularly interesting that Helkama's (1987) finding is based on Kohlberg's interview. Other methods, like Lind's Moral Judgment Test (Lind, 2000b) and Rest's (1986) Defining Issues Test, are not biased against regressions.

[4] At some point of time, Kohlberg seemed to have replaced this definition through the definition of moral autonomy as Stage 5 and Stage 6 reasoning. This definition returned, however, when he introduced the idea of substages in his model, and focused on the question of moral action. He defines substages A and B analogous to Piaget's phases of moral "heteronomy" and "autonomy." Moreover, Kohlberg (1984) assumes that mature moral action is not bound to the arrival of postconventional or Stage 5 and 6 thinking: "We find not only principled subjects but subjects who are at the autonomous or B substage of conventional (Stage 3 and 4) morality engaging in moral action from a base of autonomous moral judgment" (p. 394)

[5] The "psychological necessity" of moral or other knowledge means the degree to which behavioral principles or rules have relevance for the person's decision-making. As Lourenço and Machado (1996) explain, Piaget, "used judgments [opinions] plus explanations (instead of judgments only) as criteria for operational competence, and considered counter-suggestions essential to the clinical method" (p. 146) Piaget considered such probing an indispensable technique "to assess not only the true-false value of children's judgments and knowledge, but also their sense of [psycho]logical necessity" (p. 154) Unfortunately, besides the MJT most tests for measuring moral development do not probe into this necessity, or have ceased to do so.

[6] Sprinthall & Sprinthall (1974): "Thus the paradox. The goal of schooling was to produce good citizens, on the one hand, but the programs to accomplish those goals were not to be personal or ,emotional,' on the other hand. The school was supposed to promote growth but through an antiseptic curriculum, guaranteed safe. [. . .] Because of their neglect and abdication of responsibility, the schools have done more harm than good: their influence, the psychological education they give, is negative."

[7] For a critical discussion of these recommendations see Kahne (1994) and Reinhardt (1992).

[8] Sedikides (1989): "The post-childhood measure [of role-taking opportunities], but not the childhood measure, was highly correlated with moral judgment level in this advanced sample [of college students]. Hence Kohlberg was right to stress the importance of socially expanded perspective-taking experiences.

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