
The relation of moral judgement to authoritarianism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and concern about nuclear war

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Abstract

This study focuses on the relation between moral arguments and political attitudes such as concern about nuclear war, sexism, attitudes toward minority groups, and authoritarianism. Forty-six high school students were involved in a quantitative study based upon tests and questionnaires, and 19 of them participated in a qualitative study based on interviews. The measures were: the 'Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure', the 'Inventory of Nuclear War Attitudes', the Stade and Jenner sexism scale, an ethnocentrism scale, and a Dutch version of the F-scale. Using a multivariate analysis it was shown that concern about nuclear war and ethnocentrism are particularly related to moral judgement level. The qualitative study illustrates the context of these relationships.

Introduction

One of the main goals of the Frankfurt School of critical social inquiry (Adorno, *et al.*, 1950) was to describe the psychological and educational conditions that make some individuals susceptible to anti-democratic movements and ideas, and prevent others from being thoroughly influenced by such movements. Adorno and his colleagues were convinced that individual differences in susceptibility to anti-democratic movements, such as the German Nazi movement, could not be reduced to differences in the social circumstances and position of the people involved. Therefore, they emphasized the need to look for other determinants, especially in the areas of child-rearing background, personality and cognition. In this study, it is hypothesized that one of the factors explaining differences in susceptibility to anti-democratic movements is moral judgement as it is defined in cognitive developmental theory (Piaget, 1973; Kohlberg, 1984).

In a moral conflict the perspectives of different participants have to be balanced against each other. It has been shown that individuals strongly differ in the way

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they account for different and often contrary perspectives in a moral conflict (Kohlberg, 1984). Some people are only able to take possible consequences for themselves into account, for example the rewards or punishments involved. Others evaluate a moral conflict mainly from a conventional perspective: they derive their criteria for judging a moral conflict from the social group or institution in which they function. Yet others are able to imagine which ethical principles make social life possible, and to evaluate what decision be preferred from this 'social-contract' perspective.

Moral conflicts are characterized by clashes of individual interest. In political conflicts, institutionalized interests are at stake. It is, however, often necessary to use moral arguments in a political discussion, in addition to pertinent political facts (Van IJzendoorn, 1980). The political importance of Kohlberg's theory of moral judgement is based upon the idea 'that morality is at the very crux of political philosophy' (Candee, 1974, p.621). The concept of justice is at the very core of cognitive developmental theory of moral judgement and Kohlberg derives its meaning from political-philosophical theory of justice (Rawls, 1971). Giving each person his or her due on the individual level corresponds with the institutional obligation to distribute the goods and services of society in a just manner (cf. Weinreich-Haste, 1986). A contemporary representative of the Frankfurt School, Habermas (1976), considered moral judgement on the individual level as a necessary condition for the development of communicative competence leading to a rational political discourse (see also Lind, *et al.*, 1985; Weinreich-Haste, 1986).

In a series of empirical studies, the hypothesis of a relation between moral judgement and susceptibility to anti-democratic ideas has been tested (van IJzendoorn, 1986; 1987; 1989). These studies focused upon the relation between moral judgement level and attitude toward nuclear war (van IJzendoorn, 1987), attitude toward sexist statements (van IJzendoorn, 1986), and attitude toward minority groups (van IJzendoorn, 1989) in high-school and college student samples. The relation between authoritarianism and moral judgement level was studied because Adorno *et al.* (1950) considered the authoritarian personality to be based upon a disfunctioning 'superego'. Although Adorno *et al.* used the traditional psychoanalytic vocabulary to describe and explain authoritarianism, it was hypothesized that authoritarianism could be partly interpreted as a retarded development of morality in the Kohlbergian sense (van IJzendoorn; 1980; 1989). In fact, these studies confirmed the hypothesized relation between moral judgement level and political attitudes. Subjects with a higher moral judgement level showed more concern about nuclear war, were more strongly opposed to sexist statements about the position of women in our society, and appeared to be less authoritarian and ethnocentric in their ideas about minority groups from abroad, e.g. Moroccan or Turkish workers. Without being able to make causal statements (Emler, *et al.*, 1983), the studies appeared to confirm the hypothesis that moral judgement constitutes the hard, cognitive core of political attitudes. It was concluded that political education should take this into account by incorporating the didactic principles of moral education (van IJzendoorn, 1983).

The following study is closely related to the studies mentioned above. Hypotheses and measures are largely the same. This study differs, however, from the former ones in two respects. First, we studied the whole range of political attitudes in a new sample. It will, therefore, be possible to describe the relationships between the political attitudes. It may, for example, be hypothesized that attitudes toward sexist and ethnocentric statements will covary because both are concerned with the rights of 'minority' groups in our society. Second, contrary to our former studies, not only quantitative measures and analyses were applied, but also qualitative approaches. Semi-structured interviews with selected subjects

were carried out to study the reasons and arguments behind their answers to the questionnaires measuring political attitudes.

Method

Subjects

A sample of 46 high-school students (age: 16 years. $SD=1.0$) completed tests and questionnaires. The sample consisted of 16 boys and 30 girls of Dutch nationality. The mean socio-economic status of the fathers of these adolescents was four ($SD=1.5$), on a scale ranging from one (unskilled) to six (academic). Fifty-four per cent of the students considered themselves Roman-Catholic; twenty-two per cent was Protestant; four per cent belonged to another religious group; and twenty per cent were not religiously affiliated. Almost half of the subjects were unable to express a definite preference for one of the many Dutch political parties, or said they would abstain from voting (forty seven per cent); thirty one per cent preferred the Christian-Democratic party (CDA, a party in the centre of the political left-right spectrum); eleven per cent would vote for one of the liberal parties (PvdA, a party comparable to the British Labour party; and D'66, a party with very similar ideas to those of the Social Democrats), and eleven per cent preferred the conservative party (VVD). In our sample, the liberal voters are somewhat under-represented. Sample size is sufficient for tests of bivariate correlations. The power of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient is satisfactory. For tests of multivariate relations, Tabachnick and Fidell (1983) propose a ratio of at least five subjects on one variable in a regression analysis; our multivariate analysis conforms to this global guideline.

Procedures

Quantitative measures were used to operationalize moral judgement level, concern about nuclear war, sexism, ethnocentrism and authoritarianism. Subjects also answered questions about their age, sex, socioeconomic background, religious affiliation, and political party preference. Tests and questionnaires were completed during school hours. Our qualitative study was carried out with nineteen subjects selected on the basis of their political party preference: six subjects were included because of their relatively conservative preference; seven subjects because they were relatively liberal; six respondents who were not certain about their political preference, completed the sub-sample. In semi-structured interviews the most important items of the questionnaires on concerns about nuclear war, sexism, ethnocentrism and authoritarianism were discussed. The interviewer (Ciska Dijkstra) tried to focus respondents on motives or reasons for giving particular answers on the questionnaires. The interviews were carried out at school, during free time or lunch-times. The interviews took about 45 minutes on average, and were audio-taped. The audio-tapes were transcribed literally.

Moral judgement

The Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure (SRM; Gibbs, *et al.*, 1984) was used. It is a multiple-choice test for moral judgements about two classical moral dilemmas: the Heinz dilemma is the well-known story about a man who must decide whether to break the law and steal an exorbitantly priced drug in order to save his dying wife's life. In the Father-and-Son dilemma a 14-year-old boy would like to participate in a camp. His father promises that he may go if he earns the money himself, but breaks this promise. The son must decide whether to be disobedient to his father. Gibbs *et al.* (1984) established satisfactory test-retest reliability (0.82), and the concurrent validity with the results of the original Moral Judgement Interview was $r(21)=0.66$. The scores of the SRM range from 100 to

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores, and alpha reliabilities of the measures (N=46)

Measures	M	SD	Min-Max	Alpha
Moral judgement ¹	322.1	39.22	226-406	0.71
Concern about nuclear war ²	103.4	20.08	60-156	0.77
Sexism ³	60.7	10.14	32-78	0.90
Ethnocentrism ⁴	45.7	9.12	26-66	0.83
Authoritarianism ⁵	42.9	7.96	24-70	0.81

1. higher scores indicate a higher level of moral judgement;
2. higher scores indicate more concern about nuclear war;
3. higher scores indicate a less sexist attitude;
4. higher scores indicate a more ethnocentric attitude;
5. higher scores indicate a more authoritarian attitude.

500, and divided by 100, these scores correspond to the moral Stages One to Five (Gibbs *et al.*, 1984). In Table 1, mean scores, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores, and Cronbach's alpha reliability of the SROM are described.

Concern about nuclear war

The Inventory of Nuclear War Attitudes (INWA; Grueneich, *et al.*, 1983), consisting of 24 statements on nuclear war and the nuclear arms race, was applied. An example of a statement is: 'The threat of nuclear war has had very little impact on my daily life.' The subjects were asked to agree or disagree with each statement on a nine-point scale. Alpha reliability of the scale was satisfactory (see Table 1 for details).

Sexism

A revised Dutch version of the Slade and Jenner (1978) scale was used to operationalize the degree to which subjects appear to regard women as equals to men in family life, on occupational level, and in the area of socio-political decision-making (Hubbard *et al.*, 1982). The scale consisted of 20 items. An example of an item is: 'A woman should be quite willing to give up her own job if her husband can gain promotion by moving to another area.' From Table 1 it can be seen that this sexism scale was reliable.

Ethnocentrism

The ethnocentrism scale was validated by De Jong and Van der Toorn (1984), and contained 16 items. Subjects were asked to agree or disagree with each of the items on a five-point scale. An example is: 'Unemployed immigrants should go back to their own country.' In Table 1, mean and standard deviation, as well as minimum and maximum scores, and alpha reliability are described.

Authoritarianism

A revised Dutch version of the original F-scale (Roe, 1972) was used to measure authoritarianism. The scale consisted of 14 items, one of which was: 'The most important thing children should learn is respect for authority.' Studies of Hagendoorn and Janssen (1983), and Melloen (1983) indicated that this instrument

was a valid and reliable operationalization of the complex concept of authoritarianism (see also van IJzendoorn, 1989).

Results and Discussion

Results will be presented in two parts. First, the outcome of our quantitative study will be reported upon. Second, some results of the qualitative study will be described.

Quantitative data: trends

Quantitative data appeared to confirm our hypothesis that moral judgement level is correlated with political attitudes. In Table 2, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between moral judgement level, concern about nuclear war, sexism, ethnocentrism, and authoritarianism have been described.

Most correlations between background variables such as sex, age, and socio-economic status on the one hand, and moral judgement and political attitudes on the other hand were not significant. Only the sex of the subjects correlated significantly with concern about nuclear war ($r=0.32$): girls appeared to be more concerned than boys. From Table 2, it can be seen that moral judgement level is significantly correlated with three of the four political attitude variables, namely concern about nuclear war, sexism and ethnocentrism. Higher levels of moral judgement indicate more concern about nuclear war, less ethnocentric ideas about minorities, and less sexist views on the role of women compared to men in our society. Authoritarianism was much less strongly correlated with these same political attitudes. Contrary to our expectations, authoritarianism did not correlate with moral judgement level and concern about nuclear war. Neither did it correlate with ethnocentrism, although the F-scale was in fact constructed to discover ethnocentric views on minority groups such as the Jews in the USA (Adorno *et al.*, 1950). In fact, in two previous studies we found support for Adorno's original hypothesis, and we also found a significant correlation between moral judgement level and authoritarianism (van IJzendoorn, 1989). In these studies, however, subjects were – on average – much less authoritarian and ethnocentric, and they scored higher on the SROM, compared to the subjects in this study. Authoritarianism did correlate with sexism in the expected direction: more authoritarian subjects were inclined to more sexist reactions on our sexism scale. The latter variable also correlated strongly with ethnocentrism: more ethnocentric subjects also tended to be more sexist, as we would have expected.

Our correlational pattern could be explained by pointing to an important 'background' variable, such as political party preference. Political attitudes would

Table 2: Pearson correlations between moral judgement level, concern about nuclear war, sexism, ethnocentrism, and authoritarianism (N=46)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Moral judgement	-				
2. Concern	0.53**				
3. Sexism	0.31*	0.19	-		
4. Ethnocentrism	-0.34	-0.21	-0.45**	-	
5. Authoritarianism	-0.06	-0.17	-0.43**	0.12	-

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

primarily be determined by the subjects' political position on the left-right spectrum. More liberal subjects would in general be more concerned about nuclear war, less sexist, less ethnocentric, and less authoritarian compared to conservative subjects. In that case, all political attitudes would have to be strongly correlated. From Table 2, however, it can be seen that concern about nuclear war was not correlated with sexism or ethnocentrism, and this absence of a relation is just what we would have expected to find. Furthermore, including political position in our multivariate analyses it was shown that no significant effects could be ascribed to this predictor (see Table 3).

The multivariate regression analyses (with backward selection of predictors) has been carried out on moral judgement level. Predictors were background variables, such as sex, age, socioeconomic status, and political position; furthermore, the four scales for concern about nuclear war, sexism, ethnocentrism, and authoritarianism, were included. The result of this regression analysis is described in Table 3.

From Table 3, it can be seen that political attitudes, and especially concern about nuclear war and ethnocentrism, remained strongly correlated with moral judgement, although some pertinent variables were controlled for in our multivariate analysis. Higher moral judgement levels indicate more concern about nuclear war, and less ethnocentrism, even if we control for a series of background and concurrent variables. Because of its strong correlation with ethnocentrism, the sexism scale did not predict any variance in moral judgement level. From a multivariate perspective, socioeconomic status appeared to be a significant predictor of moral judgement level: subjects from somewhat higher socioeconomic status families appeared to have argued on a lower level of moral judgement, whereas subjects from somewhat lower socioeconomic status families appeared to argue on a higher level. It has to be kept in mind, however, that the partial correlation is not very strong ($rp=-0.32$), and that in our sample differences in socioeconomic status were rather small ($M=4$; $SD=1.5$). The sample should be characterized as mainly middle class.

Qualitative data: individual subjects

Because concern about nuclear war and ethnocentrism were the most important predictors of moral judgement level according to our quantitative data, we decided to illustrate these correlations with some quotations from the semi-structured interviews. We selected two contrasting interviews for each of the two relations, by choosing subjects with relatively extreme scores on both the moral judgement scale, and ethnocentrism or concern about nuclear war.

Table 3: Multiple regression on moral judgement (N=46)

Predictor	Moral judgement ¹				
	Beta	T	P	r	rp
a) SES	-0.26	-2.2	0.04	-0.25	-0.32
b) Concern	0.47	3.8	0.00	0.53	0.51
c) Ethnocentrism	-0.26	-2.1	0.04	-0.34	-0.31

1. $R=0.63$; $R^2=0.40$; $F(3.42=9.44$; $p<0.001$

MORAL JUDGEMENT AND CONCERN ABOUT NUCLEAR WAR

To illustrate the relation between moral judgement level and concern about nuclear war some quotations from the interviews with Charles and Karen are reproduced here.

Charles was 17 years old, and he was brought up in a high socioeconomic status family. He scored only 246 (moral Stage Two) on the moral judgement scale (SROM), and he was therefore one of the lowest scoring subjects in our sample. His score on the scale for concern about nuclear war was also one of the lowest (78). Answering a question about his knowledge of the risks involved in nuclear war he said: 'I think that if someone starts, the others will shoot back in the same way. I think that only in a few seconds, everybody will be dead, just dead; that everything will have faded away completely, and that the whole world will be destroyed.' Charles thinks it very important to have a balance in number of nuclear weapons between the superpowers, to prevent a nuclear war. He dislikes 'nuclear weapons very much; I think they should all disappear, but I find a balance important, in the world, concerning nuclear weapons. If you have them yourself, to preserve the balance . . . I think the Netherlands need them too'. Nuclear weapons could also prevent a conventional war from starting. Answering a question on whether he would prefer the abolition of nuclear weapons, Charles said: 'Well, I think that would be a good idea. But the chance of a war will be consequently greater. Well . . . if all nuclear weapons are gone, and one of the parties does have a few, in that case war will be possible again; because the consequences will not be very big, and, therefore, somebody could take up arms much quicker than before.'

Karen was 16 years old, and she was also from a family with a higher socioeconomic status. She scored 330 (moral Stage Three) on the moral judgement scale, which is above the average score of 322 in this sample. She also scored high on the scale for concern about nuclear war (131, with an average score of 103 for the total sample). Answering our question about her knowledge of the risks and consequences of nuclear war, Karen responded: 'I don't know that much. You know, if such a bomb detonates, then . . . there are rockets of different construction . . . you know people will die. There will be poisoned air . . . and people who stay alive will get handicapped children, I think . . . and so forth . . . It will be very shocking. If it happens . . . I don't know much about it . . . but they say there will be a vacuum, and, I don't know, you have to go to nuclear cellars; we have special places, in Rotterdam I believe. But if we have to go there, from Voorschoten . . . if we have to sit in the car, and have to drive there first . . . I think you will be destroyed by then.' Karen does not think in terms of balance between superpowers, but in terms of a surplus of nuclear arms. Answering a question about what she thinks of several countries having nuclear weapons, she said: 'As it is now, it is stupid. It is . . . really bad, I think.' 'Why?' 'Well they now have enough weapons to destroy the whole world I don't know how many times. Well, I mean....one time is enough, isn't it....Yes, in one blow the world will be destroyed.'

These quotations illustrate two important differences between the two subjects. First, Karen appears to be personally involved in discussing the consequences of nuclear war. She is able to imagine the experiences of her own and of other individuals in a nuclear war. Charles, however, seems uninvolved, speaking strategically about the possibility of nuclear war. He does not elaborate on the destruction of life, on the nonsense of nuclear cellars, or on this likely personal experiences in a nuclear war. Second, Charles and Karen disagree about the relevance of a balance between the nuclear powers. Karen focuses upon the large surplus of nuclear arms of both sides – West and East – and thinks it irrelevant to

discuss nuclear strategy in terms of a theoretical balance between superpowers. Charles, however, considers a balance – at whatever level of nuclear armament – the most important instrument to prevent real war, nuclear or conventional. Charles argues on a strategic level, whereas Karen personalizes the issue and takes the perspective of individuals involved in a destructive nuclear war.

Arguing at a pre-conventional level, Charles shows his Stage Two instrumental orientation in discussing the nuclear war issue by emphasizing the strategic interest of nuclear arms in serving one's own needs. As Kohlberg (1984, p.626) indicated, the perspective of Stage Two is pragmatic – to maximize satisfaction of one's needs and desires while minimizing negative consequences to the self. Charles does not expect to be involved in a nuclear war during his lifetime if there is a nuclear arms balance. Karen argues on a conventional level, and shows her Stage Three interpersonal perspective by putting herself in the shoes of individuals experiencing a disastrous nuclear war. Nuclear arms are contrary to the Stage Three idea of mutually trusting relationships among people (Kohlberg, 1984, p.628).

MORAL JUDGEMENT AND ETHNOCENTRISM

The first quotation to illustrate the relation between moral judgement and ethnocentrism is derived from an interview with Cora. This girl was 15 years old, and she lived in a family with a low socioeconomic status (SES=2). She scored very low on the moral judgement test (SR0M=246; moral Stage Two), and she belongs to the group of subjects without a clear political preference. She scored 58 on the scale for ethnocentrism (M=45.7), and appeared to be one of the most ethnocentric subjects in our sample. Cora stated that every foreigner should remain in his or her own country: 'They came to Holland, and at the same time there was a growing unemployment. You know, you hear such stories....about big fights and so on.' She would not like to live in the neighbourhood of foreigners: 'You always hear about troubles in those areas where foreigners live . . . You hear those stories, for example, about people from Turkey and Morocco being quick to show their knives and to fight.' She would not want to marry a foreigner: 'If people do want to marry a foreigner they should decide themselves; I don't care . . . But I would never marry a foreigner, I think . . . You hear those stories about women being repressed in every way, in other countries such as Turkey. Therefore, no, I don't want to marry a foreigner.' Foreigners do have the right to get a good job, however: 'They have that right, I think . . . if they are living in Holland OK . . . and if they have Dutch nationality they may have a good job.' But if the foreign workers get unemployed or unable to work anywhere, they should go back to their own country: 'I don't know, but I think they should get lost quickly.'

Coby was 14 years old, and lived in a family from a higher socioeconomic milieu (SES=5). She scored relatively high on the moral judgement test (SR0M=346; moral Stage Three), but she did not have a clear political preference. She was one of the least ethnocentric subjects: she scored 33 on the ethnocentrism scale (M=45.7). Coby disagrees with the statement that foreigners should remain in their own country: 'I think it is good to have contact with foreign people and other culture. Otherwise, you are only fixated upon your own country.' She would not mind living in the same area with foreigners: 'if I am able to relate to those people, I don't care at all.' But what about the risk of fights and so on? 'Yes, maybe there are . . . their way of life is altogether different from ours, but I think if you try to understand each other, it should not happen.' If a Dutch person and a foreigner would like to live together or be married, she thinks 'it would certainly be normal; it should be possible'. She does not know for sure if she would like to be married to a foreigner: 'it doesn't matter, it depends . . . if I like him very much, I would of

course not care at all'. Foreign workers should have the right to get a good job, and if they become unemployed or unable to work, they should get the same facilities as Dutch workers: 'I don't know, but if they cannot work again, if they are forced by the circumstances, or if they really cannot find any work however much they tried, I think they should have the same rights.'

Both subjects are unable to analyse the problem of foreign workers from the point of view of the social system. They do not appear to be able to take the societal point of view and to discuss this issue on a moral-political level. They differ, however, in terms of a strategic versus a personalized perspective on the issue. Coby feels that foreigners have to be considered as fellow human beings in the first place. An attempt should be made to try to understand their perspective, and to give them the same rights and duties as Dutch citizens. Cora, on the other hand, does not personalize foreigners. She considers them as a group, about which several unfavourable stories are told. She does not care to take their perspective and thinks about them in a strategic way: she wants them to remain a separate group, going back to their own country as soon as their stay does not serve her own immediate interests. Coby argues clearly from a Stage Three interpersonal perspective: she emphasizes keeping mutual relationships, trying to understand and trust each other, independently from race or nationality. Awareness of shared feelings, agreements and expectations should take primacy over individual interests (Kohlberg, 1984, p.174). Cora is more instrumentally and pragmatically oriented: if an equal exchange is not possible, that is, if foreigners living in another country stay without contributing to the country's economy, they should go back.

Conclusion

Moral judgement level appears to correlate with some important political attitudes. Higher scores on the moral judgement test indicate more concern about nuclear war, and less ethnocentric ideas about the position of foreign workers in our country. Qualitative data can illustrate this outcome, and provide some background. For example, a subject arguing on a Stage Three moral judgement level appears able to take the perspective of persons involved in a real nuclear war. Therefore, nuclear war is not a mere strategic issue anymore, to which political slogans and clichés should be applied. *On the contrary, nuclear war has become a possible personal reality, and its irrationality is intuitively condemned.* The issue of ethnocentrism shows the same difference between subjects arguing on a higher or lower level of moral judgement. The subject arguing on a Stage Two moral judgement level is not capable of taking the perspective of an individual foreign worker. She considers foreigners as a rather threatening group, to which simple ideological slogans can be applied ('they should go back if they are unemployed'). Foreigners are not seen as individuals with the same rights and duties as every other human being, but as a group that should remain separate from 'native' citizens. They should only be allowed to stay as long as they participate in mutual exchange of advantages.

A Stage Three moral judgement level appears to allow for taking the perspective of individuals in threatening and stressful circumstances, whereas a Stage Two moral judgement level leaves more room for strategic thinking and political slogans and stereotypes. This implies that subjects arguing from a pre-conventional level are more susceptible to anti-democratic ideas and movements than subjects arguing from a higher moral judgement level. But it does not imply that Stage Three subjects are already able to analyse situations from a social system or social contract perspective. They do not always show enough knowledge of political facts, and because they do not argue from the level of post-conventional moral

judgement, they are not capable of applying moral principles to complex political issues. Political education, aiming at reducing instrumental and strategic thinking in matters of minorities' rights and the nuclear arms threat, should, therefore, not only focus on transfer of political knowledge, but also foster development toward post-conventional morality.

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