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Morality Behind Bars

An Intervention Study on Fostering Moral Competence of Prisoners as a New Approach to Social Rehabilitation



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EDITION

1 Introduction¹

Empirical studies detected that prisoners prefer justice, mutual respect, fairness and the ideal of democracy just as much as non-prisoners (Wischka, 1982; Lind, 2002). To understand the gap between moral principles, ideals or attitudes and the actual behavior modern moral psychology offers helpful scientific knowledge and furthermore pedagogic methods to reduce it.

Moral principles like fairness are rather abstract, vague and diverse. In every-day life they need to be concretized in the particular circumstances when a decision is made. When pursuing moral principles, one of the difficulties that arise is considering the consequences of one's action. Quite often a lack of knowledge about certain things prevents us from being fair then. Especially demanding are those situation where more than one moral principle is involved and no single course of action is morally right. For example: What is a *fair* decision when I come to know that my best friend is addicted to drugs and starts to deal in school yards in order to afford them? In such a dilemma-situation we deal with opposing moral principles - no conceivable decision would be morally right. Acting according to one's ideals gets even more complicated because a dilemma occurs "in the eye of the beholder" (Lind, 2006, p. 10)^v.

A person's ability to apply one's own moral ideals or principles to one's behavior and decision-making in every-day-life, especially to resolve moral conflicts, is called moral competence. This definition is derived from Kohlbergs definition of *moral judgment competence* as "the capacity to make decisions and judgments which are moral, i.e. based on internal principles, and to act in accordance with such judgments" (Kohlberg, 1964, p. 425)². Kohlberg's definition is central for the work of Georg Lind. Lind's *Dual-Aspects-Theory of (moral) development* (Lind, 2002) asserts that from a cognitive-developmental perspective, moral behavior should be described in relation to two distinguishable but inseparable aspects: the *affective aspect* (moral orientations) on the one hand and the *cognitive aspect* (moral competence) on the other hand³. Lind is the first

1 This study would not have been possible without the three - years research grant (2008 - 2010) I received from the Hans – Böckler - Foundation (HBS).

2 In the present work the term moral judgment competence is used according to Kohlbergs work and his way of measurement (MJI). The new approach as outlined in this work is moral competence used for studies with the MCT (Lind).

3 Its connection is rather that they are logically distinct, but operationally impossible to separate. For this reason, they are in the literature often mentioned in one breath (moral judgment and discourse competence) or - as in the title of this work - simply referred to as moral competence.

who succeeded in adapting the Dual-Aspects-Theory to psychological measurement. He created the Moral Competence Test (MCT; Lind, 2013)⁴, which allows to adequately measure moral competencies and orientations.

Numerous empirical observations and experimental studies with the MCT support the *Education Theory of (moral) development* (Lind, 2002). It states:

1. Each person has moral ideals (e.g. a sense of justice) or at least an intuition which differentiates between *right* and *wrong*.
2. Moral competence needs to be developed by everyone throughout his or her life span. Experiments and correlation studies using the MCT show that moral competence correlates strongly with legal behavior. This competence seems to be a pre-condition for voluntary compliance with norms, for helping behavior, for quick decision making in complicated dilemmatic situations and even for learning behavior itself (Lind, 2002).

This development requires support through education, more specifically, good education, because the contemporary social world is too complex and learning through *natural* interpersonal and social interaction alone is not sufficient. Recently, those features of the learning environment which seem to be particular important for moral development could be identified, namely opportunities for Responsibility-Taking and for Guided Reflection (Reimann & Thies-Sprinthall, 1993; Lind, 2000). Hence, the Education Theory states that development takes place only in a learning environment which leaves room for interpersonal free discourse and offers opportunities which encourage Responsibility-Taking behavior and free discursive exchange about social problems. If learners have no or only few learning experiences in this type of environment, they will eventually decrease in their moral competence (Schillinger, 2006).

Empirical studies and meta-analyses support the notion that delinquents have lower moral competence compared to non-delinquents controls. Rare studies in prison environments indicate that moral competence seems to regress in minimum and medium-security institutions and youth penitentiaries (MacPhail, 1989; Glasstetter, 2005)⁵.

In this study I will investigate a) whether moral competence is (or should be) an aim of social rehabilitation of prisoners, and b) whether this competence can be fostered through appropriate methods like the Konstanz Method of Dilemma-Discussion (KMDD; Lind, 2009a). The KMDD provides prisoners with

4 In 2014 the test's name was changed from Moral Judgment Test (MJT) to Moral Competence Test (MCT) because it fits better the intention to measure moral competence.

5 The authors of the mentioned studies didn't further discuss these results.

a positive learning environment where morality can be experienced directly because:

1. everyone, even authorities like the teacher and the spokesperson of the group, submits to the same universally accepted moral principles (justice, equal dignity, mutual respect, freedom etc.) and does not try to use their power to ignore these principles and
2. the whole learning environment is arranged in a way that the learner is able to control his own moral affects. Through this it is possible to uphold a *medium arousal level* that enables the learner to concentrate and think.

Based on the theoretical and empirical findings of the present study, I will argue that the KMDD can expand and enrich the working environment of the penal service, of psychologists and social workers in a professional way.