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**Psychology of Morality &  
Democracy and Education**

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# The Importance of Role-Taking Opportunities for Self-Sustaining Moral Development<sup>1</sup>

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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 education.<sup>3</sup>

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 them to develop well beyond the completion of their college and professional school education (Kohlberg & Higgins, 1984).<sup>4</sup> 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).

Further evidence comes from the qualitative and quantitative studies on

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

teacher and counselor students and young professionals by Sprinthall and his colleagues. They found that these groups can make enormously progress, depending on their educational and professional experiences (Sprinthall, 1994; Sprinthall et al., 1994; Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1993).

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 lose their moral judgment competence, while their peers, who continue schooling, show steady gains even beyond their graduation.<sup>5</sup>

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

These contrasting findings concerning the course of moral development in high and low track groups are summarized in [Figure 1](#) (see appendix).

So we know now that education is important both for fostering moral-

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<sup>5</sup> 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 precluded 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.

cognitive development and for making it self-sustaining. 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, 1985).

In this paper I will suggest a theory of self-sustaining moral development, which can be summarized as follows:

First, self-sustaining moral development can only take place when the individual has acquired a critical level of moral judgment competence. This critical point of development is what Piaget (1965) called moral autonomy. If this critical point of development is not yet attained, people will avoid difficult moral tasks and fail to develop their skills further. As a consequence they will gradually lose 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. He or she will not depend any longer on external stimulations for learning.

Second, 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 take over real responsibility 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.

The research that I will report here is based on empirical studies that I conducted together with Andrea Böhn and Stefanie Herberich at the University of Konstanz, Germany (for further details, see Böhn, 1995; Herberich, 1996).

### *What is moral judgment competence or “moral autonomy?”*

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 principals) 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 moral values rather than on other considerations.<sup>6</sup> Moral autonomy is more than just an orientation or an attitude, but 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 and they can do so within a short period. Overall, according to Piaget and Kohlberg, development proceeds slowly, though sometime, in periods of developmental crisis, quick upward changes may happen. However, we believe that moral competence, as any other competence, can also erode and that the idea of cognitive development, as distinct from attitude change, is very useful even when we allow for erosion or regression (Lind, 1985; 2000c).

Besides being defined through the speed of change (slow development), competence means something that, 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 self-contradiction because according to Bloom et al.’s (1956) very influential classification of human behavior into two domains, this term belongs to two mutually exclusive categories. While “Morality” is assumed to belong to the “affective” domain, “competence” to the “cognitive” domain. However, Bloom and his colleagues have themselves considered the possibility that this classification of human behavior into two separate domains is mistaken. “When behavior is studied in its cognitive aspect,” Piaget and Inhelder (1969) explain, “we are concerned with its structures; when behavior is considered in its affective aspect, we are concerned with its energetics (or ‘economics’ [.

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<sup>6</sup> 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)

. .] ). While these two aspects cannot be reduced to a single aspect, they are nevertheless inseparable and complementary” (p. 21).

A second misunderstanding concerns the relation of moral autonomy to social rules, norms and conventions. In modern societies, the idea of morality has become dissociated from ideas like norm, law, and convention (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 invents his or her own moral values from the scratch. Both beliefs are mistaken. If we had to invent all our moral values and competencies from the scratch, we would never be able to cope with the complexity of present-day-life. And 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. Autonomy development means that a child has both to assimilate and to accommodate external moral knowledge (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). 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 values and not all carry the same meaning of moral obligation. 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 in 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).

In other words, only if a person becomes morally autonomous, he or she is also competent to take over high responsibility for others and for him- or herself. This competence includes self-sustaining moral-cognitive

development, that is, the ability to get the skills and competencies necessary for solving 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. For example, 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, they also observed some development: “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.

Based on Keasey’s (1974) observations we developed an experimental test of moral judgment competence, the Moral Judgment Test, MJT (Lind, 2000b; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985), which was also used in the study reported below. In this test, which is designed as a multi-factorial experiment rather than a traditional psychometric test, the subjects are confronted with a series of arguments linked to important moral dilemmas (mercy killing, and breaking the law for a good reason). The MJT probes simultaneously the subjects’ level of moral concerns and their concern for opinion-conformity. The subjects are asked to evaluate arguments that represent two dimensions of judgment: a) moral type or stage of moral reasoning as described by Kohlberg (1984) and b) opinion-agreement, that is, positions agreeing versus positions disagreeing with the subjects’ own opinion about the moral dilemma. So in the MJT, moral conscience is pitted against the powerful tendency to “rationalize,” that is, to instrumentalize moral values to support pre-moral

opinions.

In a small ethnographic study, we found that some subjects rejected even dealing with the arguments in the MJT. “I am against mercy-killing, so what sense does it make to rate these arguments?” asked one subject. When being pressed, most of these subjects became very emotional, some angrily and others depressed. Of those subjects who continued, many judged only the arguments in favor of their own opinion but skipped over the contra arguments. Still other subjects would rate all arguments but rated the pro-arguments consistently high and the contra-arguments consistently low, without paying attention to the moral quality of these arguments. The judgments of these subjects seem to reflect mostly, if not exclusively, the power of social conventions and stereotypes and other non-moral agencies rather than the power of their moral conscience. This and other research with the MJT shows that a considerable amount of moral-cognitive development is required to judge counter-arguments as for their moral quality (Lind, 1985; 2000a; 2000b). Only on the highest level of moral autonomy, the subjects seem able to submit his or her opinion to a judgment based on his or her own moral principles, and to reject or accept an opposing argument only on ethical grounds rather than on non-moral grounds. Only when the individual has developed the skill of symbolic reasoning and formal operational thinking (Kuhn et al., 1977; Kohlberg, 1984), moral knowledge will become a psychological “necessity” for his or her behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Evidence accumulated by two decades of research, supports the claim that the Moral Judgment Test gives us a valid impression of individuals’ level of moral judgment competence. The MJT indexes the degree to which subjects apply consistently their own moral values and norms. Moral competence or the C index does not reflect their opinions on concrete issues, nor their acceptance or rejection of some social standards, nor their particular moral values and attitudes. The C index is a pure measure of moral competence (Lind, 2000b). A person can get a high C score without subscribing to a

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<sup>7</sup> 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.



particular opinion on hot social issues like mercy-killing, abortion, or capital punishment, and even without subscribing to a particular moral philosophy like Kohlberg's. Hypothetically, a subject can prefer Stage 1 reasoning to Stage 6 reasoning and still get the highest possible score on the C index. So, in contrast to other instruments, the MJT allows us to detect dilemma-specific moral attitudes without giving up the idea of moral judgment competence, as some have suggested (e.g., Wark & Krebs, 1996). Moreover, because of this special 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 get the maximum C score of 100 (Lind, 2000b). Empirically, such constellations can happen but they rarely do. Lind (2000a) found that, regardless of gender, age, socio-economic status, political belief or cultural background, subjects' moral judgment competence shows the same pattern of correlations with their moral attitudes. This pattern can be perfectly predicted on the basis of Kohlberg's hypothesis of affective-cognitive parallelism: Subjects' preference for Stage 6 reasoning correlates highest with their moral judgment competence; their Stage 1 reasoning usually correlates highly negatively with their C scores, and all the other correlations stretch out between these two extremes.<sup>8</sup>

So far, deviations this pattern have been found only in regard to different dilemma types (Lind, 1978; 2000a). Some dilemmas can obviously be optimally solved employing moral reasoning on levels lower than Stage 6, Kohlberg's (1984) highest level. Morally mature or autonomous action can take place on each Stage. Which stage is chosen seems to depend on the type of dilemma. The scoring of the MJT takes this largely but not yet perfectly into account.

*What builds self-sustaining moral competence:  
Direct teaching or free learning?*

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<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that moral *attitudes* are the same as moral *competencies*; in critical situations like in faking experiments this correlation dissolves. So we cannot regard tests of moral attitude as valid measures of moral competencies. But it means that, in many instances, we can use such test as highly predictive *indicators* of moral development (see Lind, 2000b).

The answers that experts give to this question still lay far apart from another. On the one side, 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, 1985): “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).

This answer is not satisfactory, as the large study into character education by Hartshorne and May (1928) showed. Direct teaching and indoctrination, as often practiced in traditional moral education, may create a high level of moral expectations in children toward others and themselves. However, these methods fail to enhance children’s moral competencies and their behavior. Moreover, we believe that teaching methods that enhance only moral values and rhetoric, may cause severe damage in children. It may lead to a cleavage between their moral values on the one hand and their ability to act upon them in real-life decision-making. 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.”

On the other side, developmentalists point out that education should focus more on the development of moral thinking and judgment. For this end, they argue, methods like indoctrination and traditional schooling seem inappropriate.<sup>9</sup> Child’s moral development is only fostered if school provides opportunities for taking real roles and responsibilities (Piaget, 1965/1932; Kohlberg, 1980; Neill, 1960). Some recommend substituting much, if not all, of traditional schooling through the Deweyan ideas of “service learning” or “community education.”<sup>10</sup> 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 solution. They would hardly learn anything if they would just have to memorize the basic mathematical axioms and some

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<sup>9</sup> 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.”

<sup>10</sup> For a critical discussion of these recommendations see Kahne (1994) and Reinhardt (1992).

theorems. Students must take 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. Kohlberg and Higgins (1984) maintain that the “experience of moral decision making and job responsibility following an advanced or professional education, rather than education itself, leads to Stage 5 reasoning” (p. 459). Such responsibilities cause moral-cognitive conflicts that require a person “simultaneously to take the perspective of individuals within a system and the system as a whole,” and “this experience aids development to principled thinking” (p. 468). However, this one-sided emphasis of role-taking has also its drawbacks. Role-taking-opportunities are a *necessary* but not a sufficient condition for the development of moral judgment competence. Role-taking by itself does not foster moral competencies because it cannot solve the problems of optimal discrepancy and of power abuse.

As to the first problem, 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 or responsibility on the other side. 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 by the smallness of the learning steps. If this discrepancy is too big, the learner will fail to cope with the task and cease to develop at all. On a low stage of development, learners are not yet able to judge the difficulty of a moral task precisely enough to choose the right ones for practicing their skills. Therefore, young children depend very much on the guidance by an experienced person – usually parents and teachers, and continue to benefit from such guidance throughout their adolescence and adulthood, though to a gradually lower degree.

As to the second problem, role-taking can only stimulate moral-cognitive development if learners get adequate feedback about their success and failure. If they are in their young ages, children can hardly avoid such feedback, yet the quality of that feedback may vary considerably depending on whether it comes from persons with little or high moral competence. Bad response is confusing and thus slows the learning process considerably. Only when the

learner becomes highly autonomous, that is, is able to evaluate the outcomes of his or her moral decisions by him- or herself, moral development becomes self-sustaining.

Role-taking can fail also 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 the less likely will they get adequate response any longer. There is, as Kohlberg and Higgins (1984) caution us, “not an automatic relationship between holding a position of power and responsibility and having one’s capacity for and use of principles thinking stimulated. We will inevitably recall Bryce’s dictum, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (p. 479).

The discussion of both positions makes it clear that we cannot expect that guidance and direct teaching alone or role-taking opportunities alone is an optimal strategy for fostering moral competencies. We should rather 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.

### *The impact of opportunities for role-taking and guided reflection on moral development*

To clarify some assumptions about the importance of role-taking and guided reflection for the development of moral development in higher education, we conducted a survey of 271 German university students. The participants were sampled to represent four different fields of study, which seem to provide

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<sup>1</sup> 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 for moral judgment development beyond childhood” (p. 38).

different opportunities for moral learning, and to represent lower and higher semesters.

The dependent variable, moral development, was assessed with the *Moral Judgment Test* (MJT) by Lind, mentioned above (see Lind, 2000b; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985). The main index derived from the MJT is the *C* index for the subjects' degree of moral judgment competence. The *C* index measures the degree to which subjects' judgment behavior is determined by *moral* considerations rather than by non-moral considerations like opinion-agreement. The *C* score can vary from 0 to 100. Technically, 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"). Although there are already many instruments for assessing the learning environment of university students (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), we could not find one which is suited to test our hypotheses. Many of these questionnaires were not structured around theoretical constructs.

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). Dippelhofer-Stiem distinguishes several approaches to studying learning environments: The "objective" approach assesses the learning environment directly by observation, document study, interviews with professors and administrators and so on, without involving the learner as a source of information. This approach has the advantage of producing information (like the student-teacher-ratio) which is not colored by subjective meanings and can be directly used for policy-recommendations. However, it tells us much about the *potential* opportunities for learning but little about the degree to which these opportunities are used by the learners. The "subjective" approach produces such information. Yet it may have other drawbacks, especially when it focuses mainly on the learners' personalities and their attitudes toward their learning environment (e.g., their valuing of an intellectual climate or their motivation to learn). This "subjectivistic" approach gives a good idea of how much the learning environment resonates in the individual learner, yet, its data may be too subjectively colored by individual personality differences.

The “objectivistic” approach, as employed in the construction of the ORIGIN/u, was viewed as the optimal compromise. Here the individual learner assesses attributes of the learning environment. Gathering the information from the learners tells us which opportunities are really available to the students. For example, 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. Focusing on the learning environment rather than on students’ personality give us information more suited for policy recommendations.

The ORIGIN/u is designed to capture all kinds of learning environments and not only those created by the curriculum. We assume that learning is not tied only to curricular activities, but also to non-curricular activities. A copy of the questionnaire is available in English and German from the author. 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. Because these opportunities are all on top of regular study activities, none of the sums can become large. Therefore, for detailed analysis we dichotomized the sample into those students who had *zero* opportunities versus those who have *small* opportunities.

In line with the theory outlined above, we tested two hypotheses: first, the opportunities for role-taking will promote students’ moral judgment competence; second, opportunities for guided reflection will add markedly to this effect. We did not expect a *zero-effect* of role-taking by itself because with the ORIGIN/u we assess only learning opportunities that stand out. A zero score here does not mean that the students do not have any opportunities for guided reflection.

## *Findings*

Both hypotheses are clearly supported by the data: 1. Moral judgment competence increases linearly with the amount of role-taking opportunities that the students report ([Figure 2](#)), which means that the more role-taking opportunities a student had the higher was his or her moral judgment competence.

2. Students who report that they had also opportunities of guided reflection, got yet even higher C scores ([Figure 3](#)). The additional gains seem small when compared with the impact of role-taking opportunities. However, the true impact of this variable becomes better visible when we look at the data for low and high semester groups. The differences between the low and high semester groups suggest that a combination of both types of opportunities produce a much higher gain in moral development than role-taking alone ([Figure 4](#)).

## *Conclusions*

The research reported in this paper reinforces the fertility of the cognitive-developmental paradigm suggested by Piaget and Kohlberg (Lourenço & Machado, 1996). Our findings support their argument that role-taking opportunities are a necessary condition for moral development, as well as Sprinthall's argument that guided reflection is also necessary. We should no longer ask which of the two conditions are important for effective moral education. Both require each other to be optimally effective for developing self-sustaining moral competencies.

For educators the real question is, how to combine these methods and how to adapt them to various age groups and levels of development. At a low level of moral development, a child may need more guided reflection than role-taking opportunities but already then the latter seem important. The more persons are developed, it seems, the less do they depend on externally guided reflection, but can rely on their own critical self-assessment, that is, the more does their moral development become "self-sustaining." Our findings show that university students profit much from opportunities for taking real responsibilities. Their moral development seems to gain also considerably from the availability of external advice and guidance, though perhaps not as much as adolescents and children do.

These and other findings on the moral-cognitive development of students have important implications for educational policy making and curriculum design in higher education and beyond. Three deserve special mentioning: First, we can now show that higher education does not only enhance professional skills but also fosters socio-moral competencies. Twenty years ago, we lacked the methods and the data to reveal this. Martin Trow (1976): "There are not adequate measures of things we are really interested in, such

as [. . .] personal integrity, and moral autonomy” (p. 20). When the reporter of *psychology today* asked a leading expert of impact-of-college-research, Theodore Newcomb (1975), what college does for a person, he answered: “Frankly, very little that is demonstratable.” Since then, research made a big leap of knowledge.

Second, research suggests that moral development is mainly stimulated through unscheduled, independent activities rather than through direct ethics teaching in the classroom. These activities are less visible than classroom teaching; usually they take place outside the classroom and often outside the campus. So the university administrations find it hard to include these activities in its monetary calculations. For the public, opportunities for role-taking and guided reflection may sometimes seem unrelated to the syllabus 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. Thus they “squeeze out” time for important learning activities, resulting in a loss of moral-democratic competencies so badly needed today. There are already fields of university study which hardly leave time for role-taking opportunities and provide virtually no guided reflection. In Germany, such a field is medical education (Bargel & Ramm, 1994). In a longitudinal study, medical students were the only group that which showed a stagnation and even a regression of moral judgment competence (Lind, 2000c). Such a regression was also found in Finnish medical students (Helkama, 1987).

Third, we must not forget those children who do not pursue a high track educational career but also need to be prepared for the life in a highly complex, democratic society. In most countries this group is much larger than the other group, and usually much more neglected. As for the development of their moral-democratic competencies we have reasons to be concerned. As some studies show, 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 erode while those of their peers, who head for the high ranks in our society, are still developing. This enormous cleavage of moral literacy in our society seems not agreeable 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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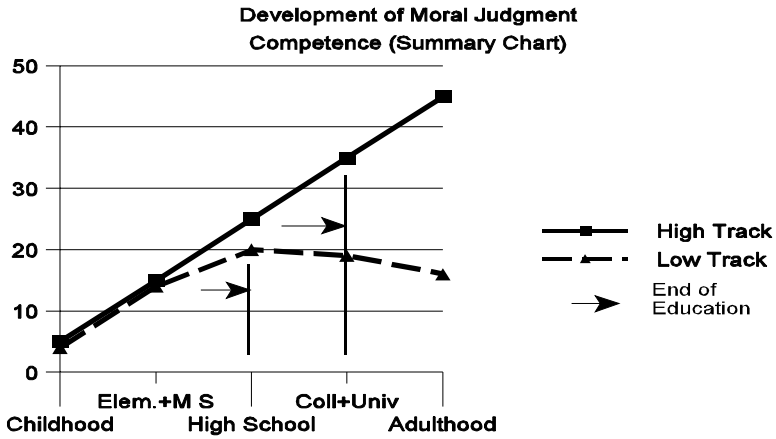
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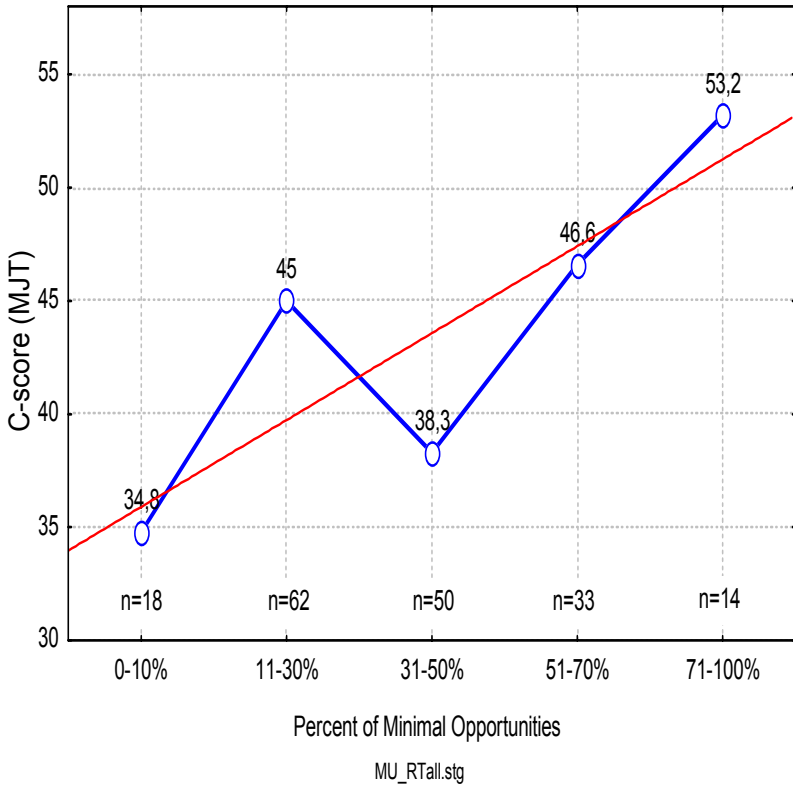
## Appendix



**Figure 1** Paths of moral-cognitive development of high and low track students. Summary chart based on the findings discussed in the text.

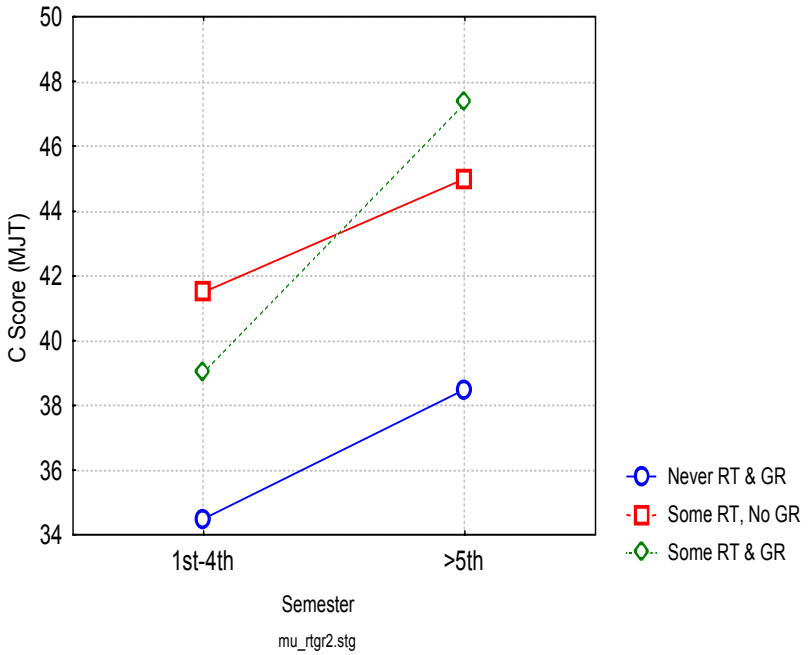
Moral Judgment Competence by  
Role-Taking Opportunities of University Students

$F(4,172)=2.56; p<.0402$



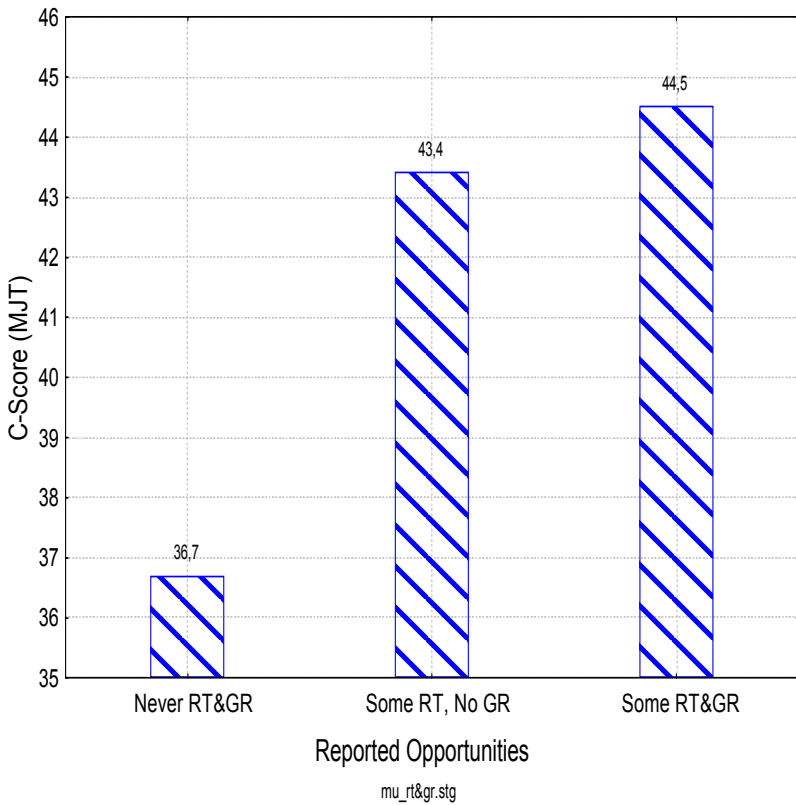
**Figure 2** The independent variable “percent of minimal role-taking opportunities” means in how many of the instances presented in the questionnaire, did the student had the opportunity to take a responsible role.

Change of Moral Judgment Competence  
By Opportunities of Role-Taking and Guided Reflection  
University Students, Germany 1995, N= 271



**Figure 3:** Change of Moral Judgment competence by opportunities of role-taking and guided reflection.





**Figure 4** Moral judgment competence by opportunities for role-taking and guided reflection. Sample: University students, Germany, 1995, N = 271. “RT” stands for role-taking, and “GR” for guided reflection. Results of analysis of variance:  $F(2,260) = 4.18, p < 0.016$ .