

Does Religion Foster or Hamper Morality and Democracy?¹

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(Work in progress)

In their discussion of the “cultural war” thesis, Hunter (1991, 1994) and Jensen (1997) describe a deep moral division, which they relate to two basically different kinds of religiosity, “orthodox” and “progressive.” This division seems to be responsible for the ambiguous role of religion for morality and democracy. While orthodox believers argue that religion is a prerequisite for morality, progressives see both as independent. Nucci and Lee (1993) and Nunner-Winkler (2000) conclude from their studies of children that the religious and the moral domain are clearly separated. Other even see, at least in part, an inverse relationship, arguing that orthodox religion may oppose principled morality (Hunter, 1991, 1994; Guttman, 1984; Rest et al., 1999) and democracy (Guttmann & Thompson, 1997), because it rejects universalism.

To clarify the relationship between moral and religious development in democratic societies, we have re-analyzed studies using the Moral Judgment Test in Mexico, Colombia and Brazil. In these countries, the churches seem to have a strong influence on individual’s cognitive functioning beyond a mere attitudinal impact in cases in which they hold a strong opinion like mercy killing and abortion. While European students not only prefer to discuss a case of mercy killing on the highest Kohlbergian stage and also show a slightly higher moral judgment competence when judging arguments in favor and against that case, the students in those Latin American countries prefer stage 4 as an adequate level of reasoning, and also show a much lower competence of moral judgment than they exhibit when reasoning on dilemmas which are not covered by the churches’ teaching.

We call this phenomenon “moral segmentation.” The term “moral segmentation” was used to describe a similar phenomenon in German studies on workers (Lempert and his colleagues; Lempert, 1988, pp. 483-484) and soldiers (Wakenhut and his colleagues; Wakenhut, 1979; Hegner et al., 1983). Yet, while that phenomenon concerned mostly if not exclusively differences in moral *preferences*, in our study moral segmentation means that subjects apply a different level of moral judgment *competence* when deciding on different moral issues.

Findings Summary

1. In all European samples in all age groups, subjects’ average C-score (MJT) in the mercy-killing dilemma is at least as high or a little higher than their C-score on the workers’ dilemma. A small positive discrepancy was expected because the mercy-killing dilemma is generally seen as morally more demanding than the workers’ dilemma. In 1995 for the first time a study of university students in Mexico found a strong negative difference of the C-score, which was entirely unexpected and

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could not be easily explained. Other studies in Mexico and in other Latin American countries (Colombia, Brazil) all replicated this negative difference.

The findings for two Mexican studies are depicted in Figures 1 and 2, along with findings from German and Italian studies for comparison. As can be seen in these figures, even in an European “Catholic” country like Italy, there is no moral segmentation but a positive discrepancy as expected. In the two Mexican studies, there is segmentation. The study on university students by Moreno shows even a higher level of segmentation than the study of high school students by Quiroga (sources: personal communication and re-analyses of data).

2. Indeed, in Latin American countries, education seems to magnify moral segmentation rather than reduce it. Recent studies in Colombia (Figure 3) and in Brazil (Figure 4) also show an increase of moral segmentation from lower to higher grades and from high school to university. This also is a new findings in moral psychological research. So far all studies showed that moral judgment competence was positively related to level of (formal) education (Colby, Kohlberg et al., 1987; Rest & Thomas, 1985; Lind, 2002b). Yet these studies have all been done in Northern America and in Europe.

3. The Mexican studies triggered several speculations as to the causes of the segmentation of moral judgment competence in Latin American countries. One hypothesis was that religiosity or submission to the authority of a church’s teaching would account for this drop of moral judgment competence in certain areas, namely in areas about which the church would have a strong opinion like mercy killing. To test this hypothesis, Bataglia et al. (2003) constructed a new dilemma, the Judge Steinberg dilemma involving tortures, which invoked similar moral values and principles as the mercy-killing dilemma but was not subject of the teaching of the Catholic or Evangelical churches in Latin America. Indeed, her Brazilian subjects got as high C-scores on this dilemma as on the workers dilemma or even higher scores, and, most surprisingly, this positive discrepancy increased by level of education (see Figure 4).

So it seems that in Latin America (at least in the countries studied so far), education in general leads to higher moral judgment competence except in areas in which a religious authority (or some other ideological authority) has a strong opinion and asks its members not only to follow its opinion on a certain issue but also to refrain from thinking about it. We have no indication that submission to a religious authority hampers moral-cognitive development altogether. Nevertheless, this partial inhibition of moral-cognitive development may guide people’s behavior in subtle ways.

4. To understand how moral segmentation may influence people’s behavior and decision making, we looked at the relationship between their moral segmentation and their decision on the mercy-killing dilemma. There is no logical necessity for a relationship. Both things could be independent from one another. People could submit to the teaching of their church and still have their own thoughts about it. And, refraining from reasoning about the issue of mercy killing may lead to any decision. Some commentators, however, believe that to reach a clear decision on a moral issue it would be necessary to refrain from own thinking but to follow the guidance by an authority who has a privileged access to moral truth (see, for example, Shweder et al., 1987; for a critical assessment see Hunter, 1991; 194; Jensen, 1997; Guttman & Thompson, 1984). Too much reflection on difficult moral issues, it is

argued, may cause confusion and prevent any clear decision. So the necessity to come to a conclusion and to act decidedly would require religious authority to teach us how to think about certain issues and how to reach a 'good' decision.

The data from the Colombian study clearly show that this assumption does not tally with reality. Subjects with low segmentation (and high moral judgment competence scores) can make up their mind and say what they think is right or wrong, although they refrain from extremist views, indicating that their opinion may be fallible and subject to change. In contrast, among subjects with low C-scores and high level of moral segmentation most tend toward very extreme opinions on mercy killing, some being against it (as one would expect) but some also being extremely in favor of it! Yet high moral segmentation may also lead to a no-stance-position. In sum, both holding an extreme opinion on certain moral issues (like mercy killing) as well withholding of any judgment may result from lack of autonomous thinking. In both cases, it is likely that an external authority determines people's opinion, either by coercing them to be conformist, or by provoking their opposition, or by making them unsure "what to think".

In contrast, autonomous thinking leads to a clear but not an extreme stance on those issues, in either direction. In other words, moral judgment competence is a powerful predictor of decision-making but the relationship is not simplistic. The form but not the content of the decision seems to be influenced by moral judgment competence.

Conclusion

This study deals with the relationship between morality, religiosity and democracy from a psychological point of view. The findings underscore the need for the development of autonomous moral reasoning. A lack of moral judgment competence, as indicated by the phenomenon of moral segmentation, seems to cause extremist, non-negotiable opinions, or a lack of opinion. In that case, it seems, controversies on moral issues can only be solved by the use of violence and civil war.

Second, the above findings urge us to reflect on the existing educational practice not only in Latin America, and on ways to improve it, so that adolescents will develop a higher sense of responsibility and a greater capacity to make more mature decisions based on autonomous moral reasoning rather than on authoritarian teaching.

Yet, peaceful resolution of moral conflicts would be undermined if religiosity means that some people have a more privileged access to moral truth than others, or, to quote Orwell, that some people are more equal than others.

As the struggles between 'orthodox' and 'progressive' church members indicate, democracy means a great challenge for the churches and for religiosity (Hunter, 1991; 1994; Guttman & Thompson, 1994). In the history of Christianity and Mohammedanism, there was always a tensions between the rule of the authority of the church and of the state, which was reduced either by the submission of either one under the rule of the other, or by strictly separating the two domains. Yet, in either case this conflict could not be resolved in a lasting way. Maybe it can by reconciling people's quest for democracy with their desire for religious transcendence and spirituality (Oser, 1980; Kohlberg, 1984). Maybe movements like those for a universal "world ethos" (Küng, 1998) are apt to bring religiosity and democracy closer together. Maybe people will turn to churches like the Mennonites and others which build strong communities without granting any of its members a

privileged access to moral truth. Maybe democratic society itself produces sufficient moral motivation to fulfill people's desire for a moral life (Nunner-Winkler, 2000; Nucci & Lee, 1993), without resorting to any form of traditional religiosity. In any case, people need to develop an autonomous moral judgment rather than rely on the thinking of other people, and education needs to help the individual in that development.

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Definition of “Segmentation”: Higher C-score (MJT) on the Worker Dilemma (issue: arbitrary law) than on the Doctor Dilemma (mercy killing) or on the Judge Steinberg Dilemma (torture).
 “Pronunciation”: Positive difference score.

Pronunciation and Segmentation: Moral Judgment Competence by Dilemma and Culture

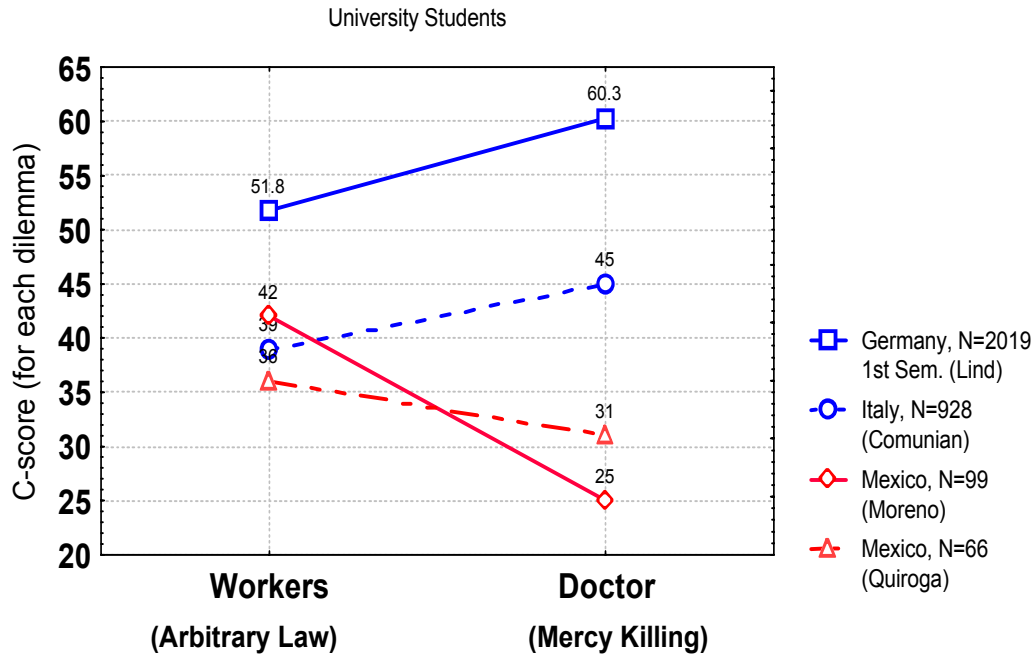


Figure 1 Pronunciation and segmentation of moral judgment competence by dilemma and culture. Pronunciation = Higher C-score in the Doctor Dilemma; Segmentation = Lower C-score in the Doctor Dilemma. Instrument: *Moral Judgment Test*.

Segmentation: C-Score Differences DocDil - WorkDil

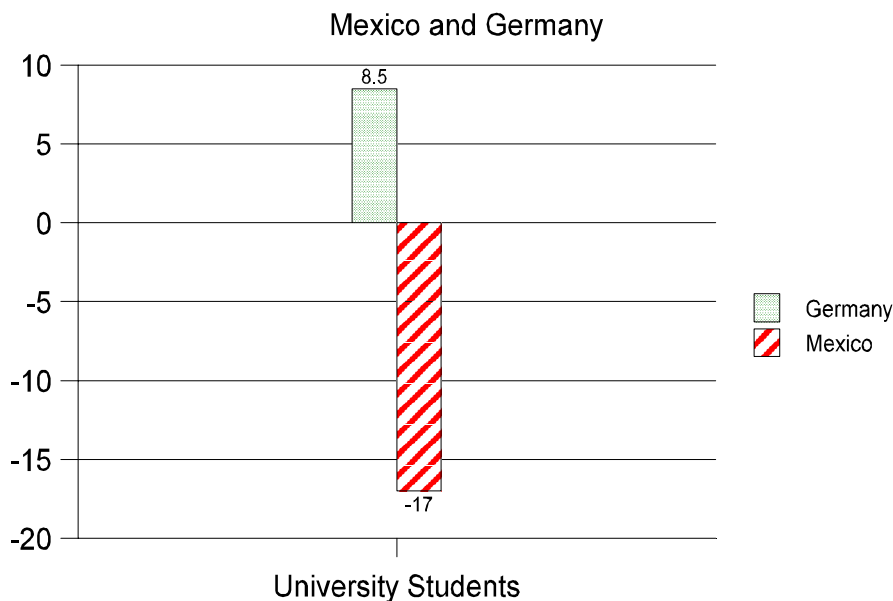


Figure 2 Sources: German data from FORM project, 1977 (Lind, 2002). Mexican data from Moreno et al. (2000)

Segmentation by Level of Education

Colombia, March 2003, N = 3922

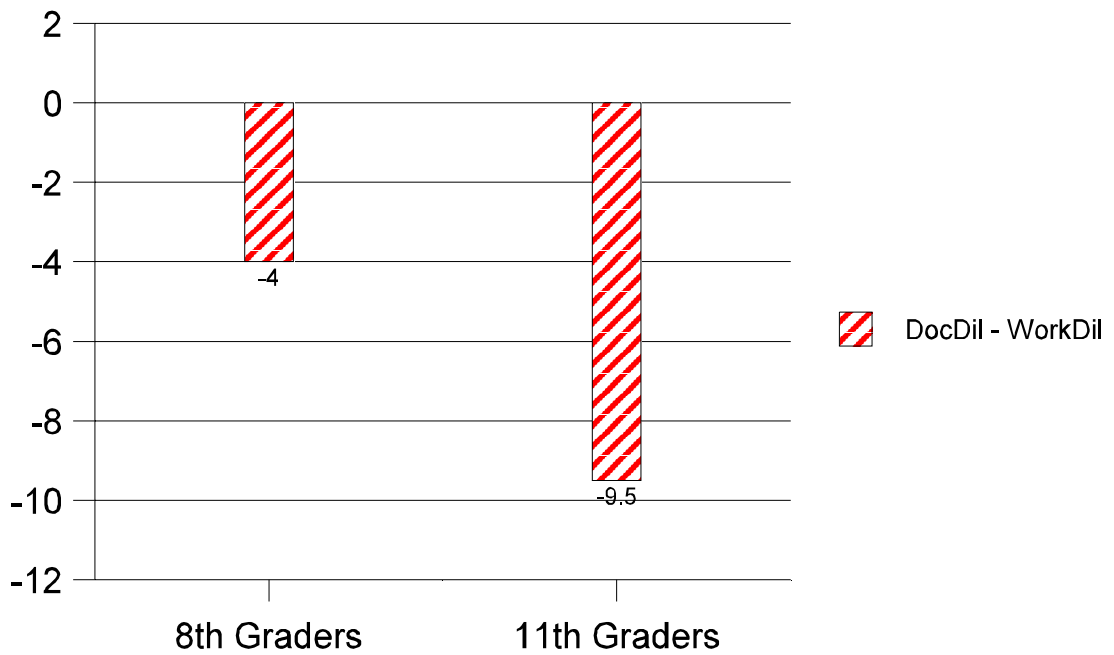
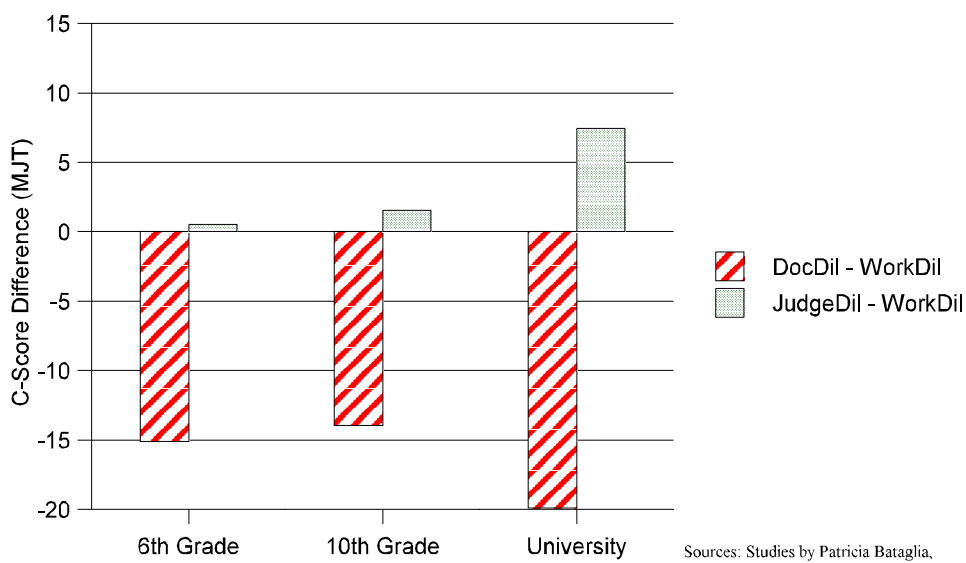


Figure 3 Segmentation of moral judgment competence in Colombian students by level of education. Source: Secretaría de Educación, District of Bogotá, Colombia.

Segmentation by Level of Education

Students in Brazil



Sources: Studies by Patricia Bataglia, Marcia Agati & Georg Lind (see text)

Figure 4 Segmentation and pronunciation of moral judgment competence in Brazilian samples by level of education

Segmentation by Decision on Mercy Killing

Bogota Study, March 2003; N = 3922

$F(6,3045)=15,33; p<,0000$

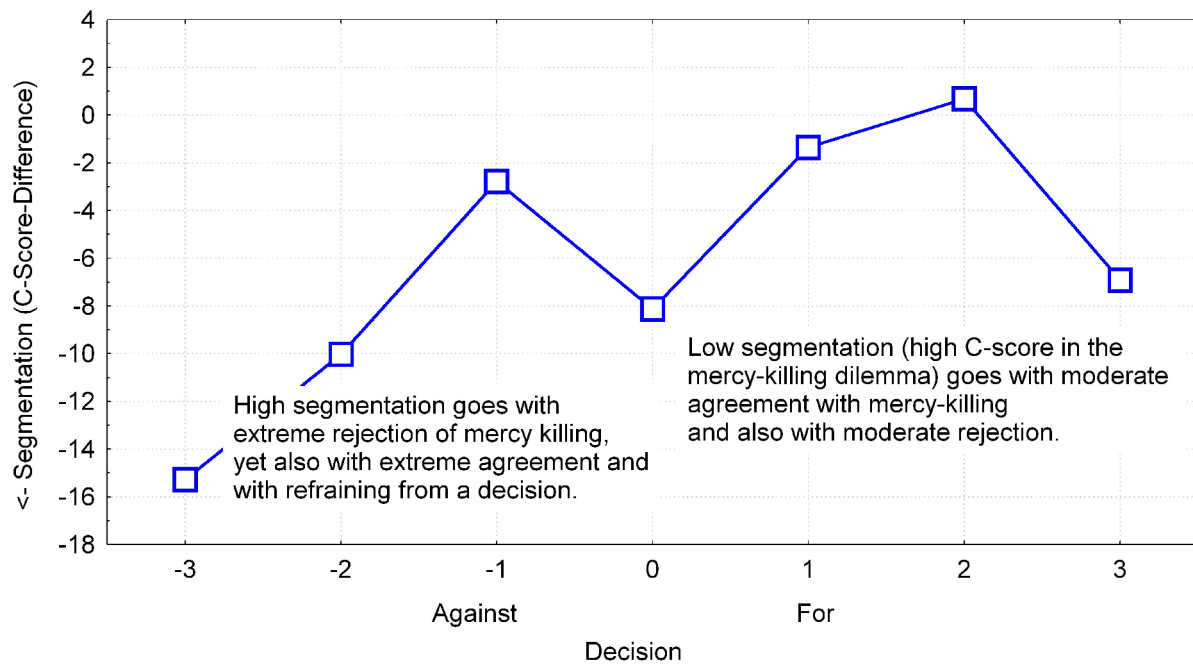


Figure 5 The influence of moral segmentation on decision-making.