

DIFFERENCES IN STRUCTURE AND SEVERITY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS BY STUDENTS AND BY A COMMUNITY SAMPLE: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ETHICAL RELATIVITY¹

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The present study is conducted with the intention of bringing to light some of the cultural-moral changes that may be taking place presently in American society. It is expected that young college students, when compared to a cross-sectional sample of adults from a small (Midwestern) town, will show differences in moral views that can be attributed to the influence of recent times. Because of certain selective features, young students tend to represent the more progressive elements of a society. Their moral views, although perhaps not considered to be mature views rooted in personal experience, nevertheless tend to incorporate and reflect the more recent developments in science, technology, and world affairs. That is, the "cultural lag" usually ascribed to a social community, especially to a small semi-rural community, should be expected to be smaller among young students. The expression of such more recent moral views on the part of young students is only partially a function of their youth. Perhaps the more important antecedent condition responsible for such progressive views is the combined fact that these students were socialized during a more recent historical epoch than adults, and that they, because of their higher socio-economic status and urban environment, are more exposed to and aware of recent developments in the sciences (particularly the social sciences) and in the world situation.

A previous study reported on the factorial structure and severity of moral judgments of nearly 500 Midwestern undergraduate college students on a set of 50 different moral issues (Rettig and Pasamanick 1959b). These findings were compared in a later report to similar data obtained from a sample of over 1700 graduates of the same Midwestern University (Rettig and Pasamanick, 1960). The comparison revealed overall similarity in factorial structure between students and alumni. The only striking difference in the two structures occurred with respect to moral issues which involved violations on the part of business and industry. These issues formed a separate dimension of "corporate" morality in the judgments of the university graduates, but not among the undergraduate students. Comparison of the severity of judgment across different dimensions of morality showed the alumni to be significantly more condemning of general and economic morally disputable conduct, and less indignant about religious transgressions than the students.

The above comparison was made with the implicit intention of attempting to uncover changes in moral orientations that take place with increased formal education and post educational experience. However, such a comparison does not take into account the fact that the young adults who decide to enter the field of higher education are selected individuals whose attitudes and orientations are not necessarily similar to the attitudes of the less educated in the United States. Students usually represent a higher socio-economic stratum and come from a more urbanized environment than the rest of the population. These influences would

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tend to affect the moral orientation of students before entering the institution of higher learning. Some influences of socio-economic status and urban environment on moral value orientation have already been shown elsewhere (Rettig and Pasamanick, 1961). To be able to better evaluate the moral orientation of the more educated persons it is of importance to assess the initial moral position they occupy at the beginning of the educational process and to contrast this position to the moral views held by a cross-sectional sample of less educated adults of a typical small community. It is the purpose of this paper to present the findings of such a comparative study, using both factorial structure and severity of judgment as criteria for the comparative evaluations. The importance of this comparison also lies in the fact that many of these students will eventually occupy positions of leadership in the local, central, and international affairs of the society in which they live. These potential college educated may bring with them a moral orientation which is not necessarily shared by those who are represented by this leadership. This discrepancy in moral orientation is probably more pronounced in small semi-rural communities than in the major urban centers. It will be shown in this report that such a differential moral orientation does exist, and that it exists *prior* to the influence of a higher education.

One difference in moral orientation postulated by us relates to the thesis of cultural relativity, that is, the influences of contemporary sociological and anthropological orientations on relativistic moral views. The relativistic moral view maintains that social practices and social conduct which are considered inappropriate or even reprehensible in one society, may be quite appropriate in a different society. Hence, moral judgments must be made relative to the learning process and cultural milieu of the society in which the conduct takes place. Such a view implies not only less moral indignation with respect to such cross-cultural practices, but it also subsumes a clear and rational differentiation between immoral conduct that takes place in the American society and similar conduct taking place in other (non-Western) societies. Although the problem of ethical relativity is certainly not a new one, it was until recently largely an academic issue. The intense emphasis it has received in recent times through modern developments in science and through enhanced international efforts at solving world problems make it an issue which demands individual involvement and some form of personal commitment. It was predicted that students would hold a more relativistic moral position than the small town community sample. This relativistic view would be expressed in a clearer separation of "foreign" moral issues from domestic ones, and in a lesser severity of condemnation of morally questionable practices taking place in non-Western societies.

METHODS

Samples

The first of two groups studied consisted of a sample of nearly 250 male and female college students, predominantly freshman (73 percent) and some sophomores, from a large Midwestern state university located in central Ohio. The students represented an entire section of the introductory sociology course in a given quarter. This course is a requirement for the beginning students in the schools of commerce, education, and liberal arts. Most of the students (98 percent) are unmarried, and many (68 percent) come from the cities. Their median annual parental income is approximately \$8,000. About 40 percent of both parents of the students have had some education above high school. Two-thirds of the students are Protestants, 12 percent are Catholic, and 18 percent are of Jewish descent.

The second group consisted of a randomly selected proportionate area sample (N=384) from a small Ohio community. The proportionate area sample was

drawn in turn from a larger equal size random area sample ($N=600$) of individuals of the age of twenty-one or over from the same community. Each of the four areas sampled represented a different socio-economic stratum of the town. The community, as well as the samples and the process by which they were selected, derive from an intensive community study conducted earlier. The study has been reported in detail elsewhere (Depres, 1960). The respondents who constituted the proportionate area sample were reinterviewed approximately 2 years later with 80 percent ($N=306$) success. Most of the remaining 20 percent had left the community by then. The refusal rate was approximately 6 percent and included persons too ill to respond to a questionnaire. The community surveyed is located in central Ohio, and has a population of approximately 11,000. The town is considered conservatively Republican. It has a denominational college, some industry, chain stores, and is surrounded by small and medium sized farms. Its inhabitants are of early American stock and are predominantly of Anglo-Saxon origin. The typical respondent is approximately 40 years old, and has attended but not completed high school. He is either a farmer, or owns his own business, or works in some type of service occupation, and has a yearly family income of \$4,500. He is married and has two children who live at home. He is of the Protestant faith (less than eight percent of the interviewees were Catholics and none of other faiths) and attends church once a month or less. He does not read a metropolitan newspaper and, with the exception of the local paper, does not read any other sources of news. His favorite television programs are westerns, quizzes, and family series. These characteristics make the community a not atypical Midwestern town in the United States.

However, neither of the two samples can be considered to be fully representative of the given populations. The student sample does not represent all of the different schools of instructions of the University. Furthermore, by the time this survey was conducted, classes had already started and some exposure to the material usually taught at an introductory course in sociology could not be avoided. It is doubtful, however, that such minimal exposure to the course had seriously changed the initial moral views held by the students by the time the data were collected, since various studies of the influences of the curriculum on student values have repeatedly shown little effect even during a number of years of such exposure (Jacob, 1957). Approximately 14 percent of the community sample had left the town two years after the original sample was drawn and hence are not included in the present survey. These more mobile persons usually include the younger and more progressive individuals in a small community.

Questionnaire

A 64-item questionnaire was administered to both samples, each item stating a morally disputable situation which was reported in various news sources and in the scientific literature (table 1). The 64 situations were chosen with the aid of a table of random numbers from a pool of 145 different items extracted from the literature for this purpose. Some of the items illustrate conduct that is considered morally reprehensible in Western societies, but which is customary and often institutionalized in other (including primitive) societies. Each respondent was asked to judge each situation from 1 (least wrong or not wrong at all) to 10 (most wrong, "wrongest possible"). The Kuder-Richardson reliability score of the 64 items was found to be 0.91 in each separate sample. These coefficients show a considerable and equal consistency in the responses of both groups.

RESULTS

Factor Analytic Structure I

The judgments of both samples were separately analyzed by the principal factor method (Harman, 1960). The extracted factors in each sample were

TABLE 1

Comparative factor structure of moral judgments by students and adults

	Factor Loading Students (N = 249)	Adults (N = 293)
BIRTH CONTROL DIMENSION		
While a woman was delivering her seventh child, her husband directed her doctor to perform an operation which would prevent her from having any more children. The husband had his wife's consent to the operation. The husband's and wife's behavior was:	-76	-68
A young couple who were buying a new home decided to postpone having children until they caught up on their bills. According to plan, they practiced birth control. Their behavior was:	-83	-69
In India, the government initiated certain birth control policies because of extensive overpopulation and famine conditions. The government's actions were:	-74	-76
A woman who had three children and a husband who refused to contribute to the support of his family, obtained a divorce. Her divorce was:	-37	-66
A young married couple decided that children would interfere with their social life. They decided to practice birth control. In doing this, they were:	-60	-47
Knowing that G. I.'s stationed in foreign countries will have relationships with foreign women, the military initiated a policy of birth control education to avoid illegitimate children resulting from such unions. This policy of birth control education is:	-56	-54
RELIGIOUS DIMENSION		
A boy from a religious home became a scientist. He rejected his former belief in God as a superstition and maintained that everything can be explained on the basis of science. In doing so, his behavior was:	62	-62
A Navaho Indian who spent three years in the army returned to his tribe after the war. When he returned, he rejected all beliefs in a God. In doing so, his behavior was:	62	-68
The parents of a child refused to teach their child to believe in God because they themselves did not believe in God. In doing this, their behavior was:	64	-57
A religious man who lost his family in an accident maintained that such a thing could not have happened if there existed a God. Consequently, he gave up his belief in God. In doing so, his behavior is:	55	-40
A staff physician in a large hospital is overburdened with administrative duties. While in a hurry, he makes an improper diagnosis which results in the death of a patient. In making an improper diagnosis, his behavior was:	43	-40
WAR DIMENSION		
A near Eastern Country A, which was continuously invaded by raiding parties of a neighboring Country B, decided to declare war and invade the neighboring Country B. In doing so, Country A's actions were:	64	67
Country A was attacked and invaded by Country B. Country A retaliated by declaring war. Country A is:	75	66
ILLICIT SEX DIMENSION		
A G. I. was derided by his buddies when he revealed that he had never had intercourse. Unable to cope with this derision, he became familiar with a woman and lived with her until he could convince his buddies that he was not inexperienced. The G. I.'s behavior was:	-77	-77

TABLE 1—*Continued*

	Factor Loading	
	Students (N=249)	Adults (N=293)
A married G. I. had been stationed in Europe for almost two years. During this time he occasionally dated and had sexual relations with different women he had come to know. His behavior was:	-79	-74
A young unmarried man received an assignment in the Near East. After being alone for some time and observing that other foreigners usually keep mistresses, he hired a young lady to live with him. In doing so, his behavior was:	-81	-81
A psychiatrist informed a patient that his problem was due to the repression of strong sexual drives. The patient accepted this diagnosis and hired a prostitute to live with him for a time. The patient's behavior was:	-65	-65
An unmarried anthropologist doing research among primitive peoples was informed that if he wished to continue his research he must comply with local custom by accepting one of the daughters of a chief as a mistress. Feeling that his research was of utmost importance, the anthropologist accepted the chief's hospitality. In doing so, his behavior was:	-54	-59
A married salesman and a friend were on a business trip in Chicago. While there, they hired escorts to attend night clubs with them and to spend the night with them at their hotel. The salesman's behavior was:	-64	-44
A young unmarried girl from a family with a good reputation and living in a small town, became pregnant. Her pregnancy is:	-42	-49
UNDERDOG MORALITY DIMENSION		
A school teacher who held a strong belief that racial segregation was undemocratic and wrong, refused to defend his belief when given the opportunity to do so before a local school board for fear of being criticized by some of the parents of his students. The school teacher's behavior was:	-61	-66
A business man who violently disagreed with his boss's business practices, refrained from criticizing him for fear of losing his job. In failing to criticize his boss, his behavior was:	-50	-33
Some persons who were imprisoned and tortured in German concentration camps, now spend a major part of their lives in seeking to avenge themselves against the Germans. In doing so, they are:	-34	-48
A movie which played up a theme unfavorable to rural Southerners, was censored and repressed by local officials in a Southern city. These official's actions were:	-35	-33
MORAL RELATIVISM DIMENSION(S)		
Among the Hopi Indians, a husband is considered to be a visitor in his wife's home. When the wife tires of her husband, she informs him to collect his things and return to his own people. She is then free to take another husband. This custom is:	-74	-77
In a number of Middle Eastern countries, a man is allowed to have several wives. This custom is:	-72	-73
Among a particular group in Africa, a young man is not allowed to marry until his future wife shows positive signs of pregnancy; thus, insuring him that she is able to bear children. This custom is:	-65	-65
In a certain tribal society, sexual relations between members of the same sex are believed to enhance the physical strength of those who participate in such relationships. This custom is:	-74	-37 (Relativism II)
In a colonial country of Southeast Asia, tribal natives can only obtain a wife by taking the life of a man from another tribe. Such a custom is:	-84	70
Among certain American Indian tribes, a man must avenge any insult directed toward him or his family by taking the life of the one who directed the insult. This custom is:	-79	58

TABLE 1—Continued

	Factor Loading	
	Students (N=249)	Adults (N=293)
In a southwest African tribe, it is customary for a child to be isolated when it is born with a physical deformity since the child is thought to represent a bad omen. Such a custom is:	-71	51
CENSORSHIP DIMENSION(S)		
The U. S. Government censored news releases because these releases reported information on the satellite failures on the part of government scientists. In censoring this information the government's actions were:	34	61
A movie which played up a theme unfavorable to rural Southerners, was censored and repressed by local officials in a Southern city. These official's actions were:	67	41 (Censorship II)
On the basis of belief that comic books were a source of delinquency, a city commission prohibited the sale of comic books within the city. The commission's actions were:	58	57
A book which played up the theme that certain doctors ignored medical ethics was censored when a local medical group brought pressure against the bookstore that had displayed the book. The medical group claimed that the book misrepresented medical ethics. In bringing pressure against the local bookstore, the medical group's actions were:	56	57

The table presents the Varimax computer rotated results only. Decimal points are omitted.

rotated, using the normalized varimax solution (Kaiser, 1958) of simple structure and invariance. The representative items of the extracted orthogonal dimensions of both samples are shown in table 1. Seven basic common dimensions are extracted which relate to *birth control* measures, *religious* issues, *war*, *illicit sexual* practices, "*underdog*" morality (including failure to defend one's convictions in front of superiors), moral *relativism* (conduct which is morally prohibited in Western societies but which is customary in other societies), and *censorship*. As can be observed, the item loadings of these seven dimensions show considerable structural invariance in the two samples. However, two of the seven dimensions are represented by two rather than one orthogonal factor in the adult sample.

Moral relativism, which emerged as a single factor in the student judgments, is split into two *unrelated* clusters by the adults, one cluster (relativism I) representing only those foreign situations which deal with marital and sexual customs, the other (Relativism II) relating to customs which involve taking human life. Similarly, censorship is separated into two orthogonal clusters by the adults. Censorship I pertaining to censorship by central and local government (political censorship) and Censorship II relating to issues involving health and welfare. In both instances the community sample does not perceive the issues relating to moral relativism and censorship as unidimensional in scope, whereas the students do.

Severity of Judgment II

The representative common items of each factor (table 1) were further analyzed for differences in severity of judgment. Table 2 shows the means and differences in severity of judgment for each factor. The differences in severity of judgment on four factors reach statistical significance. Moral judgments relating to religion, illicit sex, and alien marital customs (Relativism I) are significantly more severe in the community sample. However, judgments relating to political cen-

sorship (Censorship I) are significantly more severe among students. Severity of judgment on issues relating to birth control practices, war, "underdog" morality, foreign customs involving the taking of human life, and non-political censorship does not differ in the two samples.

DISCUSSION

In the evaluation of the results a note of caution is necessary. In addition to the sampling limitations mentioned earlier, it must be remembered that not all of the items loading on the various factors are reported here, since some of the items did not load on similar dimensions in both groups. Since only jointly loading items were selected to represent the various dimensions, interpretations with respect to differences (and similarities) in total factor structure and in severity of judgment on the various separate dimensions can only be made with caution.

With the above limitations in mind the following observations are in order. The overall structural organization of moral judgments in the two samples shows considerable similarity. The seven basic unrelated dimensions of morality ex-

TABLE 2
Means, variances, and differences in severity of judgment by moral dimensions

Dimensions	Students (N=249)	Adults (N=293)	diff	t	P
Birth control	3.58 (9.90)	4.12 (13.74)	.54	1.812	n.s.
Religious	7.24 (8.62)	8.27 (7.97)	1.03	4.170	< .001
War	3.56 (6.42)	3.82 (11.54)	.26	.996	n.s.
Illicit sex	7.40 (8.36)	8.03 (8.68)	.63	2.510	.01
Underdog morality	6.89 (6.72)	6.83 (10.60)	-.06	.234	n.s.
Relativism I	6.73 (10.95)	7.81 (10.33)	1.08	3.857	< .001
Relativism II	8.59 (5.41)	8.89 (5.76)	.30	1.478	n.s.
Censorship I	6.20 (8.40)	5.27 (12.06)	-.93	3.357	< .001
Censorship II	5.18 (9.31)	5.63 (12.37)	.45	1.579	n.s.

tracted in the student sample are also found in the community sample. However, it also is apparent that two of the dimensions show very significant structural differences. Whereas students tend to cluster all of the different cross-cultural practices into a single dimension of "moral relativism," the community sample strongly differentiates between cross-cultural customs which involve the taking of human life, and those which relate to sexual and marital practices. Each of these two groups of moral issues is clustered by the adults into a separate dimension which is completely unrelated to the other one. Here it would seem that despite the fact that the community sample does perceive of foreign moral issues as being unrelated to domestic ones, this perception does not reflect a generalized and unified orientation of "moral relativism." However, this differential latent structuring on the part of the community sample does not reflect a greater tendency on the part of the adults to judge alien moral customs with a double standard of morality. Inspection of the severity of judgments (table 2) reveals that the

students, rather than the adults, have such differential standards with respect to cross-cultural moral practices. While there are no significant differences in severity of judgments between students and adults with regard to cross-cultural practices which involve killing (both groups tend to equally agree that these customs are morally reprehensible), the students are significantly more lenient than the adults about cross-cultural practices which *do not involve killing*. On the basis of the findings on the students' more unified separation of foreign moral issues from domestic ones and their greater tolerance of alien marital and sexual customs, it is reasonable to infer that the students are more inclined towards an orientation of "moral relativity." However, this "relativistic" orientation does not include a tolerance of cross-cultural customs which involve taking human lives.

Similar results are obtained with respect to issues delineating the use of censorship. While the community sample differentiates between censorship applied by central and local government (political censorship) and censorship involving the health and welfare of people, the students make no such structural differentiation. However, despite this unified perception of censorship on the part of students, their severity of judgment about these two types of censorship differs. The students are significantly more indignant about political censorship than the adults, while they do not differ from adults with respect to non-political (health and welfare) censorship. This difference in indignation about political censorship is considerably greater with respect to censorship applied by the central government (first item; mean of students = 6.02, mean of adults = 4.84) than that exerted by local authorities (second item). This finding is not unexpected since it may be related to a decreased emphasis on nationalism, secrecy, and central government control and an increased belief in international communication and cooperation among students, mentioned earlier. Furthermore, this finding could also be related to the greater provincialism in the community sample since most of the adults have never left the community. The students may be less concerned about local censorship practices since most of them are not situated in their own communities and are not involved in local affairs.

Perhaps the clearest finding on the selective orientation of the students in comparison with the community sample, lies in the area of religious and sexual morality. While a previous investigation (Rettig and Pasamanick, 1960) showed that educated adults are more tolerant of religious transgressions than students, the present findings indicate that the less educated adults are significantly less tolerant of such transgressions than students. It appears, therefore, that the young adult who enters a formal educational career is not only initially more liberal in his religious views, but he tends to be increasingly drawn away from a religious moral orientation with enhanced post-educational experience. This seems to be true until the later part of his life during which he was shown to return, in part, to a greater acceptance of religious moral standards. The return to religious moral standards at an older age probably reflects an increasing feeling of personal insecurity, which has been discussed elsewhere (Parsons, 1953). Similarly, findings on the differences in the sexual moral code in the present study are also in the opposite direction from those obtained in the comparison of students and college graduates (Rettig and Pasamanick, 1959a). While the adults in the present study express a more severe code of sexual morality than the students, the reverse is true with respect to adult college graduates. Here it would seem that the greater leniency of sexual standards which is usually ascribed to the younger as against the older generation, should be attributed more to the educated urban as against the less-educated rural persons.

The above findings clearly illustrate the initial selective moral orientation of young students when compared to a typical small town community. The students' moral orientation is expressed in 1) a more unified separation of alien customs from domestic ones, 2) a greater tolerance of foreign marital and sexual practices

which are disapproved in Western societies, 3) a more unified perception of diverse censorship practices, and 4) a greater indignation about the use of censorship by a political body, particularly by the central government. Additional findings relate to the students' greater tolerance of religious and sexual transgressions. While these findings should certainly not be regarded as conclusive, they do tend to provide important clues for further study and prediction of some cultural-moral changes which may be taking place in the Twentieth century. While it is difficult to evaluate the separate effects of higher socio-economic status, urban socialization residence, later socialization epoch, and younger age on the selective moral orientation of students, these combined influences produce an effect which should be regarded as significant. The initial moral orientation of young students, while highly selective, is probably maintained to some extent throughout the formal educational period. Moreover, this selective moral orientation is probably perpetuated during the adult period of the educated person. The latter would tend to broaden even more the chasm in moral orientation which separates the higher class, better educated from the lower class, less educated persons in the American society. This moral chasm, which is in existence already prior to the influence of a higher formal education, may be indicative of future dissent about moral leadership. Eventually, however, changes in moral views do take place in the society at large. The present findings may be indicative of the direction of such current changes.

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