

## INTERNAL DEFINITION BUT EXTERNAL MEASUREMENT OF MORAL COMPETENCE? CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON MORAL RESEARCH AND EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this presentation I argue that aligning theory and method is an indispensable condition for any progress in the science of moral behavior as well as in moral education. Unfortunately, in most studies and education projects, a wide gap exists between the definition of morality and the methods of measurement and education. While moral behavior is defined as behavior guided by *internal* moral orientations, much research and instruction relies on methods that impose *external*, social norms and standards on the individual. In order to show that theory and method can be successfully aligned, I will present the *Moral Competence Test* (MCT, formerly MJT) and the *Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion* (KMDD).

### **The importance of aligning theory and method**

Neither in science nor in education can we be successful if we do not do what we pretend to do. If theory and method are not aligned, we cannot know what to praise when we succeed, and what to blame when we don't. More importantly, we will draw the wrong conclusions from our data when we do not measure what we intend to measure, and when we do not teach what we intend to teach.

Some years ago, the former president of the American Psychological Association, George Miller (1969) criticized the state of research and outlines what we should ideally do: "What is lacking is a psychological theory that dictates explicitly which items should be included on the test." (p. 349). I should add today that the psychological theory should also dictate the design of the test because, as we shall see, the design is as much important for the question of theoretical test validity as the items.

If the test is completely aligned with the theory on which it is based, Miller continues, "then the [test data] would be used, not to validate the test, but to validate the theory on which

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the test was based. Such an explicit theory – if it were true – would resolve all doubts as to whether or not the test actually measured what it was intended to measure. Questions of validity would be transferred to the larger domain of psychological theory in general, and the tests would become an instrument of research comparable in power and dignity to experiments conducted in the laboratory.” (p. 349).

Unfortunately, today this problem of aligning theory and method is hardly recognized anymore. While most authors define moral behavior as agreement of behavior with *internal* moral principles, it is almost always measured by *external* standards and norms.

During the reign of *behaviorism* psychologists have tried to couple concept and measurement. But rather than letting their theory determine their tests, behaviorists let their tests determine their theories. One of the most famous examples are the studies into the nature of deceit by Hugh Hartshorne and his colleagues. While Hartshorne et al. (1928) wanted to show that an internal trait like moral character exists and guides human behavior, they defined (and measured) moral behavior (deceit) only by external standards, namely “without any reference ... to its motives or its rightness or wrongness.” (p. 11).

Only after their data did not support their main hypothesis, they realized that by omitting any reference to individual motives and criteria of rightness and wrongness they omitted something very important. On the last page of their book they admitted that “the essence of the act is its pretense. Hence it can be described and understood only in terms of the human elements in the situation.” (p. 377).

Kohlberg (1958) criticized behavioristic and other approaches to the study of morality as inadequate because they are based on an external definition and measurement. “Most modern scientists have ended up defining individual morality as behavioral conformity to the more common rules of the individual's culture. ... [scientists like] Hartshorne and May ..., or Havighurst and Taba.” (p. 2) For him, “morality ... defined as 'having moral principles' ... includes selection and ordering of the rules, intelligent interpretation of them, and inner conformity to them in difficult situations rather than outer conformity in routine situations.” (p. 3) Consequently he pledged to assess moral judgment competence internally, not externally: “Thus any student of values will be tempted to come up with a typology of creative, conforming, and rebelling or withdrawing types .... The trouble with such types is that they describe the person *externally* in terms of his impact on and relation to his culture and to the observer's values. They will not tell us how the individual thinks, what values he actually holds” (Kohlberg 1958, p. 82; emphasis added). “The solution [of a moral dilemma] must do justice both to what the self believes and yet meet the situation. Thus the choice is difficult in

the sense ... of doing justice to all the values which the *self* believes are true and important.” (p. 128; emphasis added).

Similarly Pittel and Mendelsohn (1963) identify the external methods of assessing morality agreed with Kohlberg’s analysis: “The problems of measurement of moral values "seem to be the result of an insufficient effort to conceptualize the nature of moral values and their relation to behavior. Perhaps the greatest single shortcoming underlying each of the specific criticisms discussed is the failure to view evaluative attitudes as subjective phenomena whose measurement is best achieved independent of a concern with the relationship of those attitudes to conventional and normative standards of moral valuation.” (p. 32).

Judgments are often required about ethical concepts or abstractions such as 'stealing' or 'cheating' rather than about behavior occurring in realistic situations. Subjects are asked to evaluate abstract acts independent of the setting in which such acts occur and in which contextual factors may serve to mitigate or justify their wrongness. The subject, in short, is asked to do something in the test situation which he would never do in real life. (p. 32)

Therefore, these authors strongly recommend “to assess an individual level the content, strength and patterning of subjective attitudes or evaluation per se. Whether these attitudes would be approved or disapproved by society is a subsequent question which need not be considered in the construction of measures of evaluative attitudes.” (p. 32).

### **Kohlberg’s turn to external measurement**

In contrast to behaviorist and socialization theory, Kohlberg (1964) defined moral judgment competence *internally*, namely 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.” (p. 425).

But later Kohlberg did not seem to remember this internal definition anymore. Neither did he remember that solution of a moral dilemma must “meet the situation;” rather he assumed that a subject’s responses to the various dilemma-stories in his Moral Judgment Interview (MJI) must be “consistent,” disregarding the big difference between the situations described in the MJI’s dilemma stories. It is not about the degree of “realness” which is at stake but the great difference between the moral requirements of these stories (see Lind 2010).

Nor did Kohlberg remember his verdict *against* external typologies; rather he revised the MJT in order to meet the external standards of *Classical Test Theory* (Gulliksen 1950). According to Classical Test Theory, the responses of the subjects are scored in regard to common standards: Whether a respondent gets a score or not is determined by externally imposed norms of right and wrong, not by internal moral standards. By standardizing scoring and increasing “reliability” of the MJT, Kohlberg and his associates lost sight of the individual’s internal moral principles and thus undermined the test’s theoretical validity (Lind, 1989).

Therefore, forty years ago, we have designed the Moral Competence Test (MCT, formerly called MJT) on the basis of a new experimental methodology which makes it possible to measure participants’ moral competence in regard to their own *internal* moral orientations (Lind, 2016).

This contradiction is also found in moral education. Obviously we cannot grade the “achievement” in moral and ethics education in regard to social norms of right and wrong if we want to foster children’s autonomous moral development. I will deal here but with cases in which this contradiction goes unnoticed. Again Kohlberg can serve as an instructive example. He was most explicit about his internal moral philosophy. While he and his associates proposed the dilemma-method for fostering autonomous moral judgment and behavior, they advised teachers to confront students with argument “one stage above theirs” (the so-called plus-1 convention) in order to improve their “stage of moral reasoning.” This advice and the Stage model clearly represent external social norms (Berkowitz 1981; Flammer 1988; Oser & Althof 1992). But Walker (1983) showed that moral reasoning could also be improved by counter-arguments. Our Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD) uses this finding: Participants are asked to decide on the dilemma-solution given in the story, and then try to convince their opponents of their point of view. To strengthen students’ moral autonomy, participants get several opportunities to articulate their own moral gut feelings (silent thinking, collective dilemma clarification, preparing for the discussion in small groups of same-minded people) rather than external instructions from their teachers. The KMDD has shown to be a versatile and highly effective method (Lind, 2008b, 2016; Hemmerling 2014).

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