CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS
AMONG PUPILS AND STUDENTS

Michael Stanton, School of Education
The University of Birmingham, Birmingham

Two cross-cultural studies of moral judgements are reported. The first was carried out among more than six hundred secondary school pupils in Guyana, Anguilla, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon and England. The second was carried out among more than four hundred College of Education students in Nigeria, Mauritius, Jamaica, Grenada and England. Males and females were included in each national group, apart from Jamaica, where only females were involved. It was thus possible for intra-cultural comparisons to be made in all but one of the countries.

Subjects were asked to judge a number of actions carried out by others. Actions to be judged were adapted from earlier enquiries by the author and, in the case of the first study, were submitted to heads of schools concerned for comment. Items were thus initially considered by local judges. Responses were made anonymously, on a scale. It should be emphasised that it is necessary to distinguish between a judgement of an action, which reflects expectations of behaviour and the reasoning which may be elicited as a justification for the judgement. Since the enquiries referred to here were non-funded personal studies it was not possible to engage in the very extensive field-work necessary to ascertain the forms of reasoning underlying judgements. It was, however, suggested that it was desirable to separate judgements from reasoning about moral behaviour since the latter may, to a considerable extent, reflect general cognitive functioning not necessarily involved in making judgements in everyday situations. The approach adopted by Kholberg (1963) in presenting moral dilemmas that were far removed from everyday experiences of secondary school pupils was criticised on the grounds that the kind of reasoning evoked, as well as the judgement made, would not reflect responses in realistic situations.

Pittel and Mendelsohn (1966), in a review of literature in the field, concluded that there have been a number of weaknesses in research in moral values. Too much emphasis, they suggest, has been placed on moral abstractions rather than behaviour in realistic contexts, and scoring procedures often utilize preconceived ideas of 'right' and 'wrong'.

The main approaches observed in the studies reported, based on earlier work by the present author are summarized below:

1. Realistic forms of behaviour were presented in items to be judged.

2. Negative actions were balanced by those that were positive, involving concern for others.

3.   The subject selected a point on a scale : responses thus established the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of an action.

4.   The design enabled comparisons to be made between alternative forms of some actions, e.g. giving more or less to charity.

METHOD

In the case of the first study respondents answered questions in three sections, dealing respectively with actions by adults, adolescents and children. Some items were included in more than one section and some related to different forms of the same kind of behaviour, e.g. giving more or less to charity or stealing more or less money. It was thus possible to make comparisons between judgements of behaviour between sections and different levels of the same kind of behaviour within sections.

In the second study the subjects, college students, were asked to assess twenty-eight actions carried out by someone of their own age and sex. Some items, relating to giving money to charity or stealing money, were similar to those in the first study and others, like having sex experience before marriage or respecting others' religious viewpoints, were included as being age-appropriate forms of behaviour. It was emphasised that there were no special circumstances relating to actions being judged unless these were specified. Stealing, for example, was for personal gain and not because of a pressing need.

ANALYSIS

Methods of analysis were similar for both studies. Males and females in each national sample were considered independently. Data relating to each male or female group were intercorrelated. Where appropriate, it was then possible to see correlations for judgements of different forms of similar behaviour. Comparisons between males and females in each country were then made for each variable, using tests. The third stage of analysis was the comparison between assessments for each variable, by males and females respectively and in all countries, by means of analysis of variance. Main conclusions arising from the analysis of each study are summarized below.

Study of Secondary School Pupils

1.   Comparisons between males and females within each country produced very few significant differences, indicating that expectations in a culture tend to make for a comparatively high level of agreement for subjects of this age.

2.   There was a tendency for judgements by males of positive behaviours to be lower and judgements of negative behaviours to be higher than those for females.

3.   Cross-cultural comparisons for males and females respectively showed agreement for only a limited number of behaviours. The contrast between the high level of intra-cultural agreement and variations in cross-cultural responses indicated that a considerable number of judgements are influenced

by culture-specific factors.

Study of College Students

1.   There was considerable agreement cross-culturally in ranking behaviours judged as being most undesirable but not in ranking those judged most desirable.

2.   Correlations showed that there was consistency for judgements of each male and female group for giving small or large amounts to charity, stealing small or large amounts of money and helping the elderly in different circumstances. In contrast there were few significant correlations in ratings for cheating in different circumstances (in a game and in a test) and between stealing from a shop and keeping excess change when shopping.

3.   In comparisons between sexes in the four countries concerned there were a number of intra-cultural differences between English students but few such differences in other countries.

4.   Comparisons between all the male and female groups respectively, using analysis of variance, showed that universality of judgements was comparatively limited.

DISCUSSIONS

Since the main purpose of these investigations was to ascertain the extent of cross-cultural agreement the relative positions of groups in assessing various behaviours has not been discussed. The researcher's task, it is suggested, is to show how far agreement exists between groups and not to infer that there are established criteria that would enable him to conclude levels of 'rightness' and 'wrongness' that could be used as yardsticks in comparing different cultures.

Various investigators have concluded that changes in items presented produce changes in research results (e.g. Piaget, 1972). The second study, which had a number of items that were different from those in the first, was presented to older subjects. Although, as would be expected, there are a number of differences there are also a number of conclusions common to both studies. Conclusions from both studies strongly indicated that cultural influences affect levels of expectations for a number of behaviours. In the study involving college students there was less cross-cultural agreement among females than males and among females considerably more agreement for negative than positive behaviours. Thus, within the context of levels of agreement shown there are variations between sexes as well as for particular kinds of behaviour.

There would appear to be justification in using realistically-based items that are designed to elicit judgements of real-life situations. Since it is not possible to make projections about desirable behaviour from responses to those that are negative a study should include items that are approved and disapproved by society. Because some responses relate to widely-held views and others may be the outcome, to a greater degree, of independent interpretation there is doubt about the validity of summing scores arising from judgements of behaviour having differing levels of salience for

individuals. In order to distinguish between a judgement related to social expectations and the reasoning underlying this judgement it would seem desirable to use brief concise questions as in the studies reported. The more sophisticated research required to ascertain related reasoning could then form a separate part of the work or be dealt with in a separate study. It would then be possible to compare judgements with reasoning and ascertain their relationship. Considerations arising from these observations would imply the possibility of changes in stage-theory as applied to the development of moral judgement during adolescence. If, as suggested, there are no longer grounds for summing of scores the focus could well be directed to an interpretation based on forms of related actions consisting of categories of behaviour.

Several studies (e.g. Feather and Hutton, 1974; Bronfenbrenuer, 1974) conclude that there are differences in values between countries due to cultural variables. Investigations of this kind are particularly important in bringing attention to ways in which cultural diversity may provide opportunity for varying expectations of some forms of social behaviour. Evidence from these researches is consistent with a main conclusion of the studies reported above, that there appears to be little justification for postulating the universality of stages, as claimed by Kholberg (1974). Universality implies that research procedures have adequately established a discreet factor, 'morality', that is not influenced by a wide range of cultural and environmental variations and expectations. In practice universality would place the emphasis on assumptions of common expectations of moral and social behaviour and so look for common approaches in moral education instead of emphasising the need to analyse varying situations to understand the nature of features making for intra and cross-cultural differences. The outcome of such analysis and understanding could then, it is suggested, provide the basis for policy designed to meet specific needs.

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The first study reported has been published as follows:

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The second study is being prepared for publication.