The relationship of moral maturity and ethical attitude

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ABSTRACT

Two issues related to Hogan’s Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA) were investigated. First, the adequacy of Hogan’s theoretical characterizations of the two poles of the SEA was tested. The results supported his characterization of the ethics of conscience, but only partially supported his characterization of the ethics of responsibility. Our second focus was on Hogan’s prediction that “moral maturity” should be curvilinearly related to the SEA. As predicted, when moral maturity was measured in Hogan’s sense, subjects scoring in the middle of the SEA dimension showed higher levels of moral maturity than those at either the ethics of conscience end or the ethics of responsibility end. In contrast, moral maturity in Kohlberg’s sense was linearly related to the SEA with the most mature individuals scoring at the ethics of conscience end of the dimension. The total pattern of results highlights the importance of conceptual clarity and conceptual pluralism in research on morality.

The conflict between law and personal conscience is at the center of an age-old debate. Some hold that personal conscience always has priority when it conflicts with existing law, others hold that law must always take precedence, and still others hold mixed positions. Research indicates that these contrasting attitudes are associated with distinct clusters of personality characteristics (Hogan, 1970) and with reliable differences in vocational choice (Hogan, 1973). The present study focuses on the relationship between these three attitudes and moral maturity.

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These attitudes can be assessed with Hogan’s (1970, 1973) Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA). A subject scoring low on the SEA subscribes to the “ethics of conscience,” an orientation which Hogan claims reflects the view that there exist higher moral laws, unrelated to human legislation. From this viewpoint, a law is just if and only if it can be derived from higher laws. The ethics of conscience “emphasizes what the person perceives as the right thing for him or her to do, without great regard for established norms and conventions” (Hogan, 1975, p. 159). A subject scoring high on the SEA subscribes to the “ethics of responsibility,” an orientation which Hogan claims reflects utilitarian ethics with its emphasis on the instrumental value of the manifest law for promoting the general welfare of society. People holding this ethical attitude distrust personal or intuitive notions of morality, believing that reliance on such principles leads to anarchical individualism. A subject scoring in the middle range of the SEA holds a mixture of the two views, relying neither solely on the ethics of conscience, nor solely on the ethics of responsibility.

Hogan’s characterization of the poles of the SEA needs to be empirically substantiated because choices on the SEA that are coded as reflecting the ethics of responsibility do not explicitly refer to the utilitarian principle, i.e., the principle that laws should be generated such that they bring about the greatest good for the greatest number. Rather, these choices seem to reflect a “law and order” orientation (stage 4 of Kohlberg’s, 1971, theory of moral judgment) which emphasizes the individual’s duty to obey the existing laws of his/ her society, but which does not involve utilization of the utilitarian principle for generating laws.

Thus, in the initial stage of this study we assessed the validity of Hogan’s characterization of the moral judgment orientations at the two ends of the SEA continuum. Our method was to correlate SEA scores with scores on Kohlberg’s moral judgment stages. If the SEA is a valid measure of Hogan’s theoretical characterization of the ethics of responsibility, the highest positive correlation of the SEA should be with stage 5A scores, since stage 5A directly utilizes the logic of utilitarian ethics. If the highest positive correlation is instead with stage 4, then the law and order characterization of the ethics of responsibility end of the SEA will be supported.

The primary focus of this paper was an assessment of the
relationship of "moral maturity" to the ethical attitude dimension. 
Hogan (1973) makes the interesting prediction that moral ma-
turity should be curvilinearly (quadratically) related to the SEA 
scale. More specifically, he claims that people scoring in the 
middle of the SEA scale will be more morally mature than those 
scoring at either extreme. However, Hogan (1973) provides no 
strong evidence in support of his claim. In the present study, we 
tested Hogan's curvilinearity prediction using two different mea-
ures of moral maturity: (1) a measure consistent with Hogan's 
(1973) views on morality and (2) a measure consistent with 

Conceptually, we mean by "moral maturity" a combination of 
both mature moral judgment and mature moral conduct. Thus, 
the operational definitions of moral maturity in Hogan's sense and 
moral maturity in Kohlberg's sense involved adding together two 
components: (1) a moral judgment score and (2) a moral con-
duct score. Our conception of moral maturity is supported by the 
fact that Hogan (1973) and Kohlberg (1971) agree that both 
moral judgment and moral conduct are important aspects of 
morality and by the fact that Hogan (personal communication) 
agrees that our Hogan moral maturity measure is consistent with 
his theory. Our additive conception is further justified by the fact 
that each component is, by itself, problematic. Proficiency in 
moral judgment is clearly inadequate by itself as a measure of 
moral maturity because the idealistic moral judgments of some 
individuals are contradicted by their actual behavior. The moral 
conduct component is also, by itself, inadequate as a measure of 
moral maturity because the moral conduct of some individuals is 
motivated simply by the desire to conform to collective norms. 
Hogan (1973) and Kohlberg (1971) agree that since social and 
legal institutions are never totally just, those who simply conform 
to collective norms may sometimes, in so doing, be acting im-
morally. Mature moral judgment is necessary as a safeguard 
against conformity to the potentially immoral norms of the com-
unity. Thus, we believe our additive definition of moral ma-
turity minimizes problems which separate use of the individual 
components would have entailed.

Hogan's theory and Kohlberg's theory generate distinct mea-
sures of moral maturity. This is because their conceptions of the 
moral judgment and moral conduct components of moral maturity
differ. Hogan's conception of mature moral judgment (Hogan & Dickstein, 1972) is biased neither toward the ethics of conscience nor toward the ethics of responsibility. For Hogan, the most mature ethics are held by those who combine the two views. In contrast, Kohlberg's (1971, 1973) conception of mature moral judgment ("principled morality") is much more similar to the ethics of conscience than to the ethics of responsibility. Kohlberg deemphasizes the importance of laws in that he does not view laws as intrinsically moral. Laws must be consistent with personally held moral principles if they are to be considered just. Accordingly we operationalized each theorist's conception of the moral judgment component of moral maturity in a manner appropriate to his theory.

Hogan and Kohlberg also differ sharply in their conceptions of moral conduct—particularly in their views on the relationship of social conduct and moral conduct. Kohlberg (1971, 1973) makes a strong distinction between social rules and moral principles. For him, many social rules and laws are arbitrary conventions. As previously noted, social regulations fall into the moral domain only when they can be justified by moral principles. In contrast, Hogan (1973) does not sharply distinguish social and moral rules. He assumes that all social behavior occurs in the framework of systems of social rules whose function is to evaluate and regulate that behavior. Since, for Hogan, the function of moral rules is also the evaluation and regulation of social behavior, he sees no point in distinguishing the social and moral domains.

To tap Hogan's broad view of the moral conduct component of moral maturity, we utilized a measure of "rule compliance." By rule compliance we mean complying with social rules (e.g., refraining from shoplifting, drunkenness, and illegal drug usage) even in cases where noncompliance has no obvious harmful consequences for others. To tap Kohlberg's more circumscribed view, we utilized a measure of what we call "avoidance of stealing." This measure focuses on actions which are almost universally considered to involve distinctly moral issues in that all these actions (shoplifting, copying on an examination, and switching price tags) involve unfair loss to others. In other words, avoidance of stealing means avoiding acts with victims whereas rule compliance means refraining from acts with victims and from victimless crimes.
In brief, the relationship of two measures of moral maturity to the SEA dimension will be investigated. The first moral maturity measure simultaneously taps Hogan's conception of moral judgment and his conception of moral conduct (rule compliance). The second measure of moral maturity simultaneously taps Kohlberg's conception of moral judgment and his conception of moral conduct (avoidance of stealing). For the Hogan measure, we predicted a curvilinear relationship to the SEA dimension, with the highest levels of moral maturity being found in the middle of the dimension (Hogan, 1973). No prediction was made concerning the Kohlberg measure since Hogan's prediction of a curvilinear relationship between moral maturity and the SEA dimension was obviously made with his own conception of moral maturity in mind. However, the Kohlberg measure provides an interesting test of the generalizability of Hogan's (1973) prediction to other conceptions of moral maturity.

**Method**

**Subjects**

The sample consisted of 179 undergraduate and graduate students who anonymously completed a 75 minute self-report questionnaire. The researchers distributed the questionnaires using standardized instructions which described the project as a social psychological study of attitudes and behavior. The subjects who volunteered to participate represented a cross section of students in a variety of classes at a junior college, a four-year state university, and a private graduate school. Initial contact was made by the researchers with faculty in sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, and education departments. The investigators were given permission to use class time in distributing the questionnaires. Subjects were assured that participation would be anonymous, not a class assignment, and voluntary. The sample included 85 males, 91 females, and 3 not identified.

**Independent Variable (SEA)**

A 35-item Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA) has been constructed by Hogan (1970) to measure the ethics of conscience and the ethics of responsibility. High scores on the SEA reflect the ethics of responsibility and low scores reflect the ethics of conscience. Hogan (1970) developed this questionnaire from a pool of 162 items and five dilemmas. Two versions were constructed which had a parallel form reli-
ability of .97 (for a sample of 149 people outside of the academic community) and .88 (for 94 college men). The validity of the SEA has been supported in several studies (see Hogan, 1970, 1973; Hogan & Dickstein, 1972). In our questionnaire, 7 of the 15 weighted continuum attitude items, 5 of the 14 forced-choice questions, and 1 of the 2 dilemmas, all from Form A were selected factor analytically by choosing items loading .4 and above on the first varimax rotated factor. The short form correlated with the full scale at .83.

**Dependent Variables (Moral Maturity)**

Two measures of moral maturity were obtained by summing each subject's z-scores on (1) moral judgment and rule compliance, and (2) principled morality (P score) and avoidance of stealing. The former measure of moral maturity taps Hogan's views, while the latter taps Kohlberg's. The two pairs of component measures are described below.

**Moral judgment.** Twelve items from a 15-item projective measure developed by Hogan and Dickstein (1972) were used to assess moral judgment maturity in Hogan's sense. Items are short statements concerning contemporary social and moral issues (such as gun control, abortion, medicare, homosexuality, and housing laws) to which the respondent must answer as if in a conversation. Scoring is based on the clear or inferred presence in the responses of one of the following four moral criteria: (1) concern for the sanctity of the individual, (2) judgments based on the spirit rather than the letter of the law, (3) concern for the welfare of society as a whole, and (4) capacity to see both sides of an issue (Hogan & Dickstein, 1972). The moral judgment protocols were all scored by a single judge (A). Two other judges (B and C) each scored a random sample of 25 protocols to assess reliability. The average percentage agreement between A and B and between A and C on individual items was 80% and the average correlation coefficient between total scores was .82.

**Rule compliance.** Respondents were asked to indicate, along an 8-point scale (where 0 equals never and 7 represents daily or more), frequency of involvement within the past twelve months in ten rule-breaking behaviors. Hogan's broad conception of moral conduct (rule compliance) does not differentiate between acts with victims and victimless acts. Therefore, we used an unrotated principle component factor analysis to obtain our rule compliance items because this method generally yields less differentiated factors than a rotated factor analysis. Those items loading .4 and above on the first unrotated factor were retained. Seven items (frequency of marijuana use, shoplifting, LSD
use, getting drunk, use of pills without a prescription, driving while drunk, and use of cocaine) make up the rule compliance measure. Since a high score represents self-reported frequency of rule-breaking, the sign of each subject's total score was reversed in order to obtain rule compliance.

Test-retest reliability data were available for six of the seven items, averaging $r = .971$ (Nardi, Note 1).

Despite the reliance on a self-report measure, there is some evidence, obtained using the "bogus-pipeline paradigm" (Jones & Sigall, 1971), that college students accurately self-report drug, alcohol, and shoplifting behaviors (Nardi, in press; Note 1) lending support to the validity of the rule compliance and avoidance of stealing measures.

**Principled morality (P Score).** To measure moral judgment maturity in Kohlberg's (1971) sense, the P score from the Defining Issues Test (DIT) developed by Rest (Note 3) was used. The DIT is an objective measure which utilizes six moral dilemma stories. For each dilemma, a subject chooses 4 statements from an array of 12 statements (each reflecting one of Kohlberg's stages), and ranks the 4 statements in order of preference. The subject's total set of rankings is converted into seven separate scores, each reflecting the degree to which the subject used a particular Kohlbergian stage. The P score represents "principled" morality, i.e., the relative importance attributed to principled moral considerations. A respondent's scores for the principled stages (stages 5A, 5B, and 6) are totaled to obtain the P score. Although Kohlberg (1976) does not believe that the DIT is adequate for assigning a subject to a single, predominant stage, he does endorse the DIT for use in correlational studies such as the present one. Test-retest reliability of the DIT is .81 and its validity has been supported in a variety of studies (see Rest, 1976).

**Avoidance of stealing.** Kohlberg's conception of moral conduct (avoidance of stealing) sharply differentiates immoral acts (acts with victims) from socially disapproved victimless acts. Therefore, we used a rotated (varimax) factor analysis of the ten rule-breaking behaviors to obtain a factor reflecting Kohlberg's circumscribed view of moral conduct. Three items loaded .4 and above on the avoidance of stealing factor: frequency of shoplifting, copying from another's examination, and switching price tags on store items. Despite an overlap of one item with rule compliance, avoidance of stealing correlated .29 with rule compliance, indicating minimal common variance. As in the case of rule compliance we reversed the sign of the subject's total score to obtain avoidance of stealing. Test-retest reliability data were available for two of the three items, averaging $r = .954$ (Nardi, Note 1).

Subjects also completed a shortened (11-item) version of the Social
Table 1. Correlations between Defining Issues Test stages and the SEA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>Stage 4½</th>
<th>Stage 5A</th>
<th>Stage 5B</th>
<th>Stage 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—N = 179. A significant positive correlation indicates a positive relationship with the ethics of responsibility; a significant negative correlation indicates a positive relationship with the ethics of conscience.

* p < .01.

** p < .001.

Desirability scale developed by Crowne and Marlowe (1964) as well as several sociodemographic items.2

RESULTS

Validation of the Survey of Ethical Attitudes

The validity of Hogan’s characterizations of the two poles of the SEA was tested by correlating the SEA with each of the seven Kohlberg moral judgment stages measured by the Defining Issues Test. These correlations are reported in Table 1. The ethics of responsibility correlates most strongly with stage 4 and correlates negatively with stage 5A. The ethics of conscience significantly correlates with stages 4½, 5A and 5B.3 Although these correlations are not large, they are statistically significant and they can be coherently interpreted (see Discussion).

Moral Maturity Tests for Trend

Consider now Hogan’s prediction that moral maturity is curvilinearly related to the SEA. To test this prediction, the range of SEA scores (2 to 13) was divided into quintiles so that the numbers of subjects in the quintiles were as equal as possible. Quintile 1 was at the ethics of conscience end and quintile 5 was at the ethics of responsibility end. One-way analysis of variance tests for

2. The correlation between rule compliance and moral judgment was .076, ns, and between avoidance of stealing and P score was .062, ns. The only variable that significantly correlated with social desirability was P score, r (177) = -.181, p < .05. A complete table reporting the intercorrelations of the independent variables, dependent variables, and the social desirability scale is available from the authors.

3. The negative correlation of each of these three variables with the SEA remains significant (p < .01) even when the effects of the other two variables are simultaneously controlled for in a partial correlation.
trend with SEA quintile as the independent variable were performed. Following Kirk (1968), the linear and quadratic trend components for a measure of moral maturity were first tested. Had the deviation from linear and quadratic trends been significant for either of the measures of moral maturity, the cubic trend component would have also been tested; however, this was never the case.

**Moral maturity (Hogan).** Consider first the Hogan measure of moral maturity. Since we made an a priori prediction that the quadratic trend would be significant, no overall $F$-test was necessary (Kirk, 1968, p. 73). The linear trend component was not significant, $F(1, 174) = 1.30$. The quadratic trend was significant, $F(1, 174) = 3.96, p < .05$, indicating that moral maturity in Hogan's sense is, as Hogan predicted, curvilinearly related to the SEA (see Figure 1). In order to control for possible response bias on the self-report measure of rule compliance, scores on the social desirability scale were utilized. The pattern of results was unchanged when the effects of social desirability were controlled for in analysis of covariance tests for trend: linear trend, $F(1, 173) = 1.32, \text{ns}$; quadratic trend, $F(1, 173) = 3.93, p < .05$.

**Moral maturity (Kohlberg).** Consider now the test of the relationship of the Kohlberg moral maturity measure to the SEA. The variances for this measure showed significant heterogeneity (Bartlett-Box $F = 2.44, p < .05$). A more detailed examination revealed that the heterogeneity of variance was due to the avoidance of stealing component. Therefore, scores on this component were log transformed. Moral maturity was then computed by summing each subject's standardized score on the log transformed avoidance of stealing variable with his or her standardized $P$ score. The resulting variances were homogeneous. Since no a priori prediction was made, an overall test of significance was performed, $F(4, 174) = 4.49, p < .005$. The trend analyses for this variable showed a significant linear trend, $F(1, 174) = 12.96, p < .001$, but showed no quadratic trend, $F(1, 174) < 1$. The highest moral maturity scores were found at the ethics of conscience end of the SEA (see Figure 1).

In sum, the Kohlberg measure of moral maturity was not curvilinearly related to the SEA. Instead a linear relationship was found. The pattern of results was unchanged in analysis of covariance tests for trend controlling for the effects of social desir-
Figure 1. Standardized mean scores for the two measures of moral maturity plotted as a function of SEA quintile. Quintile 1 is at the ethics of conscience end of the SEA and quintile 5 is at the ethics of responsibility end.

ability: linear trend, $F(1, 173) = 12.64, p < .001$; quadratic trend, $F(1, 173) < 1, ns$.

**Discussion**

Consider first the validity data on the Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA). Our first finding was that the SEA appears only partially to capture Hogan's theoretical characterization of the ethics of responsibility. Recall that a positive correlation with the SEA indicates a positive relationship with the ethics of responsibility and a negative correlation indicates a positive relationship with the ethics of conscience. Note that the SEA correlated posi-
tively with Kohlberg's stage 4, but negatively with stage 5A. These two facts are consistent with our conjecture that the ethics of responsibility end of the SEA dimension is basically a law and order orientation which emphasizes the duty to obey society's existing laws but does not emphasize the logic of utilitarian ethics.

Our second validity finding was that Kohlberg's stages 4⅙, 5A, and 5B (Rest, Note 2) all showed significant negative correlations with the SEA. This supports Hogan's claim that the ethics of conscience end of the SEA dimension is an orientation which emphasizes the priority of higher moral laws over society's existing laws, and which emphasizes personal and intuitive notions of right and wrong. Stage 4⅖ is an antiestablishment orientation which views the existing system of social and legal norms as arbitrary, and corrupted by the rich for the exploitation of the poor. Stage 5A deemphasizes laws per se in that a law must be generated by democratic procedures and must be consistent with higher moral law (i.e., the utilitarian principle) in order to be considered just. Stage 5B is the stage of intuitive humanism, which emphasizes moral principles which are justified by appeal to one's inner, private conscience. In sum, the validity of the ethics of conscience end of the SEA is supported in that Kohlberg stages associated with it all emphasize the priority of personal conscience over existing law.⁴

Now that the psychological meaning of the SEA is clarified, we can turn to our other main concern, the relationship of moral maturity to the SEA dimension. Consider first the results on the Hogan measure of moral maturity. As Hogan (1973) had predicted and as we had expected, moral maturity was curvilinearly related to the SEA. The highest level of moral maturity in Hogan's sense was found in the middle of the SEA dimension, i.e., among those who employed a mixture of conscience-oriented and rule-oriented considerations. This finding is consistent with Hogan's (1973, 1975) theory in that his conception of moral maturity

⁴ One would also expect stage 6, the orientation emphasizing principles of ideal social cooperation, to correlate negatively with the SEA. Since Rest (Note 2) acknowledges that defining stage 6 is more problematic than defining any other Kohlberg stage, our failure to find a significant negative correlation may have been due more to the inadequacy of the stage 6 items on the DIT than to the inadequacy of the ethics of conscience items of the SEA. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that three of the four Kohlberg stages which should, theoretically, correlate negatively with the SEA in fact did.
is biased towards neither the ethics of conscience nor the ethics of responsibility. Thus, those who can draw on the logic of both poles of the SEA should show the highest level of moral maturity. We consider our finding to be an important one since it is the first published confirmation of Hogan’s prediction.

The results for the Kohlberg measure of moral maturity were very different. The only significant trend was the linear relationship of moral maturity to the SEA dimension, with those at the ethics of conscience end showing the highest levels of moral maturity. This finding is consistent with Kohlberg’s theory since his conception of moral maturity is much more similar to the ethics of conscience than it is to the ethics of responsibility. The fact that no quadratic relationship was found with the Kohlberg measure should not be taken as disconfirmation of Hogan’s prediction. Hogan presumably had only his conception of moral maturity in mind when he made the prediction, and the measure consistent with his conception did show the expected quadratic trend. The results on the Kohlberg measure do, however, place clear limits on the generalizability of Hogan’s prediction to other conceptions of moral maturity.

Thus far our discussion has ignored an important consideration—not all readers will find our measures of moral maturity acceptable. As our discussion of Kohlberg’s and Hogan’s theories in the introduction indicated, there is no consensus among behavioral scientists on how best to measure moral maturity. Since choosing a measure of moral maturity necessarily involves value judgments, disagreements about its measurement seem to us inevitable. Thus, although we argued earlier that our moral maturity measures are conceptually and empirically sound, it is clear that moral maturity can be fruitfully measured in numerous other ways. For example, direct observation of moral conduct, rather than self-report, could and should be employed in some future study. However, our data suggest that disagreements about the measurement of moral maturity can generate light as well as heat. Specifically, quite different empirical outcomes were obtained when conceptually different measures of moral maturity were employed, yet both outcomes were quite comprehensible (see also Tsujimoto & Nardi, 1978). Thus, we conclude that: (1) the concept of “moral maturity” cannot and need not be defined in a single, universally accepted way, and (2) conceptual clarity and conceptual pluralism are
Moral maturity and ethical attitude essential if we are to comprehend its complex and multifaceted nature.

Reference Notes


References


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