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The Roles of Religiosity and Spirituality in Moral Reasoning

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Relativism and spirituality play a significant role in the development of personal values, which influence moral reasoning. Consequently, many psychologists and philosophers have theorized about the relationships between religiosity, spirituality, and moral reasoning.

Kohlberg (1969) was one of the first to develop a theory of moral development. He presented people with moral dilemmas and observed how they decided upon solutions. He then categorized people’s strategies into three levels—preconventional, conventional, and postconventional—with two stages in each level. Kohlberg claimed that people move through the stages as they develop, with higher levels of reasoning marking moral maturity. There are several criticisms to this theory. Notably, Gilligan (1982) argued that Kohlberg’s theory overemphasizes justice and excludes other important values, such as caring. There are also claims that Kohlberg’s theory is not gender neutral.

Kohlberg’s theory focuses on moral reasoning in terms of development and maturity. It may not be the most useful classification for adults. More recently, Forsyth (1980) proposed a model of moral reasoning by measuring the extent to which individuals display reasoning by rejection of rules and relying on universal rules when making moral decisions. It is related to ethical skepticism, which holds that there are different ways to view morality. Meanwhile, idealism is the belief that the most desirable outcome can always be achieved.

Forsyth (1980) used the combination of relativism and idealism to describe four styles of moral reasoning: subjectivism, relativism, absolutism, and exceptionism (see Table 1). Subjectivists have high relativism and low idealism. They believe that moral behavior depends upon each individual’s personal values. This is in line with ethical egoism, which argues that moral standards depend upon each individual’s personal values. Subjectivists can be described as relativists who think that anything can happen in each action in each situation. This is consistent with Fletcher’s situational ethics (1965), which says that morality is based on which action is most fitting rather than which action is most right.

Absolutists have high idealism and low relativism (Forsyth, 1980). They believe that “the best possible outcomes can always be achieved” (Forsyth, 1980). They follow universal moral rules (p. 175) and reject making exceptions to rules based on consequences. This reasoning style is consistent with deontology, which emphasizes using natural law or rationality to make moral judgments. Meanwhile, exceptionists have low idealism and low relativism. They follow universal rules but are open to exceptions based on actions’ consequences. This reasoning style is consistent with the utilitarian approach, which says that actions should produce the best result for the most people.

Forsyth (1980) also measured the predictive validity of the four styles of moral reasoning. He found that absolutists were more likely than others to have extreme views on contemporary moral issues and deeply more religious. Though they appeared to be more likely to reject relativism and prefer universal moral rules (p. 176), they were high relativism and low idealism. They believe that moral behavior depends upon each individual’s personal values. This is in line with ethical egoism, which argues that moral standards depend upon each individual’s personal values. Subjectivists can be described as relativists who think that anything can happen in each action in each situation.

While there are no significant differences between religious groups on either idealism or relativism. However, there were few participants from non-Christian religious groups, which may have affected this finding. The fact that most participants were Christians could have limited the scope of the study. In addition, the fact that this study examines the role of spirituality rather than religious groups could have affected the findings.

Furthermore, there are no significant differences between religious groups on either idealism or relativism. However, there were few participants from non-Christian religious groups, which may have affected this finding. The fact that most participants were Christians could have limited the scope of the study. In addition, the fact that this study examines the role of spirituality rather than religious groups could have affected the findings.

The overall aim of this study was to investigate the role of religiosity and spirituality in moral reasoning. Indeed, religiosity and spirituality appear to be related, and the former may influence the latter. In this study, we examine the relationship between religiosity and spirituality as well as moral reasoning.

First, results suggest that religious people tend to be idealistic but not relativistic. This means that, in comparison to less-religious, highly religious people may be more likely to believe that the best outcome can be achieved, and be more likely to behave according to the rules in order to achieve moral decisions. Forsyth (1980) classified this combination of idealism and relativism as “Absolutism.” Based on Forsyth’s research (1980), these correlations may suggest that highly religious individuals may have more extreme views on contemporary moral issues, make more negative judgments on others’ behavior, and view themselves more negatively when they behave immorally.

Second, there were no significant differences between religious groups on either idealism or relativism. However, there were few participants from non-Christian religious groups, which may have affected this finding. The fact that most participants were Christians could have limited the scope of the study. In addition, the fact that this study examines the role of spirituality rather than religious groups could have affected the findings.

Third, the overall finding was that highly religious people appeared to be more idealistic than less-religious people, so they may be more likely to condemn less-religious people who believe that the best possible outcome can always be obtained. Based on Forsyth’s (1980) findings, this suggests that religious people may experience more self-condemnation than less-religious people. Meanwhile, highly spiritual, highly religious people were not more or less likely to be relativistic than less-religious people. This indicates that spirituality is not related to whether people value moral absolutes.

Interestingly, moral idealism correlated with all of the spirituality subscales, indicating a strong relationship between idealism and spirituality. Meanwhile, moral relativism correlated with critical and philosophical thinking and state self-construal, which may increase an individual’s “sense of oneness or unity” (Emmons, 2000: p.10)—but not the focus on oneself and a higher power.

It must be noted that, while religiosity and spirituality’s relationships with ethical positions were significant, the small sample size limited the scope of this study. This indicates that religiosity and spirituality’s relationship with ethical positions may be more apparent when investigating the wider variability within groups than there is between groups. It may be that the strength of religiosity or spirituality is most indicative of individuals’ moral reasoning styles. Future research could further investigate how abnormal high religiosity and spirituality influence moral reasoning. For example, there was no study examining the relationship between spirituality and moral reasoning. This line of research can lead to a better understanding of aspects that are critical to psychology: religiosity, spirituality, morality, and personal values.

Several studies have been conducted on the relationship between spirituality and moral reasoning. However, this study offers a new perspective by examining the relationship between spirituality and moral reasoning. Furthermore, we develop a better understanding of personal values.

The Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) is a 20-item measure that was used to examine how participants make moral decisions (Forsyth, 1980). Each item is rated from 1 to 9 (1=Completely disagree, 2=Largely disagree, 3=Moderately disagree, 4=Moderately agree, 5=Agree, 6=Largely agree, 7=Largely disagree, 8=Moderately disagree, 9=Completely agree). The Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSRFQ) is a 10-item measure that was used to examine the degree of religiosity and spirituality of Forsyth’s Ethical Positions. The roles of religiosity and spirituality in moral reasoning are currently lacking. This study investigated the relationship between religiosity and spirituality by examining the degree to which religious and spiritual beliefs influence moral reasoning.

Specifically, we were interested in the correlation between styles of moral reasoning and levels of religiosity and/or spirituality. Understanding these relationships may contribute to our thoughts about the nature of morality, which, in turn, may lead to a better understanding of personal values.

Note: Table taken directly from Forsyth, 1980, p. 176.