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Original article

Development and validation of a scale of social and moral judgments (ABB scale) and its use in prison settings



Construction et validation d'une échelle de jugements socio-moraux (échelle ABB) et son utilisation en milieu carcéral

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – The traditional approach to value judgments involves determining the position of an individual on a scale designed to evaluate the underlying mechanisms and dimensions of judgments.

Objective. – The purpose of this study was to develop and validate a scale among a general population and to apply it to individuals particularly affected by, or directly involved in, acts of transgression.

Method. – The scale comprises three types of behavior involving an expression of personal values (atypism or idiosyncratic behavior) or a violation of moral or conventional standards. Subjects were asked to assess a range of actions and behaviors on three dimensions (Likert format): seriousness, excusability and rejection of the transgressor.

Results and conclusion. – As predicted, factor analysis shows a clear hierarchy of values. The results demonstrate the multidimensional nature of the instrument and indicate good reliability. Tolerance and severity indices were developed to understand the underlying dynamics of social and moral judgments. The study found that inmates' judgments of violations and transgressions differed in some respects from the judgments made by the general population. The influence of context and the role of group membership as an explanatory factor are examined from the point of view of the identity strategies used.

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R É S U M É

Classiquement, les jugements de valeur correspondent à une position des gens sur des échelles sans s'attacher aux dimensions sous-jacentes aux jugements. Cet article présente l'élaboration, la validation d'un outil auprès d'une population générale et son utilisation auprès d'une population particulièrement concernée par la transgression. L'outil se compose de trois types de conduites évoquant, soit l'expression d'une valeur personnelle (atypisme), soit une transgression de valeurs conventionnelles ou morales. Les sujets devaient évaluer ces conduites sur trois dimensions distinctes (format Likert) relatives à la gravité d'une transgression, son excusabilité et au rejet dont doit être l'objet le transgresseur. Le traitement des scores bruts, réalisé au moyen d'une analyse factorielle révèle, comme attendu, une bonne hiérarchie des valeurs. Les résultats valident la nature multidimensionnelle de l'instrument et attestent d'une fiabilité acceptable. Des indices de tolérance et de sévérité ont été construits en vue d'une mise en relief de la dynamique sous-jacente aux jugements socio-moraux. Les détenus produisent des jugements de transgressions en quelques points différents des jugements produits par la population générale. L'influence du contexte et de l'appartenance comme élément d'explication est évoquée sous des stratégies identitaires mobilisées.

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1. Introduction

Adherence to rules, norms and values (whether explicit or implicit) is a major focus of both personal and collective concerns. Adherence and compliance are often one of the key foundations of actions or strategies aimed at promoting or maintaining a framework, whether normative, regulatory or legislative. Research in this area is closely related to research issues surrounding delinquency and is of particular interest to those directly involved in justice, but also concerns people serving a prison sentence. However, beyond the specific characteristics of transgressors, the tendency to focus on the notions of adherence and compliance often means that we tend to overlook questions surrounding the context-dependent nature of rules, norms and values and the variability of social and moral judgments according to the social and relational context in which they are made (Abdellaoui, Personnaz, & Aubry, 2004; Abdellaoui & Pittolo, 2000; Mazé, Finkelstein, & Quentin, 2004). For example, most people would agree that writing graffiti on a wall at school, using public transport without paying, embezzling public funds or abusing or mistreating someone are reprehensible acts. In other words, most people would agree on the seriousness of the transgression, the intentionality of the act, the level of personal responsibility and the appropriate sanction or punishment (Howe, 1994; Nemeth & Sosis, 1990; Przygodzki & Mullet, 1997). In many cases, a moral judgment will be a function of the acceptability of the behavior or of the perception (i.e. the appraisal) of the transgressor (Morchain, 2009). Research has shown that judgment type is determined by a range of factors (Ebbesen & Konecni, 1981). In particular, our understanding of judgments will depend, among other things, on the amount of information available to assess the dynamics of social and moral judgments. The purpose of this study was to develop a measurement scale designed to capture the dynamics of judgment (specifically, social and moral judgments) and to identify key dimensions of judgments in this area in order to improve our understanding of the inherent characteristics of transgression situations. More specifically, the aim was to validate the tool among the general population, to test it in a prison population and to identify and understand its characteristics. This approach could contribute to the development of evaluation protocol perceptions and also supports helping the development of human and social values in general (Mathys, Lanctôt, & Touchette, 2013; Pélissier & Alidières, 2014).

The study was based on the assumption that the analysis of social and moral judgments must take into account the type of value involved (i.e. violated) in an act of transgression, the dimension involved in the judgment and the degree of covariation between different dimensions of the judgment. To the best of our knowledge, post-Kohlbergian conceptions of the sphere of social and moral values have not produced standardized measurement tools. This paper presents a tool based on the idea that human beings are intuitive moralists. Drawing on Piaget's work on the development of moral judgment (1932), Kohlberg (1969, 1971) proposed a theory to explain the cognitive framework underlying individual decision-making in the context of a social-moral dilemma. Kohlberg developed a conception in which morality can be released (through cognitive development) from the shackles of obligations and egocentrism first, and from rules and conventions second, thereby resulting in the cognitive management of broad universal principles. Kohlberg (1971) defined six "stages of moral development", or "developmental stages", operating at three levels: sequential, invariant and hierarchical (for a comprehensive overview, see Tostain, 2000). The Kohlbergian conception led to the development of various methods for the analysis of moral judgments, such as those proposed by Rest (1979, 1986), although many experts have emphasized on the limitations of work in this area. In addition to the various criticisms leveled at the validity

of Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Scale (Kurtines & Greif, 1974), the developmentalist and universalist conception has been widely criticized (Baumrind, 1986; Salini, 1976; Shweder, 1981). The main criticisms include:

- the importance given to communication and socialization contexts in the development of moral judgment, with social learning theorists and experts in the anthropology of communication (e.g. Shweder) challenging the ontological nature of moral values and explaining their development by reference to socialization contexts;
- the irreversible nature of progression through the various stages of moral development; the assumption is that a person who has advanced from the conventional level to the post-conventional level will never again judge or assess situations from a conventional-level perspective;
- the one-dimensional nature of categories of values; according to Kohlberg (1983), moral values emerge from other categories of values, with conventional values representing sub-moral values from which adolescents infer universal meanings. For others, moral values merely represent a category of values governed by certain principles. The assumption is that other categories of values may be governed by other principles, thus involving other forms of judgment and appraisal. This is the view taken by Turiel (1983) and various other scholars (Killen & Hart, 1999; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Tisak & Turiel, 1984; Turiel & Smetana, 1984), whose work provided the basis for this study.

Our view is relatively close to the position taken by Turiel, who identified three main categories of values:

- moral values: applied to any behavior involving an obligatory, generalizable, objective and universal judgment, assessment or appraisal. Moral values are based on a set of principles defined as universal. Individuals and groups adhere to moral values because they are founded on the moral good and are constructed as moral imperatives. Examples include the prohibition of killing and stealing;
- conventional values: applied to any individual behavior related to a collective or social convention or involving adherence to (or compliance with) a stable set of social norms or rules. The production of a conventional value is generally the result of compliance with or submission to a social norm or rule (with varying degrees of consent). Typical examples include acts of politeness and decorum that only apply in relatively specific situations;
- personal values: applied to any behavior not involving a framework of specific social or normative rules, but involving an individual decision. Here, the process of judging an action or behavior is neither governed nor expressed explicitly or implicitly by a particular group or community, but is an indication of how individual standards or practices operate rather than a sign of adherence to collective rules. For example, no one will be offended to learn that a person has developed a habit of drinking orange juice at 8am on Tuesdays and Fridays.

2. Aims and objectives

The traditional assumption is that value judgments can be examined by determining the position of individuals on a scale or based on their answers to specific questions. Research on social and moral values has often involved using questions referring to specific cases of transgression and atypical or idiosyncratic behavior. The aim is to encourage subjects to make judgments about specific acts of transgression and examples of atypical behavior (focusing on reprehensibility). To improve our understanding of personal

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