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The Good, the Bad, and the Not-so-ugly

A Qualitative, Exploratory study of Morality in Religious Leaders and Convicted Criminals

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to explore and compare, using qualitative and quantitative methods, moral judgment and moral reasoning in religious leaders and convicted criminals. Two men and two women in each group were identified using non probability sampling. Each respondent participated in a semi structured interview and reverted to moral dilemmas as elucidated in the Defining Issues Test. The DIT revealed each respondent's preferred moral schema amongst Personal-Interest, Maintaining Norms & Post Conventional; whereas the narratives revealed other schemes and reasoning principles used in making moral judgments. The quantitative and qualitative analysis for between gender and between group differences revealed that the two groups differed significantly on the DIT score of P-score with religious leaders scoring higher than convicted criminals, but did not display striking differences in the themes generated from narratives. The narratives also revealed the need to propose new schemas of moral reasoning like 'God/ religion as the basis of universal ethical principles' and 'post conventional moral thought as subservient to divinity'. The female respondents differed from the male respondents in the nature of moral reasoning rather than stages of moral development. Other significant themes have been discussed with DIT scores as supplementary data for an exhaustive understanding of morality in the two groups. Limitations and future directions for research are also noted.

The Good, the Bad, and the Not-so-ugly: A Qualitative, Exploratory Study of Morality in Religious Leaders and Convicted Criminals

Morality has always been a very important domain of life in every society. The judgment of morality is often done on the basis of overt behavior. Certain people are categorized as "moral" and "immoral", such as religious leaders and criminals respectively. However, people belonging to each category have often acted against such popular notions. By exploring the pattern of moral reasoning that people engage in, one can explore whether these popularly held beliefs and notions are really true. The legal implications of the findings would indicate whether persons convicted for committing crime need interventions for reformation at the level of thinking and reasoning.

Major Theories on Morality

According to Freud's psychosexual theory of personality development, moral development was seen as an outcome of the resolution of the Oedipus complex and identification of the child with the same sex parent, wherein the child adopts the rules that guide the parents' behaviors, their attitudes and morality. In his learning theory, Mowrer (1951, 1956) states that internalized rules and morals can be seen as a set of learned avoidance reactions. Piaget propounded the stages of moral development – heteronymous and autonomous morality, whereby children begin by an

unquestioned obedience to authority figures and later learn to imagine different perspectives about right and wrong. James Rest developed a four component model of moral behavior which includes: moral sensitivity (an individual's concern for the needs and well-being of another individual), moral judgment (choosing course of action on the basis of what is thought to be morally right or wrong, taking into account the consequences it might have on the welfare of others), moral motivation (the intention to engage in morally correct behavior driven by the genuine desire to choose that which is just), and moral character (having courage and implementing skills to carry out a line of action even under pressure). All four components are determinants of moral action and moral failure can occur because of deficiency in any component.

Psychological perspectives on religion. Freud saw religion as an illusion, emanating from the oedipal complex. According to him, the belief in religion is strengthened because our primal ancestors believed in them. Adler proposed that humans perceive a lot of inferiorities in them and try to cope with these through their belief in the omnipotent, superior and perfect picture of God. Jung identified God as an archetype in the collective unconscious. Maslow propounded transpersonal psychology which acknowledges the spiritual aspect of human experience and self-transcendence as a state of consciousness in which the self expands beyond the ordinary definitions of individual personality, ensuing into a fundamental connection with others and the world.

Psychological theories of criminal behavior. Various theories have been postulated to explain criminal behavior. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, delinquents are "affectionless" and hence unable to relate with others. He stated that a number of events that may occur in the lives of people and cause a hindrance in the development of a secure attachment with the caregiver. According to neo-Freudian August Aichorn, an underdeveloped superego leads to the commitment of crime. The lack of guilt leading to overwhelming desire for need gratification leads to criminal activities. Cornish and Clarke, in the Rational Choice Theory suggest that criminal behavior emerges from a rational choice on the part of offenders, based upon a cost-benefit analysis. Thus, if offenders stand to gain more than they lose, then it's rational for them to commit the crime. Labeling theorists state that by labeling a deviant individual as "criminal" in a very straitjacket fashion, the individual concerned is in a way encouraged to act in that deviant manner. These theorists have also redefined crime by suggesting that it is not the actor who commits a crime but the audience that confers the label upon the act.

Review of Literature

Studies on morality in criminals. An agglomeration of experimental evidence suggests that offenders reason at lower stages than non-offenders (Blasi, 1980; Jennings, Kilkenny & Kohlberg, 1983; Jurkovic, 1980; Nelson, Smith & Dodd, 1990). Studies done on samples of violent and theft offenders have revealed that their moral reasoning development levels were less mature than those of non-violent and non-theft controls, respectively, (e.g. Arbuthnot, Gordon, & Jurkovic, 1987; Judy & Nelson, 2000). Bartek, Krebs and Taylor (1993) conducted one of the few studies available on female juvenile delinquents. Results indicated that female juvenile delinquents with poor coping revealed lowest levels of moral judgment when asked to respond to a prostitution based dilemma. The authors concluded that prescriptive judgments of what is ascribed as a right vs. wrong action is not necessarily related to moral maturity, i.e. actual moral behavior engaged in may not be in accordance with level of moral judgement. A previous research has largely revealed that criminal offenders reason at a lower stage of morality, their reasoning characterised by a delay in development.

Studies on morality in religious/spiritual leaders. Several researchers have looked at the effect of religion on the moral judgement and morality of an individual. Findings indicate that in Europe and the United States individuals who are less likely to describe themselves as religious or engage in religious

practice have a greater tendency to have a permissive moral outlook toward actions involving pecuniary dishonesty (Halman, 1991; Harding, Phillips and Fogarty, 1986; Hoge and De Zulueta, 1985; Phillips and Harding, 1985). Harding, Phillips and Fogarty (1986) explained the phenomenon by suggesting the fact that religion carries a set of absolute moral values. Scheepers and Slik's (1998) study carried out on a Dutch population revealed that the effects of traditional beliefs and religious involvement on moral attitudes outweighed the effects of educational level and personal income. Moreover, the moral attitudes of males were found to be influenced by extrinsic religious aspects such as public interaction within their religious community, while females were affected more by private contemplation or intrinsic religion (Watson, Hood, Morris, and Hall 1984; Watson, Hood, and Morris 1985).

Education has also been found to influence moral reasoning. Halman (1991) reported that respondents with a higher level of education found behavior involving self-interest and illegality to be unacceptable somewhat more than those with lower levels of education. In a study carried out with individuals from India and United States showed that in both countries progressivists reasoned more in terms of Shweder's Ethic of Autonomy - which defines the moral agent as an autonomous individual who is free to make choices, being restricted primarily by concerns with inflicting harm on others and encroaching on the rights of others - than orthodox participants. Orthodox participants reasoned more in terms of Ethic of Divinity which defines the moral agent as a spiritual entity. Thus, previous literature generally indicates that religious affiliation creates a major impact upon the moral development and judgement of individuals.

Method

The aim of the study was to explore and compare moral judgment in convicted criminals and religious leaders using qualitative and quantitative measures. The objectives of the study included: Firstly, to explore the principals of moral judgment in convicted criminals using an objective measurement tool and a qualitative interview; secondly, to explore the principles of moral judgment in individuals who are devoted to a spiritual/ religious group using an objective measurement tool and a qualitative interview**;** thirdly, to compare conceptions of moral judgment in individuals who are convicted criminals vs. individuals who are devoted followers of a spiritual/ religious group on the basis of responses to an objective measurement tool and qualitative interview.

Sample

The sample included two male and two female respondents in both the groups of convicted criminals and religious leaders.

Inclusion criteria for convicted criminals: age twenty one to sixty years; Indian origin; currently serving sentence for an action declared as crime by an Indian court; absence of clinical psychiatric syndrome or debilitating physical condition.

Inclusion criteria for religious leaders: age twenty on to sixty years; Indian origin; unmarried, living within the residential settings of the religious sect, with a clear dominance of roles and duties towards the sect/ group, with almost exclusivity from other social roles within family/ extended family; absence of clinical psychiatric syndrome or debilitating physical condition.

Procedure

Data collection from the convicted criminals was carried out in the Tihar jail premises. That with the religious leaders was done wherever convenient to the participants. In both cases, after rapport formation, the DIT was administered followed by the semi-structured interview.

Data Collection

Non-probability purposive sampling, which involves selection of a sample on the basis of easy availability; and snowball technique were

used. The study adopts a case study format which involves an in-depth study of a single person or group or any other entity. By gathering data using a variety of tools and sources, the method allows the researcher to study the case in great detail.

Tools

A semi-structured interview schedule was used with the main points of inquiry being: personal history of what brought the individual to prison/ religious sect; exploration of real life dilemmas faced by the individual; reasoning of actions/decisions taken by self as right or wrong; presence of any universal principles of moral reasoning and what principles are used to judge an action as right or wrong. The Defining Issues Test by James Rest was used, which presents 6 dilemmas to its takers, who are then supposed to provide an answer to a question following each dilemma. The three schemas that DIT measures are Maintaining Norms Schema (MNS), Post Conventional Schema (PCS) and Personal Interest Schema (PIS). The rationale for choosing DIT was that the research has been based on morality as conceptualized by James Rest, who is also the author of DIT, and Kohlberg, whose theory Rest derives his own conceptualization from. Moreover, the Indian adaptation of DIT was also available which was well-suited to the concerned sample.

Data Analysis

Both inter and intra group analyses were done under the quantitative analysis of DIT. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith and Osborn, 1996) was employed which explores the individual's life, world, and his /her own perceptions of any object, situation or event. The method acknowledges that it is very difficult to understand the participant's world directly. Hence, through the researcher's own perspective and the nature of the interaction between the researcher and the subject, the former tries to interpret the latter's experience. Themes were culled out in each transcript and then compared with the narratives of respondents belonging to the two different groups.

Results and Discussion

Superordinate themes (convicted criminals). Several themes emerged in the narratives of the convicted criminals: moral sensitivity, moral motivation, moral character, pre-conventional stage, morality of care, belief in metaphysical, consideration of circumstances for morality judgment, autonomous morality/social order maintaining, heteronomous morality among others.

Moral sensitivity, moral motivation and moral character fit into Rest's theory. Thus, the respondents depict a concern for the welfare of others in a situation where their needs are in conflict with others'; show the readiness to take a moral course of action and also take responsibility for outcomes; readiness to follow one's own moral course of action even under pressure. Pre-conventional stage, according to Kohlberg, reflects that morality is externally determined. This finding is corroborated by researches that assessed criminal and delinquent behavior using Kohlberg's theory and found that offenders reason at lower stages than non-offenders (Blasi, 1980; Jennings, Kilkenny & Kohlberg, 1983; Jurkovic, 1980; Nelson, Smith & Dodd, 1990). Morality of care, found in a female respondent is consistent with Gilligan's postulation that women's morality is characterized by care and non-violence. The discovery of the belief in metaphysical and karma as an important schema used for reasoning in moral dilemmas is proof of the deficits in applying 'universal' theories to culturally sensitive and culturally determined phenomena like morality.

Both males and female participant depicted autonomous morality, stating that conceptions of right and wrong can differ from person to person, and that one is responsible for the circumstances one faces, indicating a strong internal locus of control. This finding clearly negates previous researches, using Kohlberg's theory, which claim that criminal offenders reason at lower stages than non-offenders (Blasi 1980; Kohlberg et al. 1983).

A between gender comparison of themes revealed that the female participants' morality was indeed characterized by the sentiment of care, as suggested by Gilligan. The strong belief in 'karma' and the interdependence between karma and morality cannot be corroborated by any of the prime theories of morality. This being culturally specific to the Indian context, it is a critical finding, when looking at morality in the Indian populace. This can probably explain the contradictory presence of both internal and external locus of control found to be characteristic in the respondents of the category - the belief that karma determines who we are to some extent makes the possibility of having an external locus of control; the fact that one can also determine one's fate by modifying one's karma, provides the scope for having an internal locus of control as well. Such a conceptualization of morality cannot be explained using the leading theories in the field, such as Kohlberg's, which would suggest the presence of contradicting levels of moral reasoning, rendered impossible within its framework. The other novel schema emerged from the narratives of the males who believed that traumatic experiences can lead to a positive transformation in one's moral system.

The DIT scores indicate that females have a more micro-moral perspective, perceiving fairness in terms of an equal exchange of favors. Other scores indicate that the individual is concerned with moral issues more on an individual level rather than being society-wide. However, the presence of moral sensitivity and motivation in the same respondents does not seem to corroborate with the DIT scores. This can possibly be evidence to the fact that presence of culture specific moral schemas undermines the universality of morality, claimed by certain theories. Overall, the results of both qualitative and quantitative analyses show that criminals do not necessarily function at lower levels of morality.

Superordinate themes (religious leaders). 'Karma', a culture-specific moral reasoning was found in one male participant who stressed upon the importance of past life deeds or 'karma' on our present situation. Similar to its mention in the narratives of convicted criminals, 'karma' here poses as a framework of the Indian mind's worldview- it's a principle of cause and effect in the Hindu thought, which dominates the Indian culture.

Moral motivation emerged in the female participants who emphasized the importance of being just and the rejection of gender and social roles to pursue the goal of social welfare, thus depicting an internal locus of control. The themes are consonant with the concept of moral motivation as proposed by Rest i.e. the intention to engage in morally correct behavior should be driven form the genuine desire to do so. It also found to be consistent with empirical studies which state that religious characteristics are the strongest predictors of moral attitudes (Ebaugh and Haney 1978; Jelen 1984; Woodrum 1988). This was corroborated by their DIT scores.

The male participants saw religious teaching and divinity as the basis of morality. This is consistent with previous research in the field which claims that orthodox religious groups define moral agent as a spiritual entity or deriving from the divine. However the female participants allowed for a more cohesive existence of the personal elements in moral reasoning as well as the divine elements. This is in accordance with the findings of Scheepers and Slik (1998) who found that the moral attitudes of males were found to be influenced by extrinsic religious aspects such as public interaction within their religious community, while females were affected more by private contemplation or intrinsic religion.

There was the presence of post-conventional thought indicating the highest stage of moral reasoning as per the theory of moral development advanced by Kohlberg. Individuals operating at this stage define right actions by self-chosen principles conscience valid universally. Respondents believed that universal texts, from which these actions were derived, made them universal, confirming that morality can have varied dimensions coexisting in the individual rather than being completely stage-like as suggested by Kohlberg. Autonomous morality

was also found in the narratives, in line with Piaget's definition of autonomous morality, whereby rules are seen as flexible, agreed upon concepts and thought is characterized by concern for welfare of others.

In the between gender comparison both male and female religious leaders have been found to be on the higher levels of moral reasoning, in terms of both Kohlberg and Piaget. The finding is backed by the DIT scores and previous research which suggests that religious affiliation has a significant impact upon the morality of individuals (Voert et. al. 1994). Males showed some degree of extrinsic religious inclination and DIT scores show a higher tendency to conform to societal norms than females.

Comparison of themes (convicted criminals and religious leaders). The themes that have been found to be common across the two groups include: moral sensitivity, moral motivation, moral character, belief in metaphysical, autonomous morality and heteronomous morality.

Moral sensitivity was expressed in the convicts through and awareness of the social code and intention for the well-being of other; the religious leaders expressed the same through a concern for the larger good prior to the individual good and the ability to be morally sound comes from devotion to God. However, the intention to do good for others as well as sensitivity towards needs of others is a common thread across the two groups. Moral motivation was conveyed by the convicts by talking about the positive work that he was doing in the prison, and a genuine desire to help. The religious leaders emphasized the importance of being just and rejected social roles to pursue social welfare. The fact that such an important element of moral judgment is found to occur with equal frequency in both the convicted criminals as well as religious leaders throws to wind commonly held misconceptions about lack of morality in criminals.

A female convicted criminal spoke about 'karma' being an important determinant to life outcomes, conveying her belief in metaphysical, while, the male religious leader stated the moral judgment should derive from the metaphysical because humans are imperfect. Moreover, he also spoke about 'bad karma' which leads to one engaging in amoral acts. Hence this was a similarity in their conceptualizations of who is the authority on morality. It appears then that both groups, with the religious leaders more often, utilize the belief in 'karma' to evaluate moral dilemmas and guide their decisions/actions.

Autonomous morality has also been found to be common across the two groups, with both groups stressing the fact that right and wrong can differ across individuals and intentions behind an act is very critical in determining whether it is right or wrong and may be more important than the act itself. Theoretically contradicting the presence of the earlier schema, heteronomous morality has also been found to exist in both the groups. While the convicted criminal believed that rules laid down by parents and elders are unquestionable, the religious leaders believed that adherence to spiritual guides will lead one to take morally right decisions. Thus, although the authority figures are different about the source of authority, both the groups maintain that adherence is essential. However, this must also be understood within the cultural context of the Indian society wherein obedience to elders/authority is a desirable virtue under all circumstances.

Considering these schemas, there seems to be little difference in the nature of moral reasoning between the convicted criminals and spiritual leaders, with both depicting almost similar conceptualization of the construct.

Considering the implications of the DIT scores, the participants in both the groups have depicted a macro-moral concern with the importance placed on justice and fairness to all, individual good being subservient to common good etc, corroborating the finding. As for the scores on MNS, it has been found to be the highest contributing scheme in the moral reasoning of the convicts while being the second

highest in the case of religious leaders, the latter being less than the former. This may have emerged from the autonomous morality seen to be present to some extent in both the groups.

The religious leaders scored significantly higher than the convicted criminals (35.83 and 22.07 respectively) on the post-conventional schema, the former lying within the average range, while the latter falling below it. This is corroborated by the qualitative finding that reveals a presence of post-conventional morality in religious leaders and pre-conventional in the convicted criminals. However, the qualitative findings are not in complete accordance with the objective results. Several explanations are possible for what appears to be a contradiction. Firstly, the criminal respondents belonged to a lower educational status, with the exception of one, which is bound to have influenced their comprehension of dilemmas in DIT and hence, there is reason to believe that their scores might not be truly representative of their capacity for moral judgment. The fact that there is presence of post conventional thought in the narratives of convicted criminals along with important elements of moral reasoning like moral motivation and moral character further substantiates this claim. The interview which was conducted in the language found comfortable by the respondent (Hindi or English) perhaps allowed them to verbalize the vicissitudes of his/her moral reasoning with better accuracy.

Morality of care was evident in one of the female convicts, consistent with Gilligan's postulation that morality in women is characterized by the sentiment of care arising through the bond between the mother and the child, while for men it is morality of justice and rights based on equality. However, in the female religious leaders a very high level of moral motivation revealed that they placed a high degree of importance on being just and moral, emphasizing the importance of seeking the common good. This finding seems to negate Gilligan's theory and reveals morality may not be very gender-specific, with different conceptualization present in different individuals.

A point of difference that emerged was the fact that religious leaders reported a high degree of internal locus of control, while a poor internal locus of control was evident in the convicts. This can probably be accounted for by the fact that the latter have a poor sense of self-efficacy, as all of them, except for one, see themselves to have been trapped and in a way wrongfully imprisoned (evident in the theme: 'rejects status of offender'). While the former have a high degree of self-efficacy, having chosen the path of spirituality themselves, depicting a high degree of responsibility.

Another line of divergence was evident in how the two groups described the source of high moral functioning. The religious leaders stated that morality emerged majorly from affiliation to religion, suggesting for instance that autonomous morality is subservient to religion. One of the convicts, on the other hand suggested that traumatic and negative experiences can bring about a positive change in oneself and enhance one's moral capabilities. This is also evident in the respondent suggesting that his constructive work undertaken in the prison is more significant now than the crime committed by him earlier.

Overall, the study reveals that morality may not be a construct that necessarily proceeds through stages and can be defined in terms of levels of high and low. It is dynamic, multi-dimensional, influenced by culturally specific factors, and an individual is capable of functioning across the dimensions at any point in time.

Conclusion

The over-arching result of the study is that spiritual leaders function on a higher moral plane than the convicts when viewed through the lens of theoretical perspectives such as Kohlberg's and Piaget's. However, the presence of common themes and schemas of moral reasoning in the two categories of respondents points to the fact that the above finding cannot be accepted at face value. The presence of different levels of moral reasoning and contradicting schemes of morality also challenges the stage-like conceptualization

of morality and indicates that an individual may function at different levels of morality simultaneously. This also might question the commonly held notions of the superiority and inferiority of morality in certain categories of individuals like spiritual leaders and convicted criminals.

Limitations

This study, while proposing brand new schemas of moral reasoning and posing critical questions on stage conceptualization of morality, also suffers from some limitations. Though the intent of this study was exploratory and qualitative in nature with no overt objective of proposing theory or drawing generalizations, the small sample size of four convicted criminals and four religious leaders is a cause of concern.

Incidental, purposive sampling and snow ball sampling methods were used to identify and collect sample for the study. The use of non-probability sampling methods hence also raises questions about representativeness and exhaustiveness of the presented results. While gender was controlled for, other relevant socio-demographic details like the educational background, socio-economic status, marital status and religion was not controlled for. However, it is important to note that given the unique nature of the population of interest, these methods of sampling were perhaps most feasible.

The present study is a cross sectional design which involved one-time assessment of each respondent. As mentioned in the section on gaps of previous literature, a cross sectional assessment is bound to provide a circumscribed version of the person's moral reasoning rather than its development, its fluctuations and its transformations. The paucity of time and the inaccessibility of the target populations however, did not allow addressing this limitation.

The Defining Issues Test (DIT) was used to supplement information obtained from the qualitative interviews. However, conduction of DIT proved to be difficult with the convicted criminals as majority of them hailed from below average educational status. Hence, their comprehension of the DIT dilemmas and issues related to them was perhaps not very accurate.

Implications and Future Directions

The present study offers many insights and criticisms into the conceptualization of morality. As mentioned in the discussion, the study revealed the presence of unique, culture specific worldviews like the belief in karma and the attribution of morality to divinity in the thinking patterns of both convicts and religious leaders. This has serious implications for the current utilization of theories of morality as being universally applicable and points out the deficits of imposing structured assessment tools on complex phenomena like moral judgment. The study also dispels commonly held misconceptions about convicts and religious leaders, the two often perceived to be at two polar ends of moral reasoning. By drawing parallels between the patterns of moral sensitivity, moral motivation and moral character of the two groups, this study extends to providing valuable information to the legal/ judicial systems of convicting criminals and planning their rehabilitation. Future research may address the drawbacks of the present study in order to provide for more robust, conclusive findings. For e.g. further study of moral reasoning in the general population as well and attempt to evaluate moral judgment on a longitudinal basis. Research could also endeavor to operationalize culture into research based, accessible to assessment terms in order to better appreciate the role of culture in building and shaping morality.

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