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Moral reasoning and its correlates in job applicants

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The aim of this study was to verify the applicability of the Test of Moral Reasoning (TMR) in the selection of job applicants and to see how it correlated with education, intelligence, and the "big five" personality traits. The study included 210 participants (132 women and 78 men) who applied for various positions in the banking sector. Our findings have confirmed the applicability of TMR for recruitment because they showed that TMR did not allow the candidates to fake their responses. Furthermore, they have confirmed Kohlberg's views that general intelligence and education are the main determinants of moral development (positive correlation), whereas tendency towards socially desirable responding showed a negative correlation.

KEY WORDS: *education; intelligence; moral reasoning; personality; selection situation*

Morality was first discussed by philosophers and theologians. Psychologists started to show interest only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Behaviourists focused on behaviour, psychoanalysts on the internalisation of social norms, and cognitive psychologists studied moral reasoning, that is, the processes involved in making decisions in morally doubtful situations (1). Jean Piaget was the first to observe that cognitive development affects reasoning (2) and proposed two stages of moral development: the stage of heteronomous morality, which is determined by the authority of people who play a significant role in the child's life (age 5 to 10), and the stage of autonomous morality, characterised by critical consideration of the rules and a standards of justice arising from reciprocity.

Kohlberg's stages of moral development

Kohlberg built on Piaget's theory and took it further by saying that moral development continues until adulthood (3). He proposed six stages of moral development divided in three levels. The preconventional level is characterised by respect for others, as in Piaget's stage of heteronomous morality. In the first stage, individuals are focused on punishment and obedience and in the second on the satisfaction of personal needs in such a way that the rules are followed as long as they accord with personal interest. The third stage is a transition to the conventional level, characterised by respect for rules to maintain positive relationships and social order (2). Morally right is what is consistent with the expectations of the loved ones. In the fourth stage, the norms of the loved ones are broadened by the social law. At the postconventional level, morality is seen as a set of abstract principles and values that underlie social laws but not always coincide with them (stage five) and are universal in the sense that they apply to all situations and social groups (stage six).

Measuring moral development

There are several tests of moral reasoning. The instrument designed by Kohlberg himself is called the Moral Judgment Interview (MJI) (4). As the instruments developed, they sought to eliminate earlier deficiencies. Currently, the common instruments are the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (5) and Moral Judgment Test (MJT) (6). In our study, we used the Test of Moral Reasoning (TMR) (7). This test has been designed in Croatian and validated in Croatian participants.

The logical question is which factors affect moral reasoning or decision-making in morally doubtful situations. One such factor is gender. Most studies have established no gender differences in moral judgment (8) and those that have - usually relying on the application and interpretation of moral dilemmas that are closely related to the real lives of the participants (9) - were flawed with bias.

Cognitivists assume that moral development depends on two key processes: cognitive development and education. Studies indeed show that education, or the number of years of schooling, is one of the strongest predictors of moral reasoning (2). In their review article which encompassed the results of 172 studies, King and Mayhew (10) draw the conclusion that higher education increases the level of moral reasoning dramatically. The relationship between cognitive and moral development has been confirmed by many authors (11-13). Hernstein and Murray (14), for example, claim that people with lower IQ are more prone to deviant and criminal behaviour, while those with IQ above 125 (so called »cognitive elite«) commit crimes to a much lesser

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extent, engage less in excessive consumption of drugs and alcohol, have lower unemployment rate, and are usually successful in their careers. In addition, a whole series of studies has reported that gifted individuals have better developed moral reasoning than their peers (15-17).

Benefits of moral development assessment for the selection of personnel

In the context of selection of job candidates the study of moral reasoning is a promising, yet poorly explored area. A typical selection procedure involves measuring of specific, work-related, usually intellectual and/or motor skills. Many psychologists believe that general mental ability, that is, intelligence, is the universal and best predictor of success at work (18). Over the last fifteen years, the use of personality questionnaires in the selection process has increased globally (19) and in Croatia (20). However, personality questionnaires raise the issue of bias and false answers by job candidates who tend to put their best foot forward (21). To overcome this bias and get a more reliable insight into the personality of the candidates, standard selection procedures now also include intelligence tests and various measures of socially desirable responding. However, tests that assess the ethical or moral dimension of the individual still do not make part of the standard selection procedures. This is surprising, considering how much damage can an unethical person cause to an organisation. Furthermore, tests of moral reasoning have a great advantage over personality questionnaires inasmuch as they minimise the effect of falsehood and bias (22).

The primary aim of this study was to assess the applicability of a test of moral reasoning in job recruitment. The secondary aim was to test two hypotheses: the first was that individuals with higher level of education would have higher level of moral reasoning. The second was that moral reasoning would correlate with intelligence and the following personality traits: conscientiousness and openness (positively) and socially desirable responding (negatively). We did not expect differences in moral reasoning between the genders.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

The study included 210 participants aged between 19 and 32 years applying for a job in the banking sector in Croatia. Seventy eight were men and 132 women; 150 held university degrees (economists, lawyers, IT specialists) and 60 secondary school degree (grammar school or school of economics).

All participants completed four questionnaires (see below) in groups no bigger than 20 at 16 candidate screenings in 2015 and 2016. Completing all four questionnaires took about 70 minutes. The first part of the screening involved filling in forms of formal importance to the employer and a test of specific knowledge.

The second part included the Test of Dynamic Series (TDS) (23), which is a nonverbal intelligence test focused on the dynamics of thought in the area of concrete relationships and ability to detect logical connections between symbolic tasks. It contains 30 tasks (dynamic series) of six elements each for which the respondent must establish a logical sequence. The respondent's final result is formed as the sum of correct answers to all the tasks.

The third part consisted of completing the Test of Moral Reasoning (TMR) (7), personality questionnaire [Five Factor Nonverbal Personality Questionnaire – FF-NPQ (24)], and the Scale of Socially Desirable Responding (SDR scale) (25). The Test of Moral Reasoning consisted of two moral dilemmas, described in detail, in which a character in the story makes a certain decision. The decision is followed by twelve arguments, six in favour and six against the decision. These arguments reflect the six Kohlberg's stages of moral development. The respondent's task is to score each argument as acceptable or unacceptable on a six-point scale (1 to 3 acceptable; -1 to -3 unacceptable) (see Appendix at the end of the article). The level of moral reasoning is expressed as the so-called Index of Moral Reasoning (IMR), which reflects the deviations from the "optimal profile" (detailed procedure to calculate the index is given in reference 7). In general, IMR has a normal and somewhat leptokurtic distribution (M=0.49, SD=0.08). The results of the tests performed to date have shown good metric characteristics for this measurement instrument, and IMR has been confirmed as a valid indicator (with both criterion and construct validity) of the level of moral reasoning.

The Five-Factor Nonverbal Personality Questionnaire (FF-NPQ) (21) consisted of 60 items of nonverbal type (drawings in which an individual behaves in specific ways in various situations), and the task of the respondents was to assess how likely they would behave in the manner shown in the picture (on a scale of seven). The total score for each of the "big five" dimensions of personality (extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness) is the sum of scores for the 12 corresponding items. The questionnaire has been validated cross-culturally on a large sample of respondents. All studies conducted so far show a clear five-factor structure of the questionnaire and sufficient internal consistency for all subscales/ dimensions of personality ($0.77<r_{tt}<0.86$).

The Scale of Socially Desirable Responding (25) consisted of 20 statements to which the respondents answered with either "yes" or "no", depending on whether the statement applied to them or not. The items describe either socially desirable traits or behaviours that are extremely rare or socially undesirable traits or behaviours that are very common in real life. The total score is the sum of all responses. Higher scores indicate a greater tendency towards social desirability. The scale has one-dimensional structure and high internal consistency in the personnel selection situation ($r_{tt}=0.92$) (36).

Statistical analysis

For statistical analysis we used the 2015 Statistica version 13 (Dell Inc, Tulsa, USA.). In addition to descriptive statistics, we ran ANOVA and ANCOVA to assess significant determinants of IMR among the genders and levels of education and univariate multiple regression models to single out predictors of IMR among personality traits, intelligence, and socially desirable responses.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results of TMR expressed as IMR and assessed validity of arguments for each stage of moral reasoning.

Mean IMR was at the mid-point of theoretical range of results (0 to 1), which corresponds to the expected value and indicates normal distribution. The respondents generally found more important those arguments that corresponded to the higher stages of moral reasoning (this correlation was almost linear).

Table 1 *Index of moral reasoning and Kohlberg's moral development stage scores obtained with the Test of Moral Reasoning in study participants*

	Mean±SD
IMR	0.48±0.07
Stage 1	11.63±1.03
Stage 2	11.65±1.31
Stage 3	12.05±1.00
Stage 4	12.77±1.09
Stage 5	13.02±0.95
Stage 6	13.31±0.84

IMR: index of moral reasoning. Stages 1-6 denote lower to higher moral development stages according to Kohlberg (6)

Gender and educational level as determinants of moral reasoning

Table 2 shows a significant difference ($p<0.05$) in IMR between the genders (men *vs*. women) and levels of education (secondary school *vs*. university).

This prompted us to look for a reason, since the gender effect on IMR was unexpected. Our preliminary analysis of the TDS results showed that men and women differed in general intellectual ability [$F(1/208)=6.50$; $p<0.05$; $M_{men}=15.5$, $M_{women}=13.84$)] in favour of the men (due to sample characteristics we could not control) and revealed a significant correlation between general intellectual ability and IMR ($r=0.29$; $df=208$; $p<0.01$). Before running the analysis of covariance, we made sure that homogeneity of regression was satisfactory. This means that the correlations for each level of independent variable ($r_{women}=0.251$; $df=130$; $p<0.01$ and $r_{men}=0.257$; $df=76$; $p<0.01$) were equal ($t=0.076$; $df=208$; $p>0.05$). Then we ran ANCOVA with general intellectual abilities as a potential covariate (Table 3), and it showed no real difference between the genders, i.e. the difference can be attributed to the mismatch in intellectual abilities between the gender groups. The level of education, however, was still a significant determinant of IMR.

Table 2 *Analysis of variance of the index of moral reasoning with regard to gender and educational level*

ANOVA				
Effects	df	MSE	F	p (F)
Gender	1	0.03	4.99	0.0265*
Education	1	0.03	5.59	0.0189*
Interaction	206	0,01	0.11	0.7314

ANOVA: analysis of variance; df :degrees of freedom; MSE: error mean square; F: F-ratio; p (F): significance of F-ratio
** - statistically significant ($p<0.05$)*

Personality traits, general intellectual ability, and socially desirable responding as predictors of moral reasoning

We ran univariate multiple regression analysis with IMR as the criterion variable and general intellectual ability, the "big five" personality traits, and socially desirable responding as potential predictors (Table 5).

General intellectual ability and social desirability explained nearly 13 % of the variance in moral reasoning. Intellectual ability showed the greatest predictive value. None of the personality traits turned out to be a significant predictor of moral reasoning, most probably because the answers given by the participants highly depend on socially desirable responding. Socially desirable responding, in turn, inversely correlated with moral reasoning; candidates who give socially desirable answers often show a lower level of moral reasoning. As shown in Table 6, socially desirable responding also significantly correlated with agreeableness (simulation) and inversely correlated with neuroticism (dissimulation).

Table 3 *IMR analysis of covariance with regard to gender and educational level (with general intelligence used as covariate)*

ANCOVA				
Effects	df	MSE	F	p (F)
General intelligence	1	0.06	11.961	.0006*
Gender	1	0.018	3.519	.0620
Education	1	0.031	6.151	.0139*
Interaction	206	0.005		

ANCOVA: analysis of covariance; *df:degrees of freedom; MSE: error mean square; F: F-ratio; p (F): significance of F-ratio*
** - statistically significant ($p<0.05$)*

Table 4 *IMR across subgroups (gender and education)*

		N	M±sd
		210	0.488±0.076
men		78	0.509±0.076
women		132	0.476±0.073
university		148	0.500±0.074
secondary school		62	0.461±0.074
men	university	65	0.514±0.076
men	high school	13	0.487±0.075
women	university	83	0.489±0.070
women	high school	49	0.454±0.073

DISCUSSION

Our findings have confirmed our expectations about the levels of moral reasoning in study participants/job applicants. The scoring trend (Table 1) that rises with the stages of moral development is in line with the findings of other authors (6) who, unlike Kohlberg, believe that postconventional moral reasoning is not limited to »the philosophical and intellectual elite«, but that other people are capable of it as well. It is rather a matter of using a proper measuring instrument to identify these capabilities, and TMR is one such instrument.

Our findings also confirm the validity of TMR in terms of Lind's statement that "In a truly moral dilemma, subjects should prefer the stages of moral reasoning in the order of their number, with highest preference for stage-six reasoning and lowest preference for stage-one reasoning" (26). IMR mean values confirm Lind's view that responses cannot be faked with this kind of measuring instrument (6, 27). This makes TMR useful in a personnel selection situation, as it removes the problem of socially desirable responding, which is almost always present at job interviews/screening and affects all personality trait measures except for intellectual ability and knowledge.

The difference in the level of moral reasoning between the genders in our study reflects the mismatch in general intellectual ability between our gender groups (sample). When this was accounted for, our findings, in fact, corroborated Kohlberg's view (28) that moral development is mainly determined by intellectual skills and education and not by gender. They also corroborate the views of other authors who contributed to the clarification of the construct of moral reasoning (6, 10).

When it comes to other predictors of moral reasoning, general intellectual ability and socially desirable responding were the only significant predictors of moral reasoning. Many other studies have found no significant correlation between moral reasoning and various "non-cognitive" variables, such as family relationships, personality, empathy, and moral emotions, even in non-selection situations (29, 30).

We expected that openness, one of the "big five" personality traits, would correlate with the index of moral reasoning by proxy, that is, because openness has often been reported to correlate with intelligence (28). However, our results have disproved our assumption (Table 6). This is probably because job candidates perceived some of the items related to openness as desirable qualities for the job they were competing for and "embellished" them. The same may be the reason why conscientiousness did not significantly correlate with IMR.

It is only fair to reflect on the limitations of our study. We have already mentioned the mismatch between genders and their intellectual ability. Another one is the absence of a matching control group. With this group, our results about moral reasoning would have certainly had more weight, especially in selection situations. The last limitation is that our study did not include real behavioural measures at the workplace, which means that we have not evaluated the morality of employees in their real work situations. Of course, research of this type requires longitudinal approach, and we hope to carry one out in the future.

Limitations aside, our findings encourage the use of TMR in the selection of candidates for various types of jobs for which the ethical profile of the candidate is important to the employer. Its main advantage is that it does not allow for fake responses and social desirability bias. In many other tests, such as integrity, mental health, and value orientations, this bias largely reduces their prognostic validity.

Of course, reasoning morally and acting morally do not always coincide, but some (even significant) correlation between the stage of moral reasoning and action (such as helping behaviours, job performance, cheating, and

Table 5 *Results of multiple regression analysis with the index of moral reasoning as criterion variable*

Predictors	Beta	SE (beta)	t (beta)	p (beta)
General intelligence	0.2849	0.0685	4.154	0.0001
Extraversion	-0.0292	0.0740	-0.395	0.6931
Agreeableness	-0.1092	0.0819	-1.333	0.1839
Conscientiousness	0.0038	0.0785	0.048	0.9613
Neuroticism	-0.1351	0.0729	-1.852	0.0654
Openness	0.0419	0.0792	0.530	0.5966
Social desirability	-0.1784	0.0718	-2.484	0.0137

$R(7/210)=0.356$, $p<0.01$; SE: standard error of the estimate - 0.07250

Table 6 *Matrix of intercorrelations between the examined variables in job applicants*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender		0.22**	-0.21**	0.03	-0.01	-0.01	0.41**	0.02	-0.05	-0.21**
2. Education			0.17*	-0.07	-0.08	0.01	-0.12	-0.09	-0.06	0.23**
3. General intelligence				0.01	0.13	0.27**	-0.06	0.11	-0.01	0.29**
4. Extraversion					-0.15*	0.18**	0.15*	0.34**	-0.13	0.01
5. Agreeableness						0.39**	-0.28**	0.32**	0.27**	-0.06
6. Conscientiousness							0.00	0.40**	0.02	0.05
7. Neuroticism								0.08	0.35**	-0.06
8. Openness									-0.03	0.03
9. Social desirability										-0.16*
10. IMR										

*p<0.05; **p<0.01
Notes:
For dichotomous variables (gender and education), the point-biserial correlation coefficient was used
2. Gender codes: male 1, female 2
Education codes: secondary school level 1, university level 2

stealing) seems to persists (32, 33). Therefore, in our future research we shall focus on the prognostic validity of TMR for success in jobs that are challenging not only intellectually but also ethically.

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Moralno rasuđivanje i njegovi korelati u selekcijskoj situaciji

Cilj ovog istraživanja bio je provjeriti primjenjivost testa moralnoga rasuđivanja u selekcijskoj situaciji te ispitati neke od potencijalnih korelata moralnoga rasuđivanja u kandidata za posao. U istraživanju je sudjelovalo 210 osoba koje su pristupile selekcijskoj situaciji odabira kandidata za različita radna mjesta u bankarskom sektoru. Korišteni mjerni instrumenti bili su Test moralnoga rasuđivanja (TMR), Test dinamičkih nizova (TDN) (neverbalni test za procjenu generalnih intelektualnih sposobnosti), FF-NPQ (neverbalni test *big five* osobina ličnosti) i TESPO (skala tendencije k socijalno poželjnom odgovaranju). Dobiveni rezultati idu u prilog primjenjivosti mjernog instrumenta u selekcijskoj situaciji jer se pokazalo da kandidati nisu u stanju simulirati odgovore na TMR-u. Nadalje, dobiveni rezultati u skladu su s Kolbergovim postavkama, prema kojima su intelektualne sposobnosti i obrazovanje pojedinca glavne odrednice moralnoga razvoja. Naime, značajni prediktori indeksa moralnoga rasuđivanja u selekcijskoj situaciji bili su generalne intelektualne sposobnosti i razina obrazovanja kandidata u očekivanom smjeru te tendencija k socijalno poželjnom odgovaranju (negativna povezanost).

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *inteligencija; ličnost; moralno rasuđivanje; selekcijska situacija; obrazovanje*

Appendix

Example of a moral dilemma and counter arguments representing each of the six stages of moral reasoning

A wife of a terminally ill man found herself in a truly misfortunate life situation. Physicians gave him a couple more months to live. In the same hospital there was a young girl who urgently needed pancreas transplantation or she would die. The new organ, if transplanted in time, would secure her a long life. The physicians asked the man's wife if she would let her husband donate the organ, as he was a perfect match, but stressed that the husband most likely would not survive the operation. The wife was given time to make her decision by tomorrow. She decided that she would not allow the transplantation.

Below are the arguments **against** the wife's decision. To which extent do you find them acceptable?

-3) completely unacceptable
-2) mostly unacceptable
-1) unacceptable to a smaller degree
1) acceptable to a smaller degree
2) mostly acceptable
3) completely acceptable

Because she did not agree to transplantation, she will have to face disapproval of her family and friends who do not support her decision. (S1)	-3	-2	-1	1	2	3
Because she did not agree to transplantation, she will feel bad and have guilty conscience. (S2)	-3	-2	-1	1	2	3
She was the only one who could have saved the sick girl. If she had decided otherwise, the girl would have had a long and happy life, and everyone would be happier for that. (S5)	-3	-2	-1	1	2	3
Because she did not agree to transplantation, she opposed the hospital policy that gives younger patients priority treatment in urgent situations. (S4)	-3	-2	-1	1	2	3
Because she did not agree to transplantation, she will have to face the resentment of the young girl's parents. (S3)	-3	-2	-1	1	2	3
The condition of the sick girl and her chances to have a long and prosperous life justify the exception to the wife's marital commitment to her husband and preserving his life. (S6)	-3	-2	-1	1	2	3