

## Moral Judgments and Self-Presentations

JOHN A. JOHNSON AND ROBERT HOGAN

*The Johns Hopkins University*

Meehan, Woll, and Abbott (*Journal of Research in Personality*, 1979, 13, 25-38) have shown that scores on Hogan's Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA) are affected by instructions to simulate politically liberal or conservative attitudes. They also found that scores are affected by instructions to present one's self in a socially desirable or undesirable light, and that group ratings of the social desirability of the items could account for as much as 78% of the item response variance. Meehan et al. argue from these data that the SEA is a measure of political attitudes rather than moral judgments, and that the SEA is susceptible to dissimulation in the form of role playing and impression management. The present paper argues that test-taking is a form of self-presentation, identical to what goes on in everyday social interaction; this renders the Meehan et al. findings meaningful rather than problematic. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relationship between personality testing, self-presentation, moral judgments, and political attitudes.

A recent paper by Meehan, Woll, and Abbott (1979) suggests that the Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA; Hogan, 1970)—purportedly a measure of moral judgment—is susceptible to dissimulation in the form of role-playing and impression management. The paper also suggests that the meaning of SEA scores is contaminated by the social desirability of the items, and finally, that the SEA should be reconceptualized as a measure of political and social attitudes. The evidence they present to support these claims has implications that go far beyond an evaluation of the SEA, and raises questions about the meaning of all measures of moral judgment. In fact, the paper raises questions about the meaning of *any* self-report measure—be it a measure of moral judgment, political attitudes, or personality.

Because the implications of the Meehan et al. research are so far reaching, and because the results are apt to be misunderstood, we feel a review of their findings is in order. Briefly, our goals are (1) to point out that the Meehan et al. findings are exactly what we would have predicted; (2) to

The requests for reprints should be sent to Robert Hogan, Department of Psychology, The Johns Hopkins University, 34th and Charles Streets, Baltimore MD 21218.

clarify further our view regarding the meaning of item responses on self-report measures; and (3) to discuss, in the context of our theory of item responses, the relationship between personality, moral judgment, and political attitudes.

### A SUMMARY OF THE MEEHAN ET AL. FINDINGS

Meehan et al. conducted three studies. Subjects in the first study completed one of two parallel forms of the SEA under standard instructions, and then completed the second form, imagining they were applying for a job with a politically liberal or a politically conservative social action group. Every subject in the "fake liberal" condition lowered his or her score on the SEA (i.e., scored more in the direction of the ethics of personal conscience), and every subject in the "fake conservative" condition raised his or her SEA score (i.e., scored more in the direction of the ethics of social responsibility).

Subjects in the second study were also asked to complete one form of the SEA under standard conditions, but were asked to present themselves in a favorable or unfavorable manner on the second form. In the "fake good" condition, 12 students raised their scores, 8 lowered their scores, and 5 remained the same. In the "fake bad" condition, the group's mean score increased one standard deviation above the mean under standard conditions, though not every subject raised his or her score.

In the final study, a third group of subjects rated the social desirability of the alternative items on the SEA. Meehan et al. found that between 55 and 78% of the item response variance under standard conditions in the first two experiments could be accounted for by the rated social desirability of the items. The score of someone who would check the more socially desirable response in every case was found to be 17—the mean score obtained under both standard and "fake good" instructions.

### THE MEANING OF THE MEEHAN ET AL. FINDINGS

Meehan et al. interpret both the lability of SEA scores under explicit role-playing conditions and the SEA's correlation with social desirability as factors that detract from the validity of the SEA as a measure of moral judgment. This interpretation is consistent with the classic view that responses to items on self-report measures are a second best source of information about a subject's actual behavior or attitudes, appropriate only when direct assessment of the subject's behavior or attitudes is impossible or not practical (cf. Meehl, 1945). On this classic theory of item responses, an ideal self-report test would elicit responses about the subject's real, actual behavior or attitudes, exactly as if the subject were responding in a laboratory experiment. An ideal test would not be affected by role-playing instructions or a subject's desire to present him/herself in

a socially desirable light, because these influences are forms of lying or misrepresentation—i.e., distortions of actual behavior. In the context of the classic theory of item responses, the Meehan et al. findings cast doubt on the validity of the SEA.

There is, however, an alternative view of item responses that leads to a different interpretation of the Meehan et al. findings. Specifically, a role-theoretical account of item responses (cf. Mills & Hogan, 1978) suggests that item endorsements are not reports of actual behavior or attitudes, but symbolic self-presentations or attempts to communicate one's covert self-image—the view that one would like others to credit one with. From this perspective, all test taking is a kind of self-presentation—subjects present themselves using test items much as they present themselves in any other social interaction—and this makes the Meehan et al. findings meaningful rather than problematic. A review of their findings bears out this assertion.

The first experiment found significant differences between self-reports gathered under “standard” conditions and “role-playing” conditions. Role theory would suggest that under standard instructions, subjects are presenting themselves to an unspecified audience (i.e., the generalized other—cf. Mead, 1934). Under role-playing instructions, the audience becomes explicit and well-defined. It is no surprise to role theorists that *every* subject raised or lowered his or her score in the prescribed direction under the given role-playing instructions. Whether one would want to call this dissimulation, however, is another question altogether. We certainly present ourselves differently to different audiences in everyday life, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between “pretending,” “just acting,” or “dissimulating” on the one hand, and “being authentic” or “expressing one's real self” on the other (cf. Goffman, 1959). Sincerity, as Sartre observes, is the mark of a person who has been taken in by his own act.

In the second experiment, instructions to “look good” resulted in some lowered scores, some unchanged scores, and even more increased scores. Instructions to “look bad” resulted in an increase in the mean score, but not everyone raised his or her score. Consistent with a role-theoretical point of view, these mixed results clearly indicate that people differ in their conception of what is meant by “looking good” or “looking bad.” Specifically, what constitutes looking good or bad depends upon one's view of the expectations of the audience, and in this experiment, the audience is unspecified.

The fact that the definition of looking good or looking bad depends upon the audience as well as the test taker (cf. Taylor, 1959) all but vitiates the Meehan et al. interpretation of their results in Experiment 3. Although people can reach some consensus about the general social desirability of

an item, the individual differences in, and context-dependency of, these ratings makes it infeasible to interpret test scores simply in terms of social desirability. An additional problem for the social desirability view is the fact that some people are relatively uninterested in what others think of them, and still others are perfectly willing to paint a dismal, unpleasant, socially undesirable picture of themselves. This fact has important diagnostic consequences (utilized, for example, by the MMPI), and simply can not be handled by a social desirability theory of item responses (cf. Block, 1965).

A final concern of Meehan et al. is that the SEA—a purported measure of moral judgment—is contaminated by political and social attitudes. To answer this problem, let us provide some background regarding the development of the SEA.

### MORAL JUDGMENTS AND POLITICAL JUDGMENTS

The SEA was initially devised to verify two hunches about Kohlberg's (1963) theory regarding the development of moral judgment. The first hunch was that Kohlberg's model contained implicit political biases (cf. Hogan & Emler, 1978), that it was an attempt to provide "scientific" evidence for the moral superiority of a liberal political philosophy as over against a conservative view. Specifically, the content of Kohlberg's Stage 5 responses closely resembled British Utilitarianism, positive law morality (Hart, 1962), or what Weber (1921) called the ethics of responsibility—a moderately conservative perspective in the context of the American political climate in the late 1960s. Similarly, the published protocols from Kohlberg's Stage 6 sounded like Kantian moral philosophy, higher law morality (Fuller, 1964), or what Weber called the ethics of conscience; here the emphasis is on private moral visions and civil disobedience, making this a liberal to radical posture in the context of the war protest movement of the late 1960's.

The second hunch—in actuality more an article of faith—was that the Kohlberg Moral Judgment Scale was a projective measure of personality rather than index of cognitive development. It seemed impossible to demonstrate that it was a personality measure, however, because scores on the test (like scores on most projective tests) are inherently unreliable (Kurtines & Grief, 1974). Hence the SEA was developed to provide a reliable index of the ethics of conscience and the ethics of responsibility which could then be used to verify these hunches.

Five short statements from utilitarian and conservative moral and political philosophers and five from writers in the higher law tradition were assembled; these statements sounded much like the protocols Kohlberg offered as examples of Stages 5 and 6 reasoning. Several hundred paraphrases of these statements were written along with some items that seemed psychologically related to them. Two hundred of these items were

put in booklets and given to a large number of volunteers. All the items were correlated with the original 10 statements, and the 60 items with the highest correlations were retained. The items were then separated into two 35-item forms. Subsequent research has shown that there are clear cut personality correlates of the two viewpoints represented on the scale (Hogan, 1970; Hogan & Dickstein, 1972). The existence of these correlates indirectly substantiates the view that the Kohlberg Moral Judgment Scale is a projective personality test; they also call into question the view that Kohlberg's Stage 6 is more moral than Stage 5, and represents an inevitable cognitive advance over Stage 5 reasoning. Indeed, Kohlberg (1978) no longer makes such a claim. Finally, there is good evidence that the ethics of responsibility (high SEA scores) is associated with conservative political views, whereas the ethics of conscience (low SEA scores) is associated with liberal political views (Lorr & Zea, 1977).

Meehan et al. feel that, because of the political implications of SEA scores, the test is better regarded as a measure of political than moral judgments. This of course assumes that one can distinguish clearly between the domains of morality and politics, an assumption that Kohlberg's writings have done much to popularize. We do not share this assumption. Rather, we regard morality and politics as inevitably if ambiguously intertwined. All political judgments are moral judgments because they ultimately rest on choices about human values. Not all moral judgments are political judgments, but many are. Consider, for example, the statement that one shouldn't steal because if everyone stole we could have no society—is this a moral or a political claim? Is John Rawls' book, *On Justice*, a treatise on morality or politics? What about Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*? Obviously they are both. We would argue finally that not only are morality and politics linked, but that they ought to be. The only thing worse than a moral zealot who doesn't care about the political consequences of his or her actions is a psychopathic politician whose actions are uninformed by a moral vision (again, this point was made by Weber, 1921).

We regard moral and political judgments as closely related for yet another reason—both are reflections of a person's personality. Although this position is not popular in social psychology today, we feel that it is correct (see also Smith, 1980 for a defense of this old-fashioned view). This point has been difficult to demonstrate directly with regard to the Kohlberg model, largely, we feel, because of the inherent unreliability of Kohlberg's stage scores.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We can summarize our argument and conclusions in terms of nine points. First, the SEA is a measure of moral judgment by definition, given the manner in which the test was constructed.

Second, the SEA is contaminated by liberalism—conservatism—i.e., by political attitudes. But so are Stages 5 and 6 of the Kohlberg moral development model, although this isn't as well appreciated as it should be.

Third, *all* measures of moral judgment will be confounded by political attitudes because that is the way things are; it is extraordinarily difficult to separate the domains of morality and politics, except in certain extreme cases.

Fourth, the SEA is susceptible to self-presentational effects, but so are all other measures of moral judgment—the Kohlberg Moral Judgment Scale, the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1974), and Rokeach's (1973) Value Schedule. This statement is more of an hypothesis since these other measures have not been critically evaluated in terms of their susceptibility to self-presentational effects (see, however, McGeorge, 1975), but we are confident of the outcome of such evaluations.

Fifth, the reason moral judgment measures are susceptible to self-presentation effects (as are measures of political attitudes, vocational interests, as well as projective and objective personality tests) becomes clear when one considers the dynamics of item responding. People use their responses to items on tests and questionnaires as a means of telling an audience (which must be defined either by the subject or the test administrator) how he or she wants to be regarded; peoples' responses to items on any psychometric device are organized in terms of their underlying self-images. Thus all these tests, at the level of individual item responses, are indirect measures of personality.

Sixth, a liberal or conservative self-image is a major determinant of moral and political judgments; all moral and political judgment measures will be affected by this aspect of self-image. Nonetheless, correlations between these self-images and positions on contemporary political topics will be only modest. The reason is that one's stand on any single issue is a one item test with inherently limited reliability.

Seventh, the essence of a liberal self-image is that of one who likes and trusts other people, who distrusts established authority and institutionalized procedures (because they dehumanize people), and who prefers change, novelty, and innovation for its own sake. On the other hand, the essence of a conservative self-image is that of one who distrusts other people, who favors (not trusts) established authority and institutionalized procedures (because they are useful in controlling the inherently untrustworthy behavior of others), and who is suspicious of change and innovation because one never knows what motivates others to seek it.

Finally, in view of the anticonservative trends in much social psychological writing (Hogan & Emler, 1978), it is perhaps not redundant to note in closing that neither self-image (liberal *nor* conservative) is inher-

ently more moral or cognitively advanced, and that both kinds of people are necessary in a viable and open society.

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