Moral Judgment, Personality, and Attitudes Toward Authority

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Two studies investigating attitudes toward authority using Hogan's Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA) clarify the dynamics of conformity. The SEA and a semantic differential were administered to 205 male and 275 female students at a Maryland community college. The subjects were asked to rate the concepts mother, father, police, and government on 10 evaluative adjective pairs. Persons endorsing the "ethics of social responsibility" held more favorable attitudes toward authority than did those endorsing the "ethics of personal conscience." This result was replicated using 43 male and 46 female students at The Johns Hopkins University. The implications of these findings for research on social compliance are discussed.

The Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA; Hogan, 1970; Johnson & Hogan, in press) was initially devised to verify two hunches about Kohlberg's (1963) theory of moral development. The first was that Kohlberg's model contained implicit political biases (cf. Hogan & Emler, 1978)—that it attempted to provide "scientific" evidence for the moral superiority of a liberal political philosophy over a conservative view. Specifically, the content of Kohlberg's Stage 5 responses seemed closely to resemble what Weber (1921/1946) 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 were similar to what Weber called the ethics of personal conscience, in which 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 1960s.

The second hunch was that the Kohlberg Moral Judgment Scale was a projective measure of personality rather than an index of cognitive development. Scores on Kohlberg's measure (like scores on most projective tests) are, however, inherently unreliable (Kurtines & Grief, 1974). Hence the SEA was developed to provide a reliable index of the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of personal conscience that could then be used to verify these hunches.

Data reported by Hogan (1970) indicate that Weber's ethical continuum can indeed be reliably and validly assessed. The parallel form reliability of the SEA in an initial sample was .97; in a subsequent sample, the reliability was .88. The scale strongly discriminated a group of political activists from a group of policemen in the San Francisco Bay area, and student activists from ROTC seniors at the Johns Hopkins University.

Subsequent research with the SEA suggests that there are clear personological syndromes associated with Weber's two forms of moral reasoning. Low scorers on the SEA (ethics of personal conscience orientation) tend to be independent, innovative, and form-creating, but also impulsive, opportunistic, and irresponsible. On the other hand, high scorers (ethics of responsibility orientation) tend to be reasonable, helpful, and dependable, as well as conventional and resistant to change. If one can assume that the SEA is a valid surrogate measure of Kohlberg's Stages 5 and 6, the existence of personality correlates for both these stages supports two conclusions. First, it appears that
personality factors as well as reasoning ability are involved in moral judgments. Second, Stage 6 is not an inevitable moral advance over Stage 5, because positive and negative personality traits are associated with both forms of moral reasoning.

Further research with the SEA reveals that the personality syndromes tapped by the scale have implications for a wide range of human affairs. The scale predicts attitudes toward the poor (McDonald, 1971), liberalism-conservatism (Lorr & Zea, 1977), kind and form of criminal offense (Williams, Vaughn, & Sabia, 1976), and perceptions of injustice (Hogan & Dickstein, 1972). The latter study is particularly interesting because it shows that persons adopting the ethics of personal conscience like and trust other people, whereas persons who endorse the ethics of social responsibility distrust other people.

The present study extends our knowledge of the dynamics of conformity by exploring the relationship between the SEA and attitudes toward different types of authority. Persons endorsing the ethics of conscience, because they like and trust other people, should regard authority in a negative way—as unnecessary, inhibiting, and threatening individual freedom. Conversely, persons advocating the ethics of responsibility should be more positively disposed toward authority, regarding it as both inevitable and unavoidable if there is to be any society at all—as the focal mechanism by which social controls are used to regulate the wayward impulses of others.

We can make a more precise prediction, however—that the relationship between moral posture and attitudes toward authority will be stronger for public, impersonal authority (e.g., police, government, church, courts) than private, personal authority (e.g., one's parents, boss, teacher). The reasoning here is captured in the folk saying that one must respect the office but not the incumbent—the institutions of authority may be worthy of respect even if one is justified in trusting the actual office holders. Persons endorsing the ethics of responsibility favor authority because they don’t trust other people—including people in authority. Therefore, the relationship between the SEA and attitudes toward authority should be strongest for public, impersonal authority.

Method

Overview and Rationale

From the universe of authority figures and institutions, two concepts (police and government) were chosen to represent public, impersonal authority, and two concepts (mother and father) were chosen to represent private, personal authority. A semantic differential scale was used to assess subjects’ evaluations of these concepts. The semantic differential scale has proved to be a useful and valid tool for evaluating attitudes toward police (Phillips & Coates, 1971), teachers and schools (Dale & Miller, 1972), and one’s father and mother (Martinez, Sergio, Olmedo, & Goldman, 1976).

Our hypothesis states that these two kinds of authority (public/impersonal versus private/personal) are distinct and that the correlation between the SEA and each form of authority should be positive, but stronger for public, impersonal authority.

Subjects

Two samples were used in this study—an initial and a replication sample. Subjects in the initial sample were freshmen and sophomores (black and white) enrolled in psychology courses at a Maryland community college. The sample consisted of 205 males and 275 females. The subjects in the second sample were students in a personality course at The Johns Hopkins University. The sample contained 43 males and 46 females. Participation was voluntary and anonymous for both groups.

Instruments and Procedure

Subjects completed Form A of the SEA and a semantic differential scale to evaluate four concepts in the subject’s social milieu: father, mother, police, and government. On the semantic differential scale, each concept was listed at the top of a separate page, above 10 bipolar adjective scales. The adjectives selected for the study are known to have high factor loadings on the evaluative dimension. The 10 adjective pairs included good–bad, optimistic–pessimistic, hostile–friendly, altruistic–egoistic, honest–dishonest, kind–cruel, unfair–fair, important–unimportant, worthless–valuable, and successful–unsuccessful. A coin flip determined whether the positive or negative form of the pair appeared at the left.

Subjects indicated the intensity of their ratings by using a 5-step scale between the adjectives. These ratings were scored 0 through 4, with 4 representing the most negative, and 0 the most positive response. The few missing data points were assigned a score of 2—the neutral or ambivalent point. The sum of the 10 differential ratings represented the subjects’ attitude toward each authority.

High scores on the semantic differential indicate favorable evaluations of authorities and institutions. Since high scores on the SEA represent endorsement of an
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Component Scores</th>
<th>Difference between z transforms</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SEA</td>
<td>Impersonal</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial</td>
<td></td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replication</td>
<td></td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.20*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note. SEA = Survey of Ethical Attitudes.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. (Both two-tailed.)

Results

Scores on the semantic differential were intercorrelated and submitted to a principal-components analysis. Initially, each sample was analyzed by gender. The patterns for men and women were quite similar, so for all reported analyses the data were combined. In both the initial and replication sample, two factors with eigenvalues exceeding unity were found. The two factors accounted for 68.6% and 64.7% of the variance prior to rotation in the respective samples. An index of factor similarity (Kaiser, Hunka, & Bianchini, 1971) for the two varimax rotated factor matrices was found to be .998. In both solutions, police and government loaded primarily on the first factor, impersonal authority (.79 and .80, respectively, in the initial sample, and .80 and .86 in the replication sample). Father and mother defined the second factor, personal authority (loading .72 and .89 in the initial sample and .70 and .80 in the replication sample). These results support the distinction between public/impersonal and private/personal authority.

Table 1 shows the correlations between SEA scores and component scores in the two studies. The correlations are significant in all cases. The correlation coefficients were then transformed to $z$ scores by Fisher's method (McNemar, 1969) to determine whether the relationship between the SEA and impersonal authority was stronger than the relationship between the SEA and personal authority. A $t$ test confirmed this hypothesis for the initial sample, $p < .01$, one-tailed, and showed a strong trend for the replication sample, $p < .10$, one-tailed.

Discussion

Two points about this study should be emphasized: They concern what research with the SEA does and does not tell us about the psychology of conformity. First, a long tradition in personality psychology maintains that persons with positive attitudes toward authority (e.g., police, marines, FBI agents) are poorly adjusted, morally obtuse, intolerant or fascistic, and not very bright. Research with the SEA presents a rather different picture. High scorers on the SEA have positive attitudes toward authority, as shown here. They are also conforming and politically conservative (Hogan, 1970; Lorr & Zea, 1977). On the other hand, there is no evidence that they are intellectually dull; they are as bright as their nonconforming counterparts (Hogan, 1970). In addition, relative to nonconformers, they are better adjusted, use fewer drugs (Laufer, Johnson, & Hogan, in press), and have an internal as opposed to an external locus of control (Gutkin & Suls, 1979). Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, their positive attitudes toward authority are related, not to love of parents, but to an abiding distrust of other people's motives (Hogan & Dickstein, 1972).

The second point to note is that, although this study provides information about the dynamics of attitudes toward public, impersonal authority, it tells us less about the origins of attitudes toward private, personal authority. And it tells us nothing at all about attitudes toward public, personal authority.
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(i.e., charismatic leaders). That certain people are susceptible to the influence of charismatic leaders (e.g., the Reverend James Jones, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Charles Manson) and that such susceptibility has great social consequences is indisputable. Given the latent suspiciousness and internal locus of control of high scorers on the SEA, we predict that they would not be among the susceptible. Unfortunately we have no data to present on this subject at the present time.

References

Dale, R. R., & Miller, P. M. A semantic differential comparison of certain attitudes of university students from co-educational and single sex schools toward their schools. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 1972, 42, 60–64.


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