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○ Reihe: Arbeitspapiere WP ○

48

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**Morals For Merchants – Desirable,
Reasonable, Feasible?**

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Beck, K. (2003): *Morals For Merchants – Desirable, Reasonable, Feasible?*

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KLAUS BECK

**Morals For Merchants – Desirable, Reasonable,
Feasible?**

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Summary

The world of business gives many reasons to reflect on its moral dignity. It is not only the spectacular deals of weapons into warring countries or the huge accidents of oil tankers that cause us to get indignant about the actors involved. There are also the many less sensational occurrences of unacceptable acts of tax frauds, overreachings, mobbing, environmental pollution and so forth. Looking at these examples the desire for moral improvement seems to be obviously.

There are three approaches to get along with that problem: (i) to improve theory of moral education and thereby practice of moral education, (ii) to establish more and strict regulations supplemented with penalties and (iii) to enhance business people's moral competence.

Our data from a longitudinal study of young insurance clerks tell that option (iii) above seems not to work. Rather, it turned out that merchants act in specific contexts and under conditions having their own systemic logics of morality. Results of this study are reported and consequences for KOHLBERG's theory of moral judgment are discussed (option (i)). In the end the reason for a decision in favor of option (ii) are given.

Zusammenfassung

Der vielbeklagte Niedergang der „Moral“ in der Wirtschaft gibt Anlaß, die beiden Hauptgruppen von Maßnahmevorschlägen auf ihre Realisierungschancen hin zu untersuchen. Zur Diskussion stehen auf der einen Seite die Idee der Moralisierung des Personals, auf der anderen das Konzept der Institutionalisierung von Moral durch handlungsbegrenzende Regelungen. Für die Beurteilung beider Ansätze spielt eine entscheidende Rolle, ob die jeweils unterstellten Annahmen über Entwicklung, Status und Veränderbarkeit der individuellen moralischen Verhaltensgrundlagen zutreffen.

Der vorliegende Text erörtert und eruiert zunächst in kritischer Auseinandersetzung mit der etablierten KOHLBERG-Theorie die Spielräume, innerhalb derer sich die vorliegenden Maßnahmekonzepte bewegen müssen, wenn sie umsetzbar sein sollen. Er kommt zu dem Ergebnis, daß Moralisierungsprogramme in dieser Hinsicht zur Erfolglosigkeit verurteilt sind.

* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI); August 28, 2003 Padova, Italy

1. Introduction

It is as trivial as irritating to state that social reality does not fit into moral standards held by most members of our societies. Not only schools but also parents, churches, clubs, even a few politicians are busy in trying to teach, if not to preach, young people moral rules and how to behave properly. To do so is not at all a consequence of one of the many flourishing modernistic pedagogical programmes, but follows a long tradition, supposedly as long as mankind exists. Moreover, from antiquity up to modern times moral convictions and behaviour might have been the major purpose of general education at all, whereas during the last three or four decades, as a result of the cognitive turn in psychology, intellectual and knowledge skills seem to have gained comparatively more, if not exclusive attention.

As it were, everybody complains the vast gap between the desired and the real state of moral conduct in our modern (at least: Western) societies. This is especially the case with respect to the business domain. It is not only the spectacular deals with weapons or drugs, the huge accidents of oil tankers that make us indignant with the actors behind. The many less sensational, but nevertheless unacceptable acts of tax frauds, overreachings, environmental pollution, illicit work, mobbing and so forth stimulate suppositions that business people have to be considered as the main “sinners” in our society. That raises the question whether something is going wrong in vocational education, especially in business education, and what could be done to increase morality in that field. Three basic options seem to be available:

- (i) It can't be excluded that outcomes of primary socialisation are not as stable and robust so as to enable grown-ups to resist all temptations and compulsions met in the world of adults. At least one reason for that might lie in shortcomings of theoretical foundation of moral education. (Of course, there is also a possibility that educators fail to apply suitable approaches in their practice; but this would be an after-effect, not a systematic deficit.) So, the first option is to improve theory of moral education to get it “practice proof”.
- (ii) Another approach, which is relatively broadly discussed, focuses on the establishment of more and stricter regulations in economy furnished by additional surveillance and aggravated painful penalties, i.e. really high costs for transgressions, be it in terms of money, of imprisonment or of public com-

promising. By such means it is hoped the “wolves” in the minds of the actors will be subdued or, at least, fenced in. Indeed, prominent economists who deal with that problem, e.g. the Nobel prize winners G. S. BECKER and J. M. BUCHANAN, have developed sophisticated models not only for analysis but also for policymaking in the field of ethics of economy.

- (iii) A third basic idea is similar to the first. It is based on education, but now on influencing adult people, namely the agents in economy, i.e. all people from clerks up to top managers. The aim is to get them becoming more scrupulous via moral training as well as via appealing, persuading, and ethical guidance.

Each of that strategies needs, as a starting point, to relate to information on the status of moral competence of the people involved. We have carried out a study on young insurance clerks during their first six years of vocational education and practice. Data collection started in 1994 with a first cohort of some seventeen school-leavers and ended in 1998 with a last cohort of job novices. These young people are of particular interest for the problem sketched out above because we can diagnose their state of moral development at the end of pre-vocational socialisation and then observe what is happening within their moral thinking after having entered the world of business and at the same time still continuing in playing their “private” roles, say, as members of families and of peer groups.

Our findings (chap. 2) give reason to not only to discuss some arguments on whether the KOHLBERG-theory which guided our investigation needs to be revised (chap. 3). They allow also for making some basic contributions to the discussion of strategies to improve business practice in terms of morals (chap. 4).

2. State and development of moral judgement competence of insurance clerks¹

2.1 Characterisation of data

Year by year we presented our total of 174 subjects four dilemmas (48 of them being interviewed according to the MJI rules), beginning some two months after they had started their apprenticeship (cf. Fig. 1).

¹ The following analyses of data have been carried out together with DR. KIRSTEN PARCHE-KAWIK who contributed not only by providing an adjusted data base and by executing computations but also by some graphics shown in figures below.

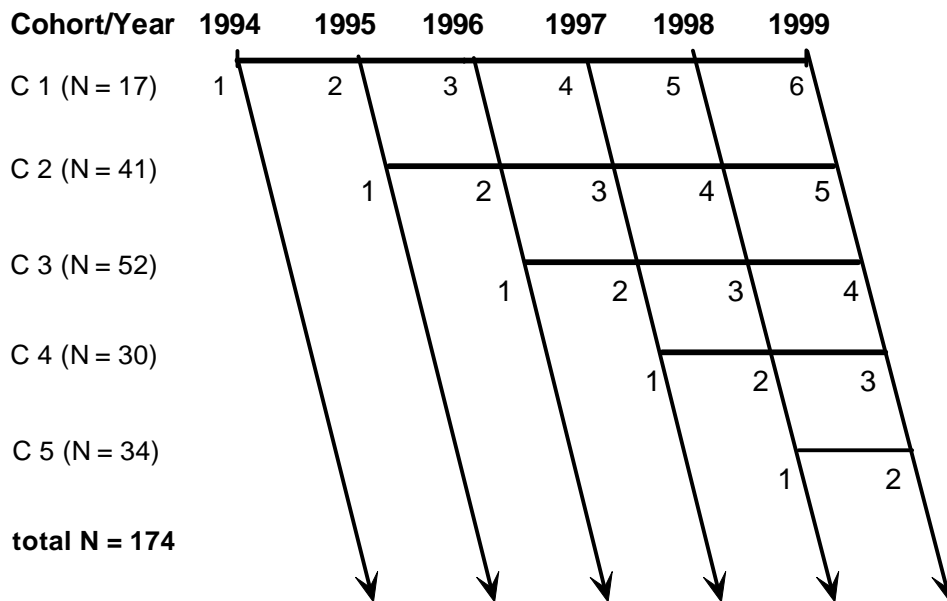


Fig. 1: Design of longitudinal study

The dilemmas develop moral conflicts in different domains, two in the realm of family and peers, respectively, and two in work-related situations, i.e. one dealing with social relations between colleagues in a company (in the following for short “in-company”) and one market problem. As a family conflict we used KOHLBERG’s Heinz-dilemma.

The details of data collection are reported elsewhere (cf. BECK/HEINRICHS/ MIN-NAMEIER/ PARCHE-KAWIK 1999). For the present paper it is important that we not only calculated the global stage score – in terms of the modal stage – across all four dilemmas to measure the current developmental stage of each of our subjects. We disaggregated that measure down to three more specialized levels, the *segment* level, i.e. private vs. vocational segment, the *domain* level, i.e. family, peer, in-company, market domain, and the *issue* level, i.e. the different value conflicts within each domain as e.g. life vs. law, affiliation vs. property and so forth (cf. Tab. 1).

I	Global level „Global“ modal stage score across all (scorable) explanatory statements of moral decisions in four dilemmas [36 statements] → “modal stage” sensu KOHLBERG
II	Segment level One modal stage score per segment (a) „private“: all statements to both „private“ dilemmas (family und peers) [19 statements] (b) „vocational“: all statements to both job related dilemmas [17 statements]
III	Domain level One modal stage score per domain (a) „family“: all statements to the family conflict („Heinz-Dilemma“), [11 statements] (b) „peers“: all statements to the peer conflict (helping a friend escape from children’s home by stealing money) [8 statements] (c) „market“: all statements to the market conflict (between clerk and customer (widow) on a life insurance contract which might have been made by the betraying husband) [8 statements] (d) „in-company“: all statements to the in-company conflict(between chiefs, subordinates and colleagues) [9 statements]
IV	Issue level One modal stage score per „issue“ (based on all statements to one of the different value conflicts either within or across dilemmas) (a) family conflict („Heinz-dilemma“) [11 issues] (b) peer conflict [8 issues] (c) market conflict [8 issues] (d) in-company conflict [9 issues]

Tab. 1: Levels of disaggregation of modal stage scores

We carried out these special computations because, by and by, during interviews with our subjects the suspicion arose that beyond the overall global score variation of judgement levels within one and the same person could be discovered. In other words: We came to the assumption that KOHLBERG’s global score measure unwillingly masks intrapersonal judgement differences which possibly depend on the variation of content and context. We thought that confirmation of that assumption would be of major importance for the questions raised above. And, indeed, we found interesting results.

In the course of the six years we got a total of 495 data sets (“cases”) from the 174 subjects. This is not six times 174 because the younger cohorts have been measured less than six times (cf. Fig. 1) and some subjects did not attend each measuring cycle. The

following report on results is based on these (approximate) 495 cases (190 of them, i.e. 38 %, based on clinical interviews), who on their part stem from the 174 subjects at different measuring points.

2.2 Differentiation of moral judgement

Looking at the global stage score computed in accordance with the rules the KOHLBERG group has developed (cf. COLBY/KOHLBERG 1987, 161, 185-188) we find the distributions shown in Fig. 2a for all cases and in Fig. 2b for the interview cases.

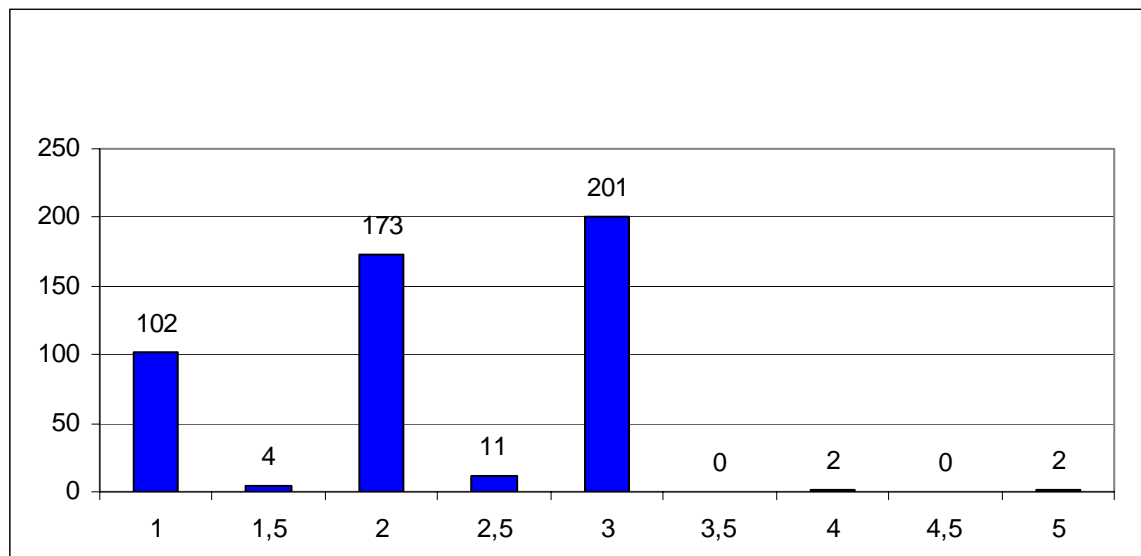


Fig 2a: Global modal stage: Frequencies (N = 495), all cases

Note: For further analyses we treat “interstages” – anyway a theoretically problematic concept – as if they were the respective lower stage though, by that, we take off a portion of variance inherent in our data. But we avoid overrating of developmental state.

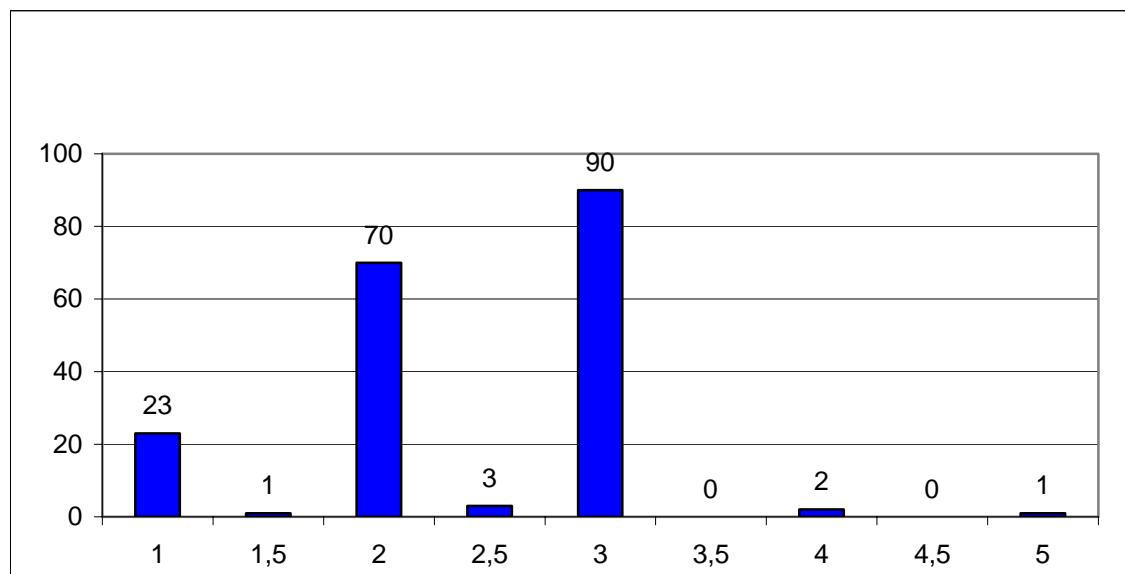


Fig. 2b: Global modal stage: Frequencies (N = 190), interview cases

Now, to give a graphical impression of what is going on below the surface of KOHLBERG's global score we selected from our 495 cases those 201 cases for which the calculation of the global modal stage results in a diagnosis of stage **3** (cf. Fig. 3a). In breaking these values down, level by level, we determined, first, two modal stages based on all values for the private segment on the one hand and on all values for the vocational segment on the other. Fig. 3a shows that from the 201 cases 185 remain on modal stage **3** in the private segment whereas 2 of them "land" on modal stage **1**, 9 on modal stage **2**, 1 on modal stage **4**, and 2 on modal stage **5**. For another 2 cases we do not have enough data for that segment to compute a modal value. Likewise, the dispersion of the 201 cases in the vocational segment is shown on the left side of Fig. 3a. The dispersion of our interview cases (90 out of the 190 interview cases "received" a global modal stage score **3**) shows, all in all, the same structure (Fig. 3b). Interestingly, in the vocational segment modal stages tend to be clearly lower not only than on the global level of measurement but also compared to the private segment. I will come back to that later (chap. 4).

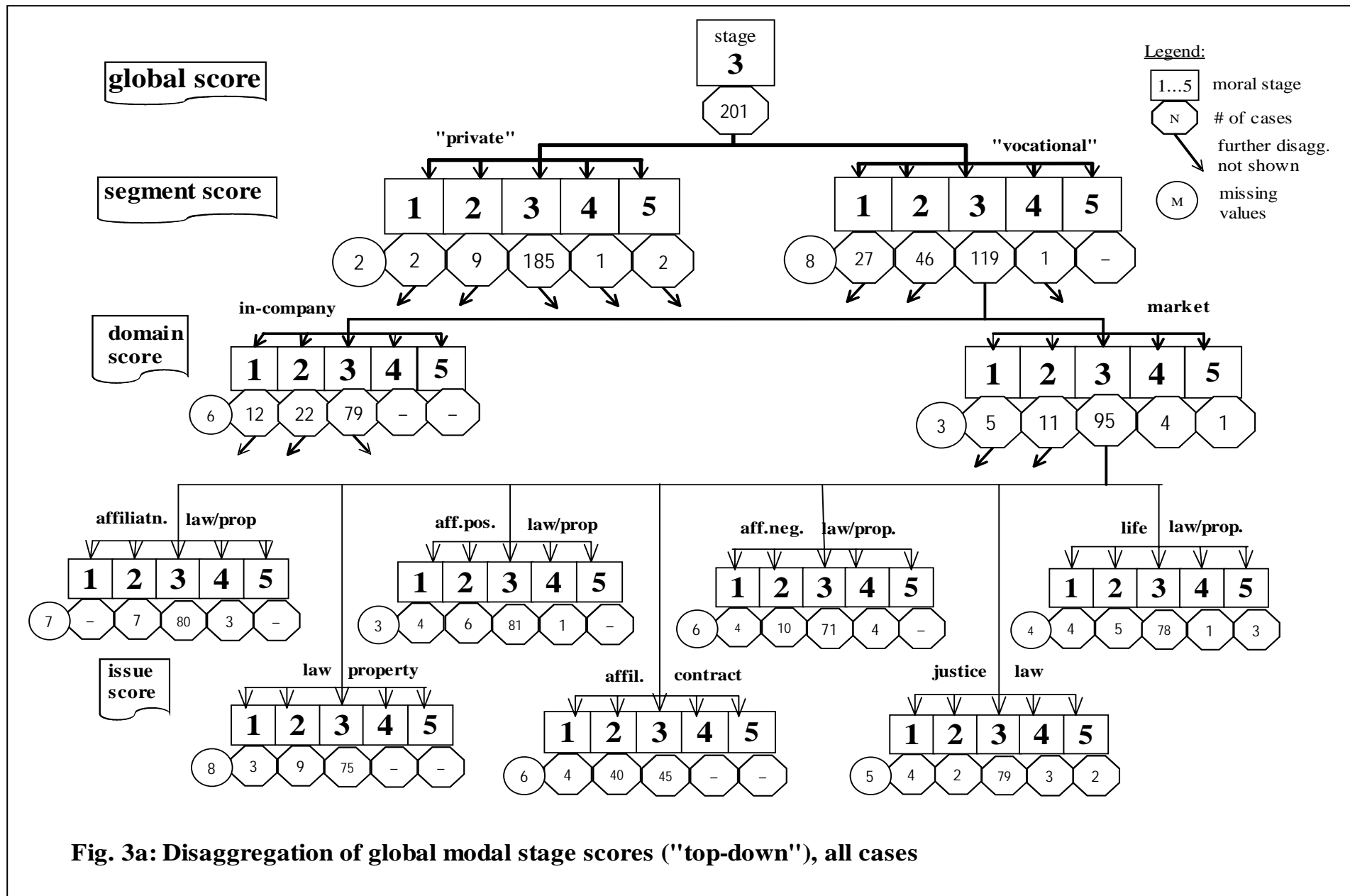
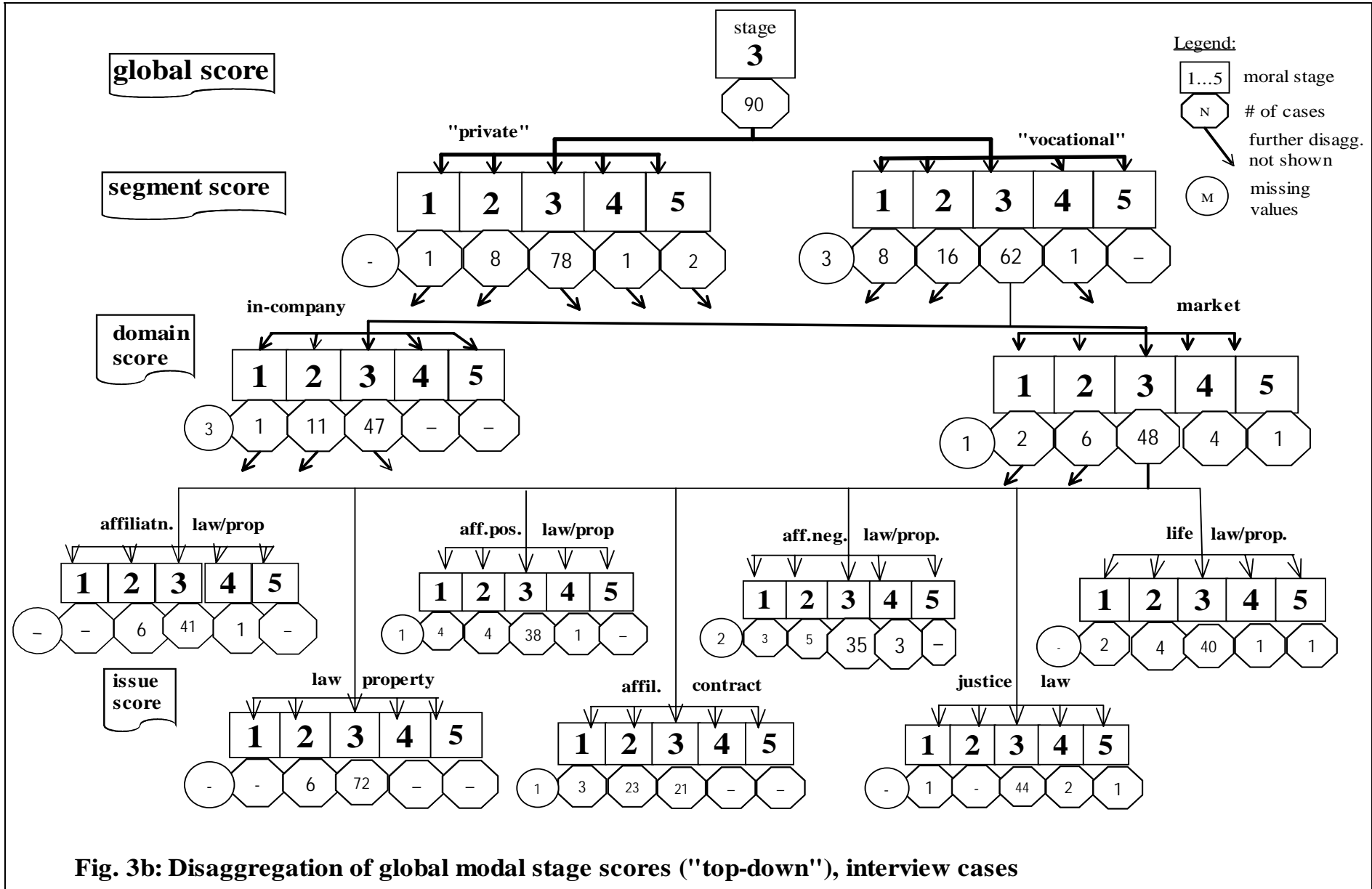


Fig. 3a: Disaggregation of global modal stage scores ("top-down"), all cases



On the next level of disaggregation we follow again only those cases who turned out to remain on modal stage **3** in the segment measure. To keep track of the general idea, on that third level, the domain level, only the dispersion of the 119 “vocational modal stage **3**” cases are shown across the two domains “in-company” and “market”. Once more, the number of modal stage **3** cases decreases and this is also true for the transition to the fourth, the issue level. It can easily be seen from Fig. 3 that the global stage score as computed according to the KOHLBERG instruction tends to veil variation of individual moral judgements which deviate from that more or less virtual global measure by variation of content.

That facts may be identified also the other way round (cf. Fig. 4a for all cases and Fig. 4b for interview cases). To make it visible we selected only those cases which in the value conflict “life vs. law/property” on the issue level come out with modal stage **3** in each dilemma (N = 57). Following these cases “bottom up”, level by level, to the high aggregated global stage score remarkable differences show up. Especially in the two vocational (or job) domains the level of moral argumentation tends to “slip down” below stage **3**.

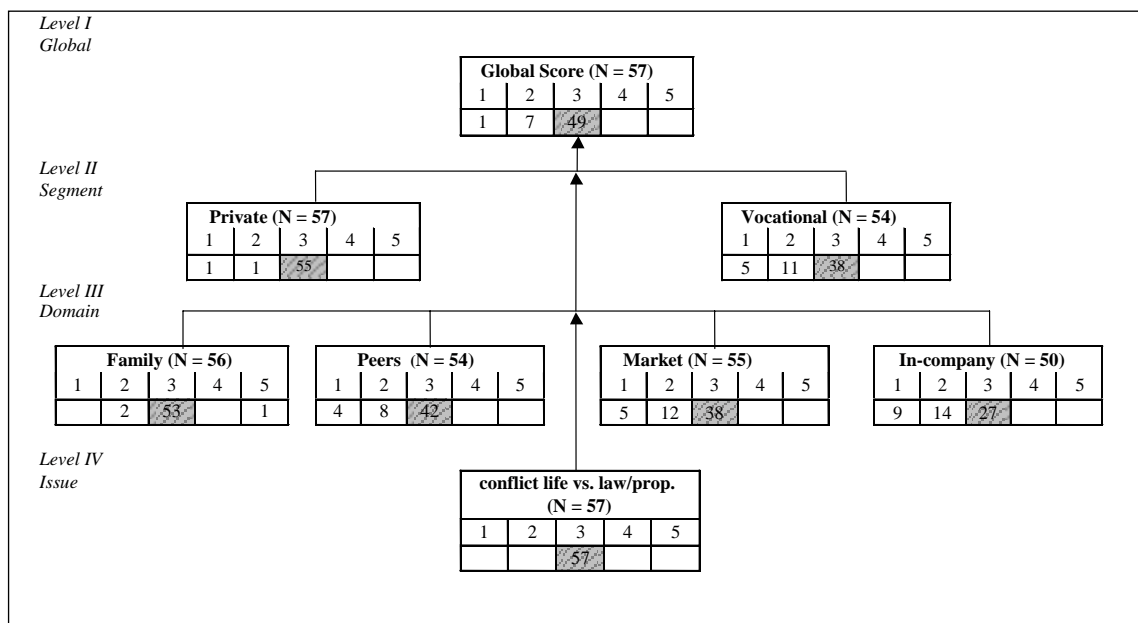


Fig. 4a: Aggregation of issue modal stage scores (“bottom-up”), all cases

Different measures may be computed to quantify the amount of deviation unveiled by disaggregation of global scores. To gain an impression we determined for every case and every level how many of the single arguments which have been scored and which

enter into the respective modal stage score are on the same stage as the resulting modal score. Ideally, all arguments lie on one and the same stage – an assumption which is deducted from KOHLBERG’s thesis that moral competence has to be modelled as a structured wholeness.

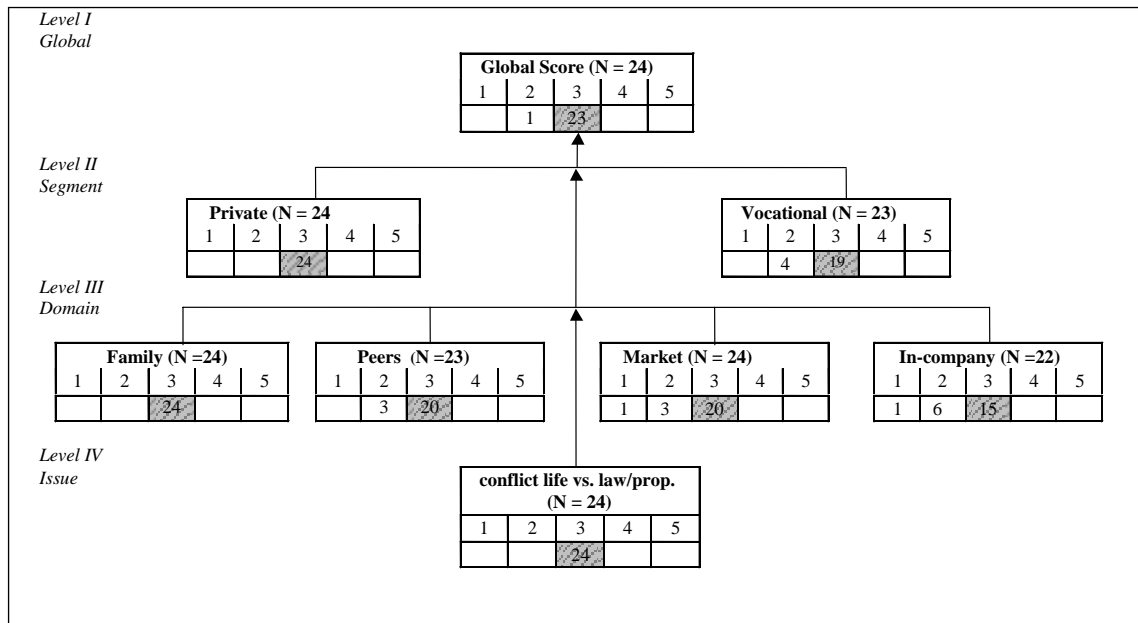


Fig. 4b: Aggregation of issue modal stage scores („bottom-up“), interview cases

Tab. 2a and 2b show that only one single case fulfils that model on the global level (first line, last column). As is to be expected, climbing down to level II and III the number of cases matching the theoretical assumption is growing. But its highest value, i.e. 25.4 % in the market domain, still remains rather low – clearly too low to support a theory stating that usually all subjects should reason always on one and the same stage. Tab. 2a and 2b (“all cases” and “interview cases”, respectively) categorise the measures of modal stage corresponding arguments in four proportion groups, down from 1.0 (last column) to “lower than .5” (first column). Without any further computation it can be seen that throughout the three levels shown, i.e. global, segment and domain level, the majority of cases get their moral judgement diagnosis, i.e. their modal stage score, on a rather heterogeneous basis – a finding which gives weak support for KOHLBERG’s strong thesis of structured wholeness.

Modal score	Coincidence rate (C) of statement scores with modal score			
	C < .5	.5 < C < .75	.75 < C < 1	C = 1
„global“ (max. 32-36 statements)	21,0 %	59,6 %	17,8 %	1,6 % ²
„private segment“ (max. 17-19 statements)	10,3 %	55,6 %	27,7 %	6,4 %
„vocational segment“ (max. 15-17 statements)	11,9 %	59,1 %	22,0 %	7,0 %
family domain (max. 10-11 statements)	3,7 %	43,1 %	34,1 %	19,2 %
peer domain (max. 7-8 statements)	5,0 %	47,6 %	25,6 %	21,8 %
market domain (max. 7-8 statements)	4,2 %	48,1 %	22,3 %	25,4 %
in-company domain (max. 8-9 statements)	3,0 %	58,2 %	19,7 %	19,1 %

Tab. 2a: Coincidence of global modal score and single statements, all cases

Modal score	Coincidence rate (C) of statement scores with modal score			
	C < .5	.5 < C < .75	.75 < C < 1	C = 1
„global“ (max. 32-36 statements)	20,0 %	60,5 %	19,5 %	0,5 %
„private segment“ (max. 17-19 statements)	10,6 %	50,8 %	35,4 %	3,2 %
„vocational segment“ (max. 15-17 statements)	13,4 %	55,9 %	26,4 %	4,3 %
family domain (max. 10-11 statements)	4,8 %	44,4 %	34,8 %	16,0 %
peer domain (max. 7-8 statements)	6,3 %	49,8 %	25,9 %	18,0 %
market domain (max. 7-8 statements)	5,4 %	51,9 %	23,2 %	19,5 %
in-company domain (max. 8-9 statements)	3,2 %	53,4 %	26,2 %	17,2 %

Tab. 2b: Coincidence of global modal score and single statements, interview cases

2.3 Single case analyses

2.3.1 Individual profiles

Of course, the analyses performed so far, are based on the total of 495 cases and allow only for limited insight in the judgement structure of single subjects as “whole persons”. To give at least a rough idea on the range of structures to be met in the “real world” we picked four persons from our sample, two of them lying on the extreme of maximal

² The 1,6 % represent the one single (interview) case in our sample of „complete“ homogeneity of moral thinking; all her judgements lie on stage 1.

homogeneity (cf. Fig. 5), two of them on the other side of maximal heterogeneity (cf. Fig. 6).

Level		Mrs. A: 32 exploitable statem. C = 1,0 *					Mrs. B: 31 exploitable statem. C = 0,97 *					
		stage					stage					
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	
I	Global score	X							X			
II	Private Segment	X							X			
	Vocational Segment	X							X			
III Domain	Family	X							X			
	Peers	X							X			
	Market	X							X			
	In-company	X							X			
IV Issues Family conflict	0 life vs. law/property	X							X			
	1 affiliation+ vs. law/property	X							X			
	2 affiliation- vs. law/property	X							X			
	3 affiliation+ vs. law/property	X							X			
	4 affiliation vs. law/property	X							X			
	5 affiliation+ vs. property	X							X			
	6 law vs. interest	X								X		
	7 affiliation+ vs. contract	X							X			
	8 justice vs. law (life)	X							X			
9 justice vs. law	X							<i>m</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	.
IV Issues peer conflict	0 affiliation+/0 vs. law/prop.	X							X			
	1 affiliation+ vs. law/property	X							X			
	2 affiliation- vs. law/property	X							X			
	3 affiliation+ vs. property	X							X			
	4 affiliation+ vs. contract	X							X			
	5 life vs. law/prop.	X							X			
6 justice vs. law	X							X				
IV Issues market conflict	0 affiliation vs. law/property	X							X			
	1 affiliation+ vs. law/property	X							X			
	2 affiliation- vs. law/property	X							X			
	3 life vs. law/property	X							X			
	4 law vs. property	X							X			
	5 affiliation+/0 vs. contract	X							X			
6 justice vs. law	X							X				
IV Issues in-company conflict	0 affiliation vs. law/property	X							X			
	1 affiliation+ vs. law/property	X							X			
	2 affiliation- vs. law/property	X							X			
	3 affiliation 0 vs. law/property	X							X			
	4 affiliation+ vs. property	X							X			
	5 affiliation+ vs. contract	X							X			
	6 life vs. law/property	X							X			
7 justice vs. law	X							X				

*Cf. Tab. 2.

Fig. 5: Profiles of two “homogeneous” subjects

Mrs. A. was 22 years old at that time. She had finished a three years apprenticeship after having passed the final examination of secondary school (“Abitur”). She is now starting

off a career in the field of credit insurance. Her moral judgements are, without exception, on stage **1**.

Mrs. B. was 23 years old when she was interviewed for the third time. She had graduated from secondary school as well and then entered a two years apprenticeship. Now, she is at the beginning of her second year as person in charge of credit insurance. Apart from one exception and one missing value all her judgements lie on stage **3**.

It is pure chance that the two extremely heterogeneous people of our sample are male. An inspection of all data showed that there is no gender bias at all, i.e. no interaction between sex and stage of moral judgement as well as measure of homogeneity. Mr. C's judgements are spread in the range from stage **2** to stage **5**. In the family domain his arguments tend to be comparatively high and, interestingly enough, more low in the peer domain. A point to be mentioned here is that his judgements with respect to the market domain are clearly lower than those dealing with in-company conflicts.

Level		Mr. C: 30 exploitable statem. C = 0,33 *					Mr. D 31 exploitable statem. C = 0,39 *				
		stage					stage				
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
I	Global score					X	X				
II	Private Segment					X		X			
	Vocational Segment			X			X				
III Domain	Family					X			X		
	Peers		X					X			
	Market			X				X			
	In-company				X		X				
IV Issues Family conflict	0 life vs. law/property					X			X		
	1 affiliation+ vs. law/property					X	X				
	2 affiliation- vs. law/property					X	X				
	3 affiliation+ vs. law/property					X			X		
	4 affiliation vs. law/property			X			X				
	5 affiliation+ vs. property					X	m	i	s	s	.
	6 law vs. interest				X				X		
	7 affiliation+ vs. contract		X				X				
	8 justice vs. law (life)					X			X		
9 justice vs. law	m	i	s	s	.			X			
IV Issues Peer conflict	0 affiliation+/0 vs. law/prop.		X					X			
	1 affiliation+ vs. law/property		X					X			
	2 affiliation- vs. law/property		X					X			
	3 affiliation+ vs. property			X				X			
	4 affiliation+ vs. contract		X				X				
	5 life vs. law/property					X		X			
6 justice vs. law					X			X			
IV Issues market conflict	0 affiliation vs. law/property			X			X				
	1 affiliation+ vs. law/property			X			X				
	2 affiliation- vs. law/property			X				X			
	3 life vs. law/property			X				X			
	4 law vs. property			X			X				
	5 affiliation+/0 vs. contract	m	i	s	s	.		X			
6 justice vs. law			X				X				
IV Issues In-company conflict	0 affiliation vs. law/property				X				X		
	1 affiliation+ vs. law/property				X		X				
	2 affiliation- vs. law/property				X		X				
	3 affiliation 0 vs. law/property				X			X			
	4 affiliation+ vs. property				X			X			
	5 affiliation+ vs. contract		X				X				
	6 life vs. law/property					X			X		
7 justice vs. law					X	X					

*Cf. Tab. 2.

Fig. 6: Profiles of two “heterogeneous” subjects

Mr. C is 22 years as well. After graduating from secondary school he entered an apprenticeship in an insurance company but a few weeks later he stopped it and started a trainee programme to become a financial adviser. People having completed that programme try to work on a self-employed basis. At the time of the interview Mr. C was busy to getting started with his own company.

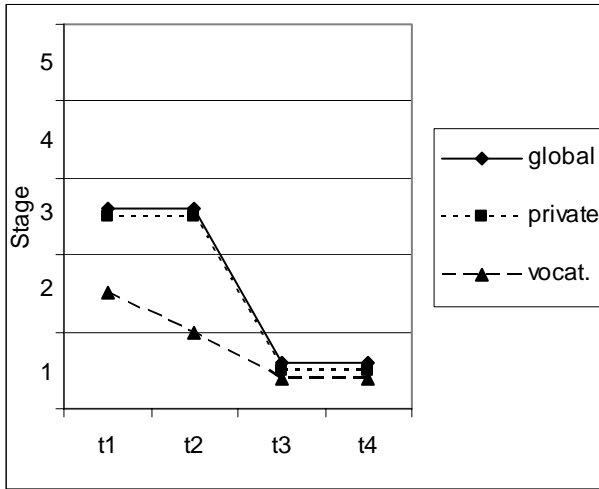
Finally, Mr. D is 23 years old. After the “Abitur” he went to university for some three or four semesters studying economics. But he felt not really happy there and therefore began an apprenticeship for insurance clerks, now being in his second year. His judgements are almost completely on stages **1** to **3**; only one group of arguments dealing with the value conflict justice vs. law in the peer domain has been scored on stage **4**. Looking at the different domains there is no clear preference to be detected in his judgements. Even market and in-company conflicts are treated almost similarly showing a slight tendency towards lower stages with respect to in-company problems. But both business related domains tend to be treated on a lower moral stage by Mr. D. than the two private domains (as is also the case with Mrs. B).

To summarize the findings presented so far we have to state that there is a considerable amount of intrapersonal variation in moral judgement behaviour to an extent that cannot be absorbed by KOHLBERG’s thesis of structural wholeness. On the other hand one could argue that this variation might stem to a smaller or bigger portion from people in phases of transition. Therefore we are now having a look at our longitudinal data.

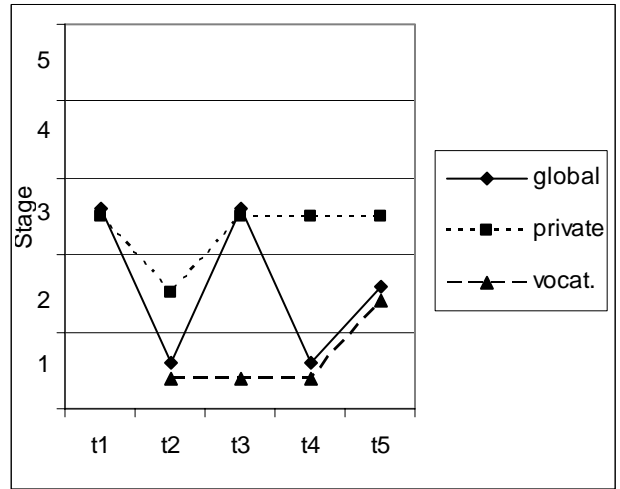
2.3.2 Developmental changes in moral judgement behaviour

WITH KOHLBERG’s theory in mind, saying that moral development follows an upward staircase without backslides, our data might evoke some surprise. What they are mirroring as a standard pattern is not a converging drift to the next higher stage. On the contrary, they show very different courses of developmental changes and phases of stability. To offer an impression we depict the developmental profiles of two persons selected for individual inspection in section 2.2., i.e. Mrs. A and Mr. D (Fig. 7). Again, we report not only what happens in terms of KOHLBERG’s global stage score. We also give the values for modal stage scores on the levels of segments, domains and selected issues.

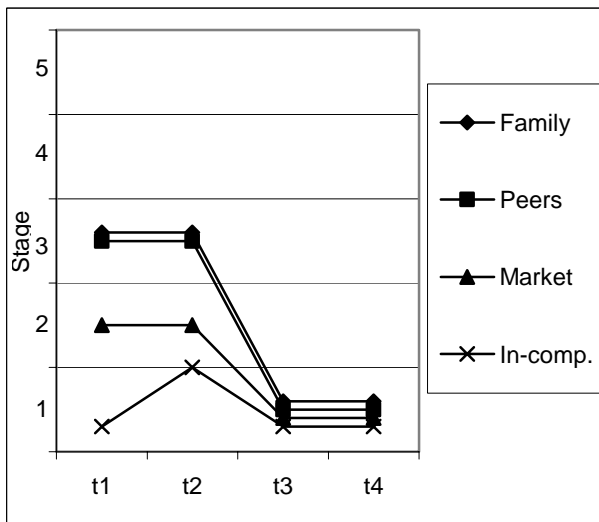
Mrs. A
7a: Global and segment level



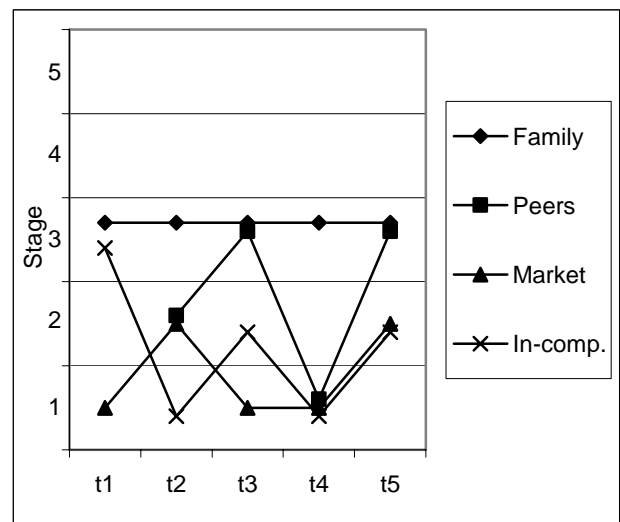
Mr. D
7d: Global and segment level



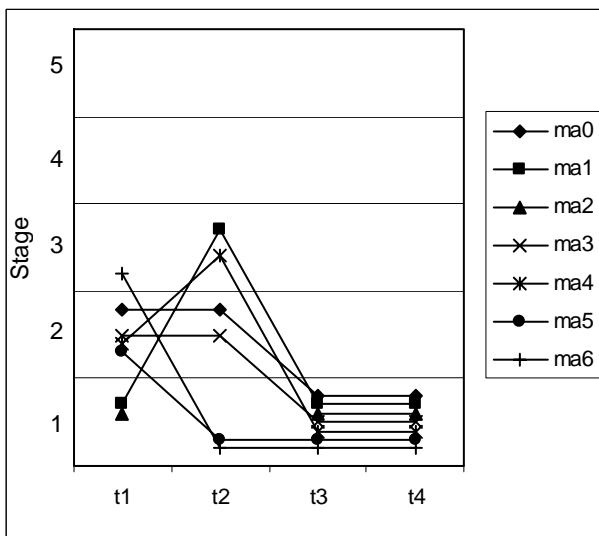
7b: Domain level



7e: Domain level



7c: Issue level, market dilemma (legend s. Fig. 5)



7f: Issue level, market dilemma (legend s. Fig. 5)

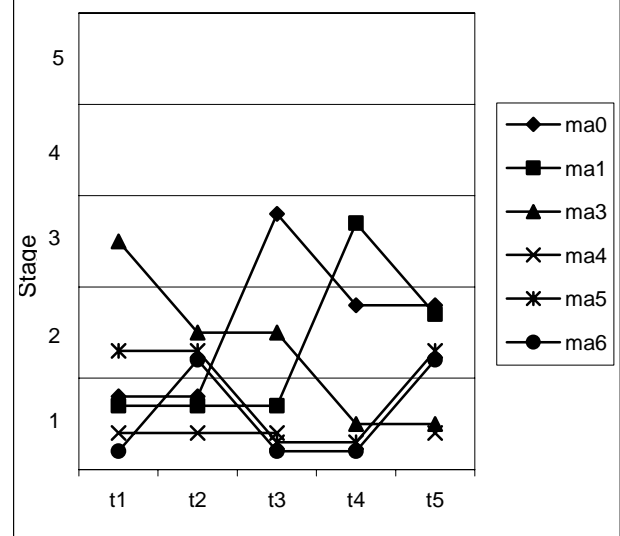


Fig. 7: Course of development of two subjects

Looking at the profiles of Mrs. A's moral development (there are data of four measuring points) it can be seen that initially (at the age of 20 years; t_1) she showed a clear tendency to differentiate between private and vocational problems (cf. Fig. 7a) the latter split up again along the in-company and the market context (cf. Fig. 7b). As time goes by and new experiences are internally processed she falls back on stage **1** at t_3 (as was shown in Fig. 5) and remains there at least for one more year. In a sense, this convergence seems to be in line with KOHLBERG's thesis of structured wholeness. But we interpret this course of development in a different way: We assume that moral judgement competence becomes adapted to the moral atmosphere of contexts (e.g. domains) in which a person has to act as a role occupant. This may result in a convergence of moral judgement if the different contexts – contingently³ – show equal moral atmospheres. Of course, this alternative conceptualisation is to be elaborated in more detail, a task which cannot be fulfilled in this paper⁴.

Another point to be highlighted is that Mrs. A shows clear regression mainly from t_2 to t_3 which again violates KOHLBERG's theory. So, even if one insists on interpreting the convergent trend in her data as an effect of the structured wholeness of moral thinking this regression remains unexplained by the theory.

In contrast to Mrs. A's development Mr. D shows a constant heterogeneous pattern of moral argumentation (cf. Fig. 7d). Moreover, at a first glance the structure of his profile seems to indicate an instable moral person who fluctuates within one year periods from one standpoint to another. But looking at the developmental processes in more detail, i.e. at "lower" levels (Fig. 7e), it turns out that Mr. D shows an absolutely stable judgement behaviour in the family domain opposed to a considerable turbulence in the peers domain. Judgements in the market domain lie on stage **1** and **2**, respectively, whereas in the in-company domain there are again relatively big differences to be stated. As to this latter domain the development on the issue level illuminates, once again, the context specificity of Mr. D's moral argumentation (cf. Fig. 7f). Different value conflicts are treated differently. Although at t_4 the profiles converge they drift apart again during the

³ A „chance- explanation “ is, of course, not sufficient. Two causes may be seen for that coincidence: (i) The person tends to enter only domains in which moral atmosphere are equivalent; (ii) the person is powerful enough to shape the domains in which she or her acts by her/himself (e.g. dictators, top managers, teachers (?) and, self-evidently, hermits.

⁴ See some more remarks below.

following year. Admittedly, even if our theoretical model opposite to KOHLBERG's is accepted, i.e. if domain specificity of individual moral competence is assumed, Mr. D's profile pattern shows a somewhat problematic structure. On the other hand it is not outside of our everyday experience that we encounter persons – maybe, not least politicians – who obviously have not succeeded in finding moral anchorages.

What can be seen from the individual cases is also true for the whole group. Fig. 8a (all cases) and Fig. 8b (interview cases) show proportions of modifications of measures of the (comparatively stable!) global score between two measuring points across all persons. There are not only progressions and stabilisations to be recorded but also a total of 31 % regressions out of all cases (25 % of the interview cases) – again developmental pathways theoretically not “allowed” to appear and to such an extent that cannot be ignored.

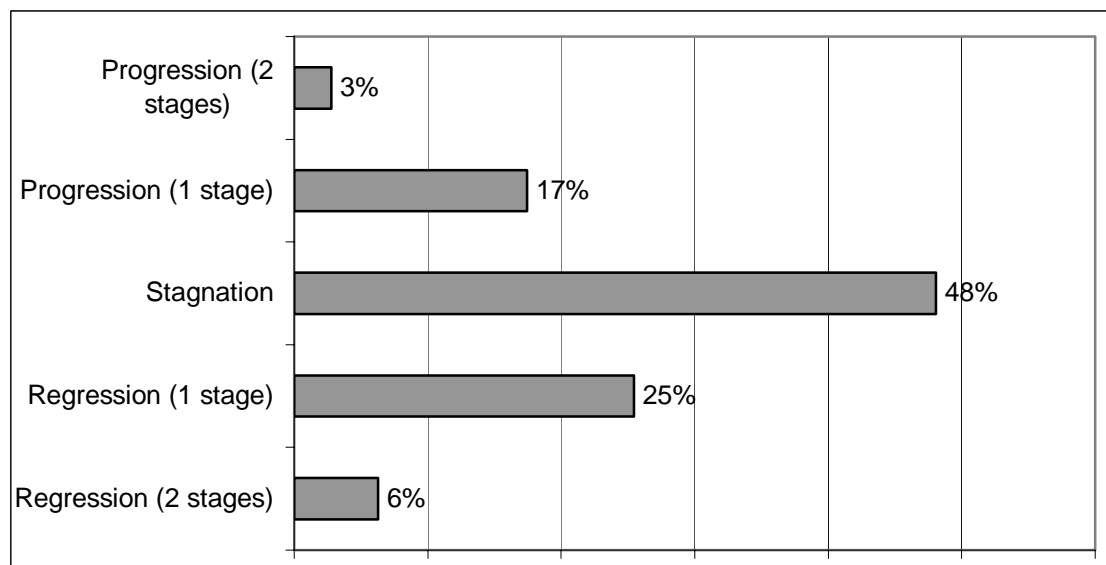


Fig. 8a: Developmental processes by global score, all cases

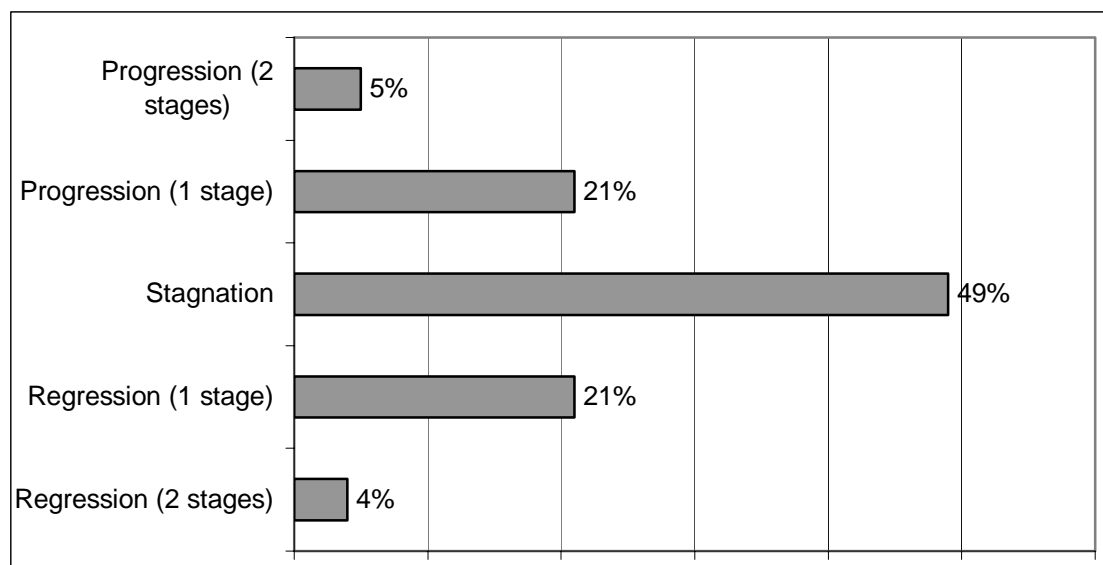


Fig. 8b: Developmental processes by global modal stage score, interview cases

3. Aspects of theory modification

3.1 *Problematic assumptions within KOHLBERG's theory*

Our findings contradict KOHLBERG's theory in three central points. *Firstly*, the thesis of structured wholeness, the very heart of his theoretical model, is substantially destabilised⁵. Although we find some cases in our data fitting in that model they remain rare exceptions. In a strong sense only 1.6 % of our subjects fulfil the homogeneity condition as calculated by the rather robust global score (cf. Tab. 2). As was mentioned above we suppose that even in that case "homogeneity" is not the result of internal uniformity in the production process of moral judgements but rather an effect of an internalised *external* coincidence of different moral atmospheres.

To be a little bit more precise, a domain specific moral atmosphere may be determined by the prevailing moral stage used mainly in arguments communicated in a surrounding which is constituted by a social role. In learning and taking over that role an individual internalises the mode of moral reflection as associated to the respective content of decisions. Therefore, social role builds up a nucleus connected not only with specific knowledge and behavioural patterns but also with specific thinking operations, moral reasoning included. One could call this – in a quite different sense – a "structured

⁵ Similar results and deliberations are reported by BOYES et al. (1997); BRUGMAN/WEISFELT (1994); BUCHANAN (1997); CARPENDALE/KREBS (1992; 1995); KREBS et al. (1991; 1997); LIND (1993); SENGER (1983); TEO/BECKER/ EDELSTEIN (1995).

wholeness” or a domain specific “social programme”. In that sense an individual has as many “structured wholenesses” or “social programmes” at her or his disposal as she or he is able to play⁶. Consequently, it is not surprising that the subjects in our study tend to judge on “lower” stages in their business roles which are embedded in an atmosphere of strategic thinking, making contracts and searching economic advantages as all their role partners do.

From that point of view KOHLBERG’s thesis that a person bases her or his moral deliberations exclusively on one principle which is the highest reached so far seems to be too restrictive. Life in our Western mass societies has become complex and differentiated. Everybody has to play different roles which are connected with different moral atmospheres which in turn contribute to the functionality of sub-cultures to which they are affiliated. Putting it the other way round, it is nowadays not possible and even not conceivable to act morally adequately if one follows only one moral principle, be it “lower” or “higher”. And as empirical researchers – far from any normative intention – we have to state and recognise that people behave that way. That is it what we have to model and to explain theoretically.

The *second* contradiction focuses on the problem of regression. KOHLBERG clearly excludes regression from the scope of his theory, which is consistent within his model. Why should somebody in her or his moral thinking rely on a principle which has been recognised as limited and surmounted! But this experience can always be made only in specific contexts (because experience is in principle context-based). And therefore the knowledge of malfunction of a principle whether too “low” or too “high” can and is obviously restricted to that context. There is no necessary negative or positive transfer of (mal-) functioning of principles to other contexts and, what’s more, no necessary generalisation to all contexts the person is acting in.

Again, according to the model of moral differentiation the phenomenon which KOHLBERGians had to label as regression may be reconstructed as adaptation. Our young clerks, by entering the world of business, experience a totally new context. They learn more or less quickly the characteristic modes of moral argumentation of this/these do-

⁶ This approach is very similar to JAMES REST’s conception (1979) who argued that an individual acquires by degrees a palette of moral thinking schemas each representing a moral stage *sensu* KOHLBERG.

main(s) and internalise the respective principles. For them making use of different principles in different domains does not seem to be a major problem. When we addressed such differences during the interviews most of the young people felt not bothered. On the contrary, they referred to the differences of contexts, social relations, circumstances and argued that with respect to them the reasons for their moral deliberations would change.

Closely connected to that issue is the *third* contradiction dealing with KOHLBERG's thesis of contextual indifference of the cognitive structure which yields a moral judgement. In his view it is absolutely consistent to postulate content neutrality of the moral reasoning "instance" because it is this element of his theory which allows that elegant modeling which avoids any "contamination" of his approach by "dirty" everyday life. This way of thinking is surely inspired by philosophers like KANT (1785/1956) and RAWLS (1971) in whose oeuvre KOHLBERG explicitly grounds his theory (cf. COLBY/KOHLBERG 1987, 10-11). Both, and very many of their predecessors and successors in ethics, prefer a position of ethical universalism which is in search for and states unconditional laws claiming unlimited validity under all circumstances at any place and at any time. In that tradition KOHLBERG's principles are formulated. Though they are not totally free of content (e.g. personal interest, institutions, "goods" in an utilitarian sense; cf. COLBY/KOHLBERG 1987, 18-19) they try to avoid any reference to special circumstances. By that they ascribe to mankind a general reasoning structure which models thinking as the application of universal statements to singular facts – in analogy to the application of laws by judges. We not only know from the latter that this type of application is anything but simple (and even KANT devoted to this problem lengthy deliberations; cf. 1790/1957). Also, we all know from our everyday experience as well as from the relevant investigations that normally our moral judgements arise quickly and immediately (cf. esp. HAIDT 2001) and that if nobody questions them we turn toward the next situation without further reflecting. The spontaneous character of most of our moral judgements doesn't plead for a passing off background procedure allowing for the difficult application of general principles.

3.2 Points for revision

Our alternative explanation assumes that usually we pass moral sentences by recourse on habituated decision tendencies. These tendencies, if not formed by genetic dispositions (cf. HAIDT 2001), have been acquired in the respective community of practice

where novices not only learn cognitive-intellectually and improve their knowledge. They also get used to explicit and – presumably more so – implicit moral arguments and judgements by experts. Therefore from our perspective moral learning can be parallelised to cognitive learning (in the sense above) as a domain specific process and achievement.⁷

Now, looking back on KOHLBERG's theory we are confident that its inherent PIAGETian structural-genetic idea of a hierarchical order of reflection modes can and should be upheld as well as the idea of “stages”, though the latter erroneously suggest that “higher is better”. We therefore prefer another metaphor: “platforms”. Theoretically we follow LEVINE's view (1979) in this facet who, contrary to KOHLBERG (cf. COLBY/KOHLBERG 1987, 6-8) and TURIEL (1974), insists to reconceptualise “progress” as acquisition of a new structure of moral reflexion under retention of the “old” structure(s) (cf. also REST 1979). Otherwise the fact of moral differentiation could not be explained or even understood.

No doubt, there remain a lot of questions to be answered theoretically. E.g. within our “proto-model” it has to be clarified what it means to say that one “learns the practice of moral reasoning of a domain” or that one “adapts to a specific moral atmosphere”. It would not be sufficient at all if “novices” only acquired the moral rhetorics of a certain domain. Rather, the underlying structure of reasoning has to be acquired. This not only implies accommodation (in PIAGET's sense) to a given moral-cognitive structure *sensu* KOHLBERG, but additionally to its domain specific complementation. A “platform” of moral thinking includes content specific arguments and/or values and/or valuations and/or preferences.

Far from being sufficiently elaborated a rough exemplary sketch of a moral “platform” for merchants in market situations as compared with KOHLBERG's stage **2** might run as follows:

⁷ Whether the resulting moral “compartmentalization” affects the process of development of identity has to be investigated as well as modelled. Within this paper there is not enough room to discuss that problem (cf. BECK et al. 1996).

General version	Domain specific version
(COLBY/KOHLBERG 1987, 18)	
<i>“What is right”</i>	
<p><i>“Following rules only when it is to someone’s immediate interest; acting to meet one’s own interests and needs and letting others do the same. Right is also what’s fair, what’s an equal exchange, a deal, an agreement.”</i></p>	<p>Following commercial laws, rules and contractual agreements as a seller or a purchaser or a broker, deciding carefully under a worst case and a long-run perspective, trying to perform better than competitors do, minimizing costs in any case, getting as much as can possibly be got regardless of the consequences for clients as well as competitors (self-evidently calculating backlash on one’s own interests) but still being fair and not deceiving.</p>
<i>“Reasons for doing right”</i>	
<p><i>“To serve one’s own needs or interests in a world where you have to recognize that other people have their interests too.”</i></p>	<p>To serve one’s company’s interests in terms of profit maximization under the restrictions of long-term economic welfare of self and/or of the company, of growing market share, of level of awareness of products or services, of reputation, of a maximum of return on equity recognizing that rivals as well as clients (have to) do the same. Following (institutionalized and informal) incentives to maximize success and seeking one’s own advantage.</p>

Obviously, there are (intended) parallels in formulations. But there are also substantial differences besides the mentioning of domain specific reasons (arguments, values etc.). In attributing to “what is right” the appeal to “following rules only when it is to someone’s immediate interest” as the KOHLBERG-group states is restricted for merchants to “following (always!) laws, rules and agreements” which is stronger than the stage 2 regulation. And the “reasons for doing right” again are not only specially related to the business world but also strengthened to the postulate that one is obliged to follow that reasons and not only to recognize that the “world” is not better. On the contrary, following that rules improves the state of universal welfare in terms of cost reduction for survival and in terms of sparing scarce resources (see below).

Coming back to the questions we have left open, it has to be admitted that the example above represents a general principle as well, though it’s scope is obviously narrower than that of KOHLBERG’s stage 2. We have criticised his model in saying that the application of general statements to singular facts seems to be a (too) difficult task. Indeed, this objection needs careful attention. To be sure, a relevant difference between the two formulations above is that in KOHLBERG’s stage 2 description it is not (and may not be) defined what the term “interests” includes, whereas in the domain specific variant the interests are enumerated. This makes an important difference as to the (substantially reduced) complexity of necessary subsumptive thinking acts and facilitates strongly the finding of a final judgement. Nevertheless, we do not know yet what the single cognitive and especially logical steps are that have to be taken given domain specific principles which need to be adapted to a single case.

Another open question asks what happens if a person enters a domain where moral communication which is higher than the one level that person has currently reached due to stable intellectual restrictions.⁸ We are sure that in this case that person will not become a professional in the respective domain. She or he will reduce the arguments and argumentations heard from experts to her or his highest (or even a lower) level and reconstruct them in its terms. But doing this the domain specific “morality” will be transformed and, at the same time, missed.

⁸ As to the relation of moral thinking and its cognitive-intellectual prerequisites see KUHN et al. 1977.

4. Merchants' morals - »from "is" to "ought"«?

As a matter of course, the practice of vocational education cannot wait until the questions addressed so far will be answered. And even if we had the answer, another problem would still remain to be solved. Practical education needs aims and objectives, i.e. accepted legitimate norms on which it must be founded. Yet, the answers to research questions are always descriptive, true or false, but not acceptable or rejectable as norms are.

So, even if (the sketch of) our reconceptualisation turned out to develop a comparatively high explanatory power nothing follows from it for the justification of educational goals. To pick the words from the heading title of this paper *desirability* of specific moral laws for merchants has to be legitimated in another way than by psychological research. And obviously *desirability* is in a sense at least narrowly related to, if not identical with, *reasonableness*: What fails to be reasonable in this field cannot be the object of rational desire.

Coming back to the three options for moral improvement of business outlined at the beginning of this article we have argued so far that it turns out to be necessary in the first place to improve theory of moral development and theory of judgement behaviour as the foundation of effective moral educational practice (option (i), chap. 1). Now, the question arises whether there are good reasons to prefer one of the two options left (ii and iii), the "rules-establishing approach" or the "raising-personnel's-morals approach". Based on the proposed theoretical modification of KOHLBERG's model a clear preference for approach (ii) comes out.

To begin with some arguments dealing with (iii) we would like to recall one result of a bulk of empirical studies done mainly in the US, i.e. the distribution of individuals' highest stages across the adolescent and adult population. Here it is enough to say that stage 5-people were rather rarely found and even stage 4-persons have been discovered just as frequently as stage 3-persons (cf. KOHLBERG/LEVINE/HEWER 1983). Now, what some authors postulate in favour of option no. 3 (e.g. STEINMANN/LÖHR 1991, ULRICH 1987) is to raise the moral level of business people to stage 5. Only then are they thought to assure that things would become better. Assuming that people whose morality developed not very high, say only up to stage 2, feel particularly attracted by mana-

gerial and other business jobs, the hope to reach such a goal seems to be in vain. Even if the average distribution of moral competence *sensu* KOHLBERG were found in the population of that field (clerks and managers) this kind of programme(s) would have nearly no chance to be put into practice (cf. PARCHE-KAWIK 2003). Our data suggest that moral atmospheres in which merchants have to act are characterised by moral communication mainly on stage 2. And these atmospheres have a long, strong and stable tradition.

From the point of view of option (ii) moral judgements of stage 2-type are not only current practice but also morally required⁹: Only if business people follow the guideline of making profit they contribute to the overall societal goal of general supply as well as saving (natural and human) resources¹⁰ – an idea expressed already in the 18th century by the famous Scottish economist and moralist ADAM SMITH (1776/1910). Those who ignore that rule will not be successful and therefore be pushed out from the market.¹¹

On the other hand the functioning of this system is endangered by opportunists or “free-loaders” who count on all others’ obedience to rules and take advantage of their own transgressions (a well-known example for this is tax evasion). Therefore, advocates of this approach (cf. BECKER 1993; BUCHANAN 1975, HOMANN 1988) advise us not only to put morals into institutions (laws, prescriptions and so forth) but to control obedience and to punish violations consequently. Yet, within the “channel of rules” business subjects can act freely, free in competing and contracting, motivated by striving for their own benefit. As long as they stay within the set boundaries they behave in a morally acceptable way.¹²

Given this interpretation of market activities and, furthermore, given that every subject acting in that field as a member of society has to fulfil not only this role but a multitude

⁹ In a sense and, of course, under many restrictions (see below) it could be said that “is” and “ought” coincide. And it sounds nearly absurd – as COLBY and KOHLBERG put it (1987, 16) – that stage 2 thinking is characteristic for children and for “many adolescent and adult criminal offenders”.

¹⁰ As far as the costs for their use cannot be externalized.

¹¹ To some extent the „economic principle“ rules everybody’s way of life: We try to reach goals by minimal expenditure and we are eager to maximize outcomes given a certain amount of means were it money, time, effort, commitment or other “cost” (HOMANN/SUCHANEK 1989). In that sense we all are “merchants” of our conduct of life.

¹² Exceptions are situations or constellations for which up to a given date rules have not been stated yet. That is usually the case in the fields of scientific progress like gene technology, medical techniques, information technology or consequences of globalisation.

of other social roles in which different moral standards (have to) prevail¹³, our reformulation of KOHLBERG's theory fits nicely in this approach. Moreover, the real (social) world seems to be described better by this reconstruction, which is, of course, still far from being perfect.

To reach the goals of moral improvement option no. 3 seems to be too far from what can realistically be hoped. Of course, educators are often said to need ideals (as a motivational basis of professional action) and also their students (as an idea where and what to be achieved), even if both of them know that they will never attain them. On the other hand it could be judged to be morally unacceptable to burden people with moral obligations in view of which they are condemned to fail from the very beginning. This is especially true for (our young) people in business whose obligatory *strategic* vocational practice, from a stage 5-perspective (as well as from most other traditional universal ethics), as a matter of principle, appears as morally inadequate¹⁴. In addition to this, all our experiences tell us that if rules or commandments are too far from what people under the conditions of everyday life can actually do they usually withdraw their compliance with the consequence of massive transgression – so we would see the opposite of what we hoped to achieve.

Acknowledgement

I am thankful to my co-worker Dr. GERHARD MINNAMEIER who provided me with valuable hints and eliminated the many mistakes of the first English version.

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¹³ See OSER (1998) for the example of schools and teachers.

¹⁴ To give only one example: Equity as an objective of „corrective justice“ and as a central idea of reasoning on stage 5 is diametrically opposed to the achievement principle which governs competition, market and economy as a whole. And that latter principle may not be understood only superficially in terms of money-orientation but fundamentally as an alternative to the equity principle.

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