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Connecting theory and practice



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# Social Work Students' Moral Judgement Competence

Petra Lajčiaková

Dr. Petra Lajčiaková<sup>1</sup> works as a lecturer at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts and Letters, The Catholic University in Ružomberok. Her field of professional interest covers psychology of moral development and positive psychology. Her research focuses on moral development, moral judgment competence and moral dilemmas.

## Abstract

A cross-sectional study explored the moral judgement competence of 168 Slovak students of social work. Lind's Moral Judgement Test was used to evaluate moral judgement competence depending on factors such as age, number of semesters of study, gender, and religion.

Students' moral judgement competence scores did not differ significantly according to religion, and gender. On the other hand, students' scores of moral judgement competence did differ significantly according to age and number of semesters of study. The fact that the Slovak students' moral judgement competence increased with age and number of semesters of study completed is an optimistic sign. Findings were discussed in comparison with those of previous studies. Recommendations for future research were discussed as well.

## Keywords

moral judgement competence, social work students, age, gender, religion

## Introduction

Recently, in Slovakia as well as abroad, wide attention has been given to the formation of moral competence, which is an important aspect of the professional training of social workers. In this context, some authors emphasize the need to use the moral component of personality in an intelligent way, talking about moral intelligence (Hass, 1999; Kaliská, 2013; Kaliský, 2013). This complex process is becoming an integral part of the intellectual and personality features of every social worker with the requirement of its creative implementation.

It is evident that the personality of a social worker is that of a helping professional, and it is one of the key tools for working in a helping profession. The helping profession – social work sees helping as its meaning and to fulfil this, looks for ways to promote the benefit

of other people. Its purpose is to help people living better (Úlehla, 2009).

As a social worker, being competent (from lat. *competere*, i.e. appropriate) means giving excellent performance of one's profession. This is a combination of dispositions, which are necessary for the exercise of the profession. Being morally competent means to be able to reach a moral judgement on the basis of one's own internal principles and then act in accordance with those judgments (Lind, 2008). It is the proper application of one's internalized beliefs that represent the humane and human approach in the profession of social worker (Jankovský, 2003). Lind (2008) emphasizes the close link between moral reasoning, decision making and subsequent behaviour and conduct of the individual. He considers the internal principles of a person to be the motive for his moral or immoral action.



The basis of social work is the personal commitment of social workers and the tools for the implementation of the actual content of the work are the relationships between social workers and their clients. Jankovský (2003), in the context of examining the problem, emphasizes the urgency of the issues of morality and ethics, especially in relation to the fragility of the working relationship between the client and the social worker.

To monitor the level of the moral competence among adepts of the helping professions – students of social work was one of the aims of our study. Ráczová and Pinková (2012) compared 60 students of helping disciplines (psychology and medicine) with 60 students of natural and technical disciplines. The average age of participants was 20.69. Based on the results obtained, we concluded that the type of study affects the level of moral competence, but only slightly. The vast majority of students, regardless of their field of study had a medium level of moral competence. However the students of the helping disciplines demonstrated a higher level of moral competence compared with students of natural and technical disciplines.

The level of moral competence of Czech and foreign medical students in relation to their education has been examined by Slováčková (2001), who seemingly came to inconsistent conclusions. On the one hand, she found that moral competence among Czech students significantly decreased during their studies with increasing university year and age, while on the other hand among foreign students it rose insignificantly. Later in 2007, Slováčková and Slováček conducted a cross-sectional study investigating the level of moral competence among 310 Czech and 70 Slovak and international medical students depending on their age, number of completed semesters of study, gender, ethnicity and religion. The level of moral competence in Czech and Slovak medical students significantly decreased with their increasing age, while that of international students did not increase significantly. In summary, the level of moral competence decreased with increasing age and number of completed semesters. No effect of other factors monitored – including gender, nationality and religion – was observed among medical students to be significantly demonstrated.

The level of moral competence in nursing students in relation to the field of study, type of study, current year and age was studied by Bužgová with Sikorová (2012). The sample consisted of 662 students of general nursing and midwifery. The overall level of moral competence of nursing students was low (medium C-index was  $14.24 \pm 9.56$ ), and moral competence was significantly affected only by the type of study and age ( $p < .05$ ).

In the context of this research study, which focuses on the level of moral competence of candidates for the helping professions, doctors, nurses, we were interested in the moral competence of social workers, also because of the lack of research attention given to that group of helping professionals. We wondered whether the selected sociodemographic variables would affect the level of moral competence of future social workers.

Despite the significant level of empirical studies conducted in the field of moral competence in relation to education, type of study, age, gender and other important parameters, we consider the area of investigation to be far from exhausted.

## Purpose

The aim of the study was to evaluate the moral judgment competence of Slovak students of social work and to compare the same and different aspects of moral judgment competence based on the age, the number of semesters of study, gender, and religion.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 168 students of social work. The number of students according to their semester of study is shown in Table 1. They aged between 18 and 23 (see Table 2). There were 50 men and 118 women. Filling in the questionnaires was voluntary and anonymous. It contained no identification data. The students were informed about the participation in the survey and its aims. The results were calculated not for individual students but for groups of students. A data sheet was used to record information on the number of semesters of study undertaken, age, gender and religion (see Table 3).



**Table 1: The number of respondents according to the number of semesters of study (N = 168)**

Students	Semester of study		
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup> *
	59	56	53

\* Master's degree study program

**Table 2: The number of respondents according to their age range (N = 168)**

Students	Age range (years)		
	18-19	20-21	22-23
	58	61	49

**Table 3: The number of respondents according to religion (N = 168)**

Students	Religion		
	Roman Catholic	Protestant	None
	126	10	32

### Instrument

Participants completed the Moral Judgment Test ("MJT") (Lind, 2008), which consists of the workers' dilemma and the mercy-killing dilemma. For each dilemma, a person has to identify to what degree he/she agrees with the solution chosen by the actor(s). Then, this person is confronted with six arguments in favour and six arguments against his/her opinion on how to solve the dilemma. The person then designates, on a 9-point scale from -4 to +4, to what degree these arguments are un(acceptable). The MJT provides a good task for observing subjects' moral judgment competence, that is, their ability to judge in accordance with moral principles. The C score indexes this ability. The C score (C-index) can range from zero, indicating absence of any moral judgment competence, to 100, indicating perfect judgment competence. Most frequently, it is categorized as low (1-9), medium (10-29), high (30-49) and very high (above 50). The MJT provides a pure measure of moral judgment competence. A high C score indicates that the subject can rate arguments consistently from a moral point of view.

It took the participants 30 minutes to complete MJT on average. In this study, the Cronbach's reliability coefficient for MJT was  $\alpha = .68$ . It demonstrates a high level of internal consistency.

### Data Analysis

The C-index scores were calculated according to Lind (2008). To evaluate the association between the C-index and the number of semesters of study, age, religion and gender, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) and t-test at a level of significance of 5% were used.

### Results

Data was collected from 168 students of social work at the Slovak universities. The numbers of semesters of study, age, gender and religion were recorded. The impact of number of semesters of study on C-index scores was studied as first. The results showed medium levels of the C-index in students of social work. Upper mean C-index scores were found in students in the sixth semester of study (Master's degree study program). As illustrated by Table 4, the results show statistically significant dependence of the C-index on the number of semesters studied. Nevertheless, significantly higher C-index scores were confirmed in students in the sixth semester of study ( $p < .05$ ).

**Table 4: Dependence of mean C-index values on the number of semesters in social work students (N = 168)**

	Semester of study		
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
Number of students	59	56	53
Mean C-index value	23.8	27.4	29.7
St. deviation	14.8	14.6	15.6

We also found the students of social work demonstrating statistically significant dependence of the C-index on age ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Dependence of mean C-index values on age of social work students (N = 168)**

	Age range (years)		
	18-19	20-21	22-23
Number of students	58	61	49
Mean C-index value	21.7	25.7	28.6
St. deviation	14.7	14.5	15.3

The impact of gender on C-index scores was also studied. As seen from Table 6, the results showed no statistically significant dependence on gender.



**Table 6: Dependence of mean C-index values on gender of social work students (N = 168)**

	Gender	
	Male	Female
Number of students	50	118
Mean C-index value	22.6	23.6
St. deviation	15.2	14.8

We were also interested in detecting a potential dependence of C-index values on type of religion. Table 7 shows C-score values (mean) according to subjects' information about their religion. It was found there is no significant dependence of C-index values on religion and C-score ( $p = .996$ ).

**Table 7: Dependence of mean C-index values on religion of social work students (N = 168)**

	Religion denomination		
	Catholic	Protestant	None
Number of students	126	10	32
Mean C-index value	19.7	15.1	17.2
St. deviation	12.6	11.7	11.3

The C-index increased depending on age and the number of semesters studied. The influence of the other factors on the C-index was not statistically significant in the students of social work.

## Discussion

Through our empirical research, we have come to some conclusions as to the moral judgment competence of Slovak students of social work. There is significant dependence of the C-index (moral judgment competence) on age and number of semesters of study. The general tendency is that of students having a higher C-index with the increasing number of semesters of their study, and therefore it might be concluded that study of social work has played a very important role for the development of the students' moral judgment competence. The moral judgment competence in the Slovak social work students increased significantly during their studies (as they grew older). The increase shown in moral judgment competence during social work studies is caused mainly by the structure of the curriculum. There are a lot of discussions about ethical problems and moral dilemmas. The study offers many possibilities for taking up roles, which is the

main requirement for the development of moral judgment competence. Similarly, Auvinen et al. (2004) found significantly higher moral judgment competence of nursing students in their final year compared with those in the first year of study. Felton and Parsons (1987) found that master's degree students reasoned at a higher level than bachelor's degree students. Also Duckett et al. (1997) reported significantly higher scores of moral judgment competence in students who had completed their bachelor's degree studies in nursing.

The opposite conclusion was reached by the above-mentioned research by Slováčková and Slováček (2007), according to which the level of moral competence in medical students decreased dramatically with increasing age. Their results could also be interpreted as follows: the level of moral judgment competence of the students who had attended few semesters of study was higher than that of those who were in the later stages of their course. Lind (2002) found a similar phenomenon – medical students begin their studies with a high level of moral judgment competence, but during the first two years its development stagnates or even regresses. This regression is replaced by a slow increase towards the end of their studies. Lind (2002) calls this “the ceiling or marginal effect”. Later, however, when comparing psychology students and teachers, Lind (2008) found that the level of education had a major impact on the level of moral competence of individuals, and most students still had considerable moral character, and therefore are not in need of further influence in this sphere. In the study by Matarazzo and his collaborators (2008), however, neither gender nor age had a significant effect on the level of moral competence.

Similarly, no significant dependence of the C-index on gender was demonstrated in our study. According to our results, gender will not directly influence the level of moral judgment competence. On the contrary, Self et al. (1998) demonstrated a significant correlation between the moral judgment competence and gender: women scored more highly than men. Similarly, Price et al. (1998) found similar gender differences in their study.

Finally, no dependence of the moral judgment competence on religion was found. Similarly,



Schillinger and Lind (2003) strove to detect whether there is any potential correlation between religion and moral judgment competence. They found no significant difference between religion and C-index. This is an interesting finding primarily with respect to the Brazilian population. Adebayo (2007) investigated effects of religiosity and occupation on moral reasoning in a sample of Nigerian adults. His results showed that religiosity has significant effects on moral reasoning. This indicates that religious people differ from nonreligious in their moral reasoning thus corroborating some previous findings in the literature (e. g. Burwell, Cole, 1999). It also lends credence to theories of scholars that have attempted to link religiosity with morality (e.g. Fowler, 1981; Feenstra, 1991). These findings do not, however, support Lupu (2013) who reported that religiosity is not a reliable predictor of morality.

Despite these results, we are aware that their interpretation is not clear and an accurate assessment of the moral competence of social work students would require a longitudinal study.

### Conclusion

As far as we know, our study is the first investigation into the moral competence of social work students in Slovakia. Since this is a cross-sectional study, it is not possible to assess the developmental trend of the monitored parameters and there are also some difficulties with the method of comparison with the results of international empirical studies, which are largely longitudinal in nature. The fact that the moral competence of social work students increases with the number of completed semesters can perhaps be interpreted as optimistic. In addition, considering the fact that the interpretation of the data is ambiguous, a more precise assessment of the moral responsibilities of students of social work would require a longitudinal research.

In the future research, participating students should be examined from the beginning of their studies and tested each year to observe their moral development.

Experience of teaching ethics and moral judgment test results indicates that Slovak

social work students show medium levels of moral reasoning (medium C-index scores). Therefore, adequate methods should be sought for to develop moral reasoning in social work courses. Based on the results, interventions for the development of ethical argumentation will be incorporated in the educational plan for social work students.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Correspondence contact: Petra Lajčiaková, PhD., Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia, lajciakova@ff.ku.sk