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Fostering moral competence can help us resist scare tactics [1]

Georg Lind

Summary

In order to cope with difficult problems and conflicts, we need moral competence, which is the ability to solve problems and conflicts by thinking and discussing on the basis of generally valid moral principles. Otherwise, these problems and conflicts can overwhelm us and cause insecurity, anxiety, or even panic. We then tend to find "solutions" that lead to further problems and conflicts, such as simply ignoring problems and conflicts or "solving" them with brute force and deception. Or we let others decide for us what to do.

In this article I show that such makeshift solutions would not be necessary if we gave all people the opportunity to develop their moral competence. Even a minimum would immunize us against fear and panic, and thus against immoral practices. Like our muscles, however, it only develops if we get enough opportunities to use it. When they are lacking, we can easily become panicked (LeBon 2019/1895). So we must provide adequate learning opportunities for all people to develop their moral competence, or freedom and peace will be in jeopardy.

Insecurity, fear

[1] Revised version of my article "Panic and the lack of moral competence. How we can help to prevent panic pandemics." Ethics in Progress 12, 1, 75-85,

How are panic and moral competence connected? To understand this, we must first understand emotional reactions such as panic and its precursors uncertainty and fear in more detail. Fear is a dubious blessing. On the one hand, it can protect us when a quick response is needed in the face of danger. But it can also harm or even kill us if it prevents us from understanding the threat and makes us make bad decisions. For example, when we encounter a snake, our body is activated to either fight the threat or flee from it. Both reactions can save our lives, but they can also make us feel worse. If we choose to fight, the snake can bite us. If we choose to flee, we can fall and break our necks.

LeDoux (1994) has illustrated what happens in our brain when we see, hear, feel or smell a threat and it triggers fear in us. Our senses first send this information to the brain areas responsible for it. From there, it is relayed to the limbic system in the lower part of the brain, where it is evaluated (usually unconsciously): Is it good or bad news? Should we be happy or afraid? This area includes the amygdala, the seat of our emotions, the thalamus, which relays information to the other parts of the brain, the hypothalamus, and the hippocampus. The hippocampus seems to store our encounters with threats. That is, it recognizes situations as threats when we have stored corresponding experiences or narratives from familiar authorities (parents, teachers, media, authorities, etc.).

So fear is learned from other people as much as from our own experience. It is not only triggered by immediate dangers such as wild animals, explosions or suspicious people, but also when we are faced with difficult tasks in life. Fear also arises when we fear being punished or embarrassing ourselves in front of higher ranking people. Should we try to solve the task set, or should we guess or cheat? Should we tell a patient we don't know how to help him, or should we prescribe pills to satisfy him? Should we pretend we know everything or admit we don't know something

and ask for guidance? Anxiety is usually hard to control, but we are aware of it and we can consider how to reduce it in the future.

Panic

If the fear becomes so strong that it completely blocks the connection to the forebrain and thus the thinking, we speak of panic. Then the incoming information from our senses is no longer passed on there and therefore cannot trigger any thinking. We then only follow the pre-programmed stimulus-reaction patterns that are stored in the limbic system.

Panic often occurs when the same fear is triggered in several people at the same time. They are then incapable of thinking and cannot stimulate each other to think and cannot stop them from reacting purely emotionally. On the contrary, they often reinforce each other's fear. Also, one becomes less aware of one's own fear when others have it too. Therefore, we experience it as a normal state. Therefore, group panic often sustains itself longer than individual anxiety. Panic-stricken people continue to reassure each other that there is a reason for panic even when it has long since ceased to exist.

That's not the only reason panic can become chronic. If it lasts for a long time, the parts of the forebrain that are used for thinking shrink, just as every organ in the body shrinks when it is not used for a long time. So our brain, after prolonged disuse, lacks the "hardware", that is , the dendrites and synapses that make thinking possible. Therefore, comparing a panic pandemic to sleep would be incorrect. After all, when we "wake up" after a prolonged panic, we can no longer think as well as before, even if we want to. Kant's famous injunction to have courage to think (sapere aude!) is therefore ineffective. It should read: Practice thinking again! Just as we have to rebuild our muscles through practice after a long period of degradation.

Panic manifests itself in behavior

Even though panic is often not conscious, it can be observed in behavior. When we suffer from panic, we tend to reject any thinking or talking about our object of fear. If someone mentions it, we break off the conversation or change the subject. When we discuss, our arguments often lack logic. In panic mode, we don't mind constantly contradicting ourselves. Panic narrows our attention. It often reduces perception to a single cause and a single consequence, as we are witnessing right now in the example of the current panic pandemic. Disease and death seem to be caused solely by a single cause, a specific virus. Other causes of disease such as cancer, diabetes, heart attacks and environmental toxins do not seem to exist. Even with the measures, panicky people often see only one goal, in this case: to eradicate the virus, but no side effects. They remain invisible to them, no matter how bad they are. It is like in a war, in which people continue to fight for the "final victory" even when it is certain to outsiders that it will mean their own demise.

The vicious circle

As Le Bon (1897) already showed 120 years ago in his book "The Psychology of the Masses", that people in positions of power are tempted to exploit people's tendency to panic for their own purposes. For panic not only paralyzes our thinking, but also our willingness to ask questions and fight for our rights. We then allow power-hungry people to restrict our right to free speech and movement, or to send us into wars against external and internal enemies. If politicians succeed in creating international tensions and thus panic among the population, they can count on their approval when they crack down on the opposition. If they succeed in

convincing people of a viral pandemic, the people themselves will demand stricter measures such as compulsory vaccinations. They can reinforce this effect by making many people beneficiaries of the panic they create. These then have no interest in ending the panic. In fact, to maintain their benefits, they are often tempted to keep the panic alive with fake information. Moreover, they probably suspect that they are guilty of a crime with their behaviour and that they will face heavy penalties after the panic pandemic has ended. In other words, panic-mongers can reach a point where they can't end the panic even if they wanted to. They will then be like the sorcerer's apprentice in Goethe's poem of the same name: He had eavesdropped on his master's spell about how to make the broom fetch the bucket of water, but had forgotten the spell to stop it again. So the flood took its course. Thus deliberately induced panics have often ended in fatal disaster. Napoleon's Russian campaign had cost the lives of three million people (LeBon 2019/1897). Kaiser Wilhelm II and Adolf Hitler could also panic people to such an extent that they .destroyed their own lives and the lives of millions of innocent people in two world wars.

Moral competence is the key to behavior

How to protect people from such panic? To do this, you need to understand why certain people can be panicked and others cannot. Certain people have a hard time panicking and being led to do things they would not normally do. They too can become rattled and afraid when faced with danger. Nevertheless, they do not seem to give up their thinking completely. They can therefore look for the cause of their fear and choose between different behaviors. If we understand why these people are protected against panic, we can also help the others to protect themselves against a panic pandemic. The key, as stated, lies in their ability to solve problems and conflicts involving moral principles through

reasoning and discussion, that is, in their moral competence (Kohlberg 1984; Lind 2019a). Above a certain level of moral competence, people can still control their behavior through thinking even when they come under pressure. If inner guidance by morality fails completely, they are left only with violence and deceit or submission to an external authority.

The importance of moral competence becomes clear when we take a closer look at some classic psychological experiments. Milgram (1974) showed in his famous experiment that obedience to authority can paralyze our moral conscience and reason. The experimenter assumes the authority of a psychological researcher. He instructs participants to give electric shocks to learners when they make a mistake in a learning task. The shocks and the victims' reactions are faked, but the participants are not aware of it. The results of many studies show: Most follow instructions to the end, even though they can see the great pain they cause. Milgram concluded from this finding that human behavior is completely under the control of external authorities and that internal instances such as a moral conscience cannot influence people's behavior.

Fromm (1973) has contradicted this. For him, Milgram's experiment shows the opposite, namely a "presence of conscience in most of the subjects and their pain when obedience made them act against their conscience" (p. 75). His interpretation is supported by the fact that some of the participants quit the experiment early. Why did they quit and why didn't the others? What enabled them to do so? Milgram (1974) gives us an indirect clue to this. He reports that participants with higher levels of education were more disobedient than participants with lower levels of education. Do the resisters have a skill that was enhanced by their education? The answer seems to be yes, as Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) showed in an experiment similar to Milgram's. In this, he recorded not only the obedience of the participants, but also their moral competence. He used his clinical interview method to measure moral competence for this

purpose. This scale is known as the "stages of moral development". In his experiment, Kohlberg actually found that obedience to authority was strongly correlated with moral competence. Of the participants with high moral competence (stage 5 "principled morality"), 75 percent resisted authority, compared to 13 percent in the group with lower moral competence (Kohlberg 1984). This is a very strong effect when measured against other findings in psychology. It shows that if our moral competence is sufficiently developed, we can solve difficult problems and conflicts without submitting to the instructions of an external authority

Based on my own research on moral competence, I have developed an objective method to make moral competence visible, the experimentally designed Moral *Competence Test* (MCT; see Lind 1978; 1981; 2019a; 2021a). Franz-Josef Mansbart (2001) used it to show that participants with low moral competence scores needed significantly more time to solve dilemmas than participants with high scores. The effect was strong (r = -.36; for my calculation see Lind 2002). They often take a long time to solve a conflict or a problem, which can quickly confront them with the question of whether, instead of thinking and discussing, they prefer to use violence and deceit to get the matter over with, or whether they simply hand over responsibility for decisions to others and submit to their orders.

Prehn and her colleagues (2008; 2013) were able to identify the main location of these processes in the brain, namely in the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (rDLPFC). We can call it the seat of moral competence. Of course, all parts of our nervous system are always more or less active when we are confronted with a moral dilemma. But the DLPFC is the most active part when we are confronted with moral dilemmas. The correlation between the level of brain activity in this area and the C-score of the Moral Competence Test (MCT) was unusually high; r = -0.47. As in Mansbart's experiment, participants with low moral competence took much longer to decide behavioraldilemmas than

participants with high moral competence. Li et al. (2016), who conducted a similar series of experiments, confirmed Prehn's result.

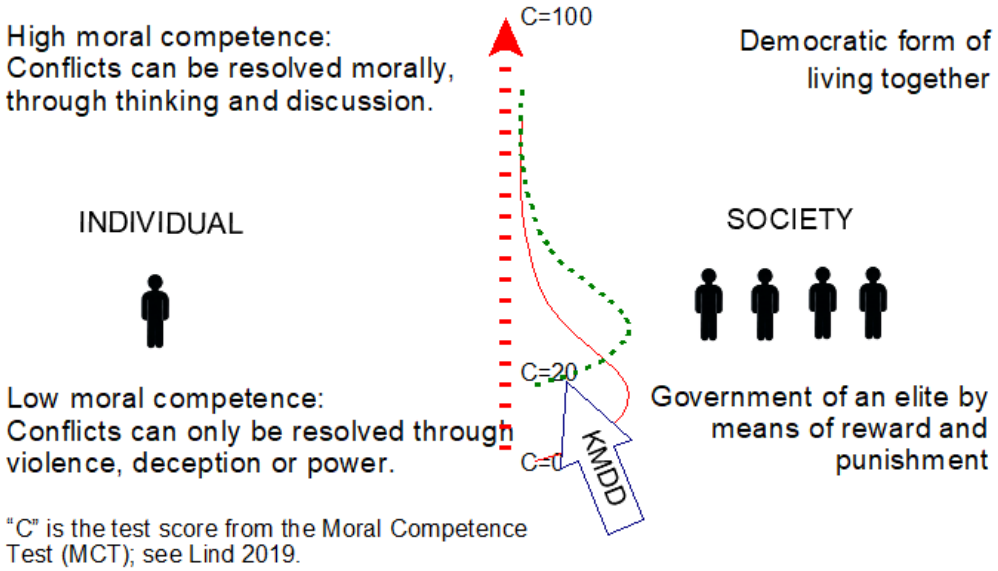
The importance of moral competence was also evident in McNamee's (1977) experi ment. She found that participants with low levels of moral competence did not offer help to a person in need. They were willing to help but felt paralyzed, as they reported afterwards, by conflicting thoughts and feelings that they could not resolve.

Further support for our hypothesis comes from studies of conformity behavior. Asch (1956) showed that most of us are willing to let others think for us. He showed that we often trust our own thinking less than the thinking of others when they are more numerous. Psychologists call this phenomenon conformism. In his experiment, Asch asked participants which of three lines on one paper was the same length as the line on another paper. When the other participants prepared by the experimenter gave the same wrong answer, most of the participants changed their correct answer to agree with the majority. Obviously, they trusted the majority's opinion more than their own thinking. But like Milgram, Asch forgot to ask why some participants resisted the temptation to conform? Mofakhami (2021) made up for that in her online experiment. She measured the moral competence of her participants. Indeed, participants with high moral competence were less prone to conformity. The effect was there, but weaker than Asch's, perhaps because the social pressure to conform does not become as strong in an online experiment as an experiment with real participants.

Moral competence is also significant for dealing with serious life problems, as adolescents often have, for example the loss of a friend, poor grades at school or the divorce of parents (Lenz 2006). In order to cope with the excitement this triggers, they tend to use drugs. But this is only true for those who have low moral competence, that is, who are unable to cope with their problems by thinking about them or by consulting

with their parents, friends, or teachers. Participants with higher moral competence, on the other hand, were apparently unable to cope with their problems without using drugs.

All these and many other experimental studies suggest that a certain level of competence is required to successfully solve our problems and conflicts through reflection and thus avoid panic and submission to external authority, i.e. to enable democratic coexistence (Lind 2019a). In the figure below, this critical level is marked by a C-score of 20.0 on the *Moral Competence Test* (MCT), whose scale ranges from 0 to 100. I would like to emphasize that this C-score is only a rough guide.



Moral competence and democracy

People who have not been allowed to develop their moral competence to the extent that they need it for life in a free, democratic society experience permanent stress. They easily panic when something unusual happens. As a way out, they simply ignore problems and conflicts or "solve" them

with violence and deceit. In order to limit and repair the damage caused by this, society has to maintain expensive institutions such as legislation, police, prosecution, courts, penal institutions and therapy for offenders and victims. A minor offence like riding a bus without a ticket can result in a jail term of several months, costing society several thousand euros. Only a fraction of this would have been necessary to promote their moral competence (Hemmerling 2014).

When ignoring, violence and deceit do not help to cope with problems and conflicts, people give up their freedom and submit to an external authority which is supposed to think and decide for them. But this is an invitation to authoritarian power mongers who like to dominate others in order to exploit them for their own purposes.

Development conditions

Moral competence can therefore protect against fear and panic. But its development requires more than will and courage. It requires favorable learning opportunities (Lind 2002; 2015; Schillinger 2016). If we have too few of these, our development stalls or we even regress (Lind 2000; Hemmerling 2014). This starts at a young age, when children begin to use their moral competence, for example, when they do not simply follow orders from parents, but ask why. When parents respond to such why-questions, they promote the development of their children's moral competence (Speicher 1984). If, however, they reprimand them or even punish them for asking why questions, they prevent their development. This can also be seen in children who grow up with religiously dogmatic parents. Many children are thus permanently hindered in their moral development (Akin 2019).

The question of suitable learning opportunities also plays a major role in schools and universities. If adolescents are not allowed to question

and discuss and thus take responsibility for their learning, their moral competence cannot develop (Lind 2000; Schillinger 2006; Nowak et al. 2021).

If we want to live together in freedom and democracy, we must therefore above all promote the moral competence of all citizens. Many parents cannot do this. They would first have to be trained for this. This must be done by schools and universities, on which we spend many billions every year. But this cannot be achieved through classical education, nor through conventional political education, as democracy researcher Westheimer (2015) rightly points out: "In study after study, we come to similar conclusions: The goals and practices commonly espoused in curricula designed to promote democratic citizenship tend to have more to do with voluntarism, beneficence, and obedience than with democracy. In other words, good citizenship for many educators means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen -- not grappling with the kinds of sociopolitical choices that every citizen in a democratic society must learn to make" (p. 472; see also Lind 2019b).

Schools in a democracy have a duty to provide sufficient opportunities for all students to use and exercise their moral competence so that it can develop. This does not need a change in the system,. But it does need a change in teaching methods and therefore teacher education. Teachers need to teach in a way that allows students' moral competence to flourish. They must refrain from using fear as "motivation". We cannot educate people to a life of freedom by means of coercion. That would be paradoxical (Portele 1978). Learning for freedom needs opportunities to apply moral competence, which teachers often have to manufacture because they are not available to many children. And it needs rules, not dozens of rules, but in essence only one, namely a rule that combines Article 5 (freedom of speech) and Article 1 (respect for

human dignity) of our Basic Law: *everyone may say what he wants, but no one may judge people* (neither praise nor blame).

This rule is the linchpin of the *Constance Method of Dilemma Discussion* (KMDD) I developed to promote moral competence.[2] From my more than twenty years of experience with this simple rule, I can state that it works. Never has a participant violated it. All one has to do to enforce this rule is to state it and announce that if it is broken, they will be reminded. So far, I have never had to remind participants. It is tragic that parents and teachers constantly violate this rule when they praise and punish children with the best of intentions. In doing so, they promote insecurity, fear, and submission, rather than maturity.

KMDD has proven to be very effective, although it costs little time and money (Lind 2002). It does not require any changes to the curriculum and timetable. However, KMDD is only effective if the teacher is very well trained. Of course, KMDD can only improve our coexistence in democracy if it is offered in an area-covering way.... My request to the readers of these lines: Help to ensure that KMDD is offered everywhere in teacher education. For the training to work, it is costly. But it is protected from plagiarists, which is not yet common in pedagogy, by registering the KMDD® as an international trademark. The *Institute for Moral-Democratic Competence* e.V. (IMDC) monitors the quality of the training. (IMDC), which some colleagues and I founded for this purpose (https://imdc.info).

The promotion of moral competence protects against panic

Fear and panic are the preferred means of people who want to impose their will on others. Fear mongering with real or invented dangers has

[2] The KMDD is based on Blatt & Kohlberg's (1975) method of dilemma discussion. However, I have modified it in many ways to make it more effective and teachable (Lind 2019a).

therefore always played an important role in education and politics: the servant Ruprecht with the rod, purgatory, the yellow peril, Jewish world domination, Bolshevism, UFOs, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Saddam Hussein's poison gas factory, climate change, are just a few examples. Currently, it is the threat of a new type of virus that will claim millions of lives that is supposed to get us all to get vaccinated, even against our better judgment. Given the low moral competence of many citizens, I had pointed out the danger of a panic pandemic at the very beginning of the crisis, in March 2020 (Lind 2020). In the meantime, many authors have taken up the topic of fear and panic (Maaz et al. 2021; Wodarg 2021). They go into it in much more detail than I can do here. But, as far as I can see, they know no way out.

But this way out does exist. We can protect people from panic by promoting their moral competence. By promoting their ability to resolve conflicts and problems through thought and discussion, people can control their panic and not have to submit to an outside authority. By doing so, we also protect our democracy.

Moral competence, can be fostered very effectively and with little effort through appropriate learning opportunities such as KMDD (Hemmer ling 2014; Lerkiatbundit et al. 2006; Lind 2000; 2002; 2019a; Nowak et al, 2021; Schillinger 2006). Providing such opportunities should be the most important task of schools in a democracy. Compulsory schooling was introduced for this purpose in the age of the Enlightenment and the democracy movement (Humboldt, Jefferson and others) (Black 2020). However, hardly anyone seems to remember this today. All that remains of it are compulsory and compulsory , namely compulsory schooling and compulsory teaching (Berliner & Biddle 1995; Ravitch 2010). What is missing, however, is an enlightening school that promotes moral competence.

Even in teacher training, this founding idea of the Enlightenment

hardly plays a role. Democratic pedagogy appears in theory seminars, but is not trained. Instead of showing prospective teachers how to turn adolescents into responsible citizens, they are only shown how to practice the unquestioning adoption of "knowledge" with them. There are teachers who are animated by the spirit of enlightenment and encourage their students to question and discuss, and let them do so. But they are a minority. It is becoming more and more difficult for them, in their studies and in their everyday work, to do justice to their democraticmission, namely to promote true competence. True competence means not only knowing something, but also being able to understand it, apply it and take responsibility for it. Promoting competence in this sense must be the duty of all teachers. We must, of course, show them how to do it.

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* The articles marked with an asterisk can be downloaded from my website: http[s]://moralcompetence.net/b-liste.htm

Vita

Dr. Georg Lind, born in 1947, was an adjunct professor of psychology at

the University of Konstanz until 2010. He was a visiting professor at the Humboldt University in Berlin, the University of Illinois in Chicago and the Universidad de Monterrey. Today he is a freelance researcher, author, and teacher trainer and gives workshops in many countries. His main area of interest is moral democratic competence. He developed the first experimentally designed objective *Moral Competence Test* (MCT) to make moral competence visible. The MCT has been translated into 40 languages and is used worldwide to measure the effectiveness of moral and democratic education methods and programs. He has also developed a very effective and few elaborate method for promoting moral democratic competence: the *Constance Method of Dilemma Discussion* (KMDD)®, also known as Debate Theatre (DT). Lind is also founder and chairman of the *Institute for Moral-Democratic Competence* e.V. (IMDC).

Neuer Text

Contact: Georg.Lind@moralcompetence.net
Internet : http[s]://moralcompetence.net