The Moral Judgment of Adolescents in a Virtual Environment
/ Mor Deshen

Abstract

This study explores the influence of the virtual environment on the profile of moral judgment of adolescents. It is concerned with questions such as (1) the possibility of an emergent gap between profile of moral judgment in daily life as against profile of moral judgment in the virtual environment, (2) whether heightened exposure to information technologies, such as Internet, leads to a particular profile of moral judgment.

The study is based on the typology of moral profiles formulated by Moshe Addad (1988). This comprises five types of solutions to moral dilemma: "human judgment", "self-interest judgment", "normative judgment", "ambivalent judgment" and "absence of judgment". The profile of moral judgment is an instrument that expresses the frequency of usage of various modes of judgment by particular individuals or social groups.

Research was carried out on Jewish adolescents in Israel. A questionnaire was administered to 1048 students in grades 7 to 11 in 6 different schools (one in the north of the country, three in the center and two in the south). In each of the schools questionnaires were administered to one class of each grade. The questionnaire included personal data, characteristics of individual Internet surfing patterns, moral dilemmas of the daily life, and moral dilemmas of the virtual environment. Further, 7 focus groups were surveyed for qualitative data to supplement the quantitative information.

We found that nearly all the adolescents had access to a computer at home, and that most of the surfing took place at home or in the house of a friend. The vast majority
of the adolescents had no filtering software at home, and on the average they spent three hours daily surfing. We also found that the Internet activity of the great majority of the adolescents entailed practices defined by the researchers as "immoral". Thus about half of the adolescents surfed pornographic sites, one quarter annoyed or molested others over the web, over one third downloaded ready-made school assignments from the Internet for

submission to teachers. Nearly all of them downloaded music and movies from the Internet and about a third gave false information about themselves.

We found a gap between the profile of moral judgment of the adolescents in daily life and their profile in the Internet environment. In the latter judgment of the "moral" type was less frequent, and judgment of the "normative" and "self-interest" types was more frequent. The gap between solutions of daily life dilemmas and Internet environment dilemmas was not constant. It was subject to the changing content of the dilemmas. Thus we found that in the Internet environment there was relatively frequent judgment of the human type in connection with annoyance or molestation of others, whereas such judgment was relatively infrequent in the context of illegal loading music and violation of creators' right.

A correlation was found between gender and type of judgment in daily life and in the Internet environment. Both boys and girls used less "human judgment" in the Internet environment, but girls tended to use "human judgment" more frequently than boys. In the Internet environment, boys tended to use "absence of judgment" more than girls. Boys thus tended to evince more apathy to their surroundings and to follow "self-interest judgment" that entails behavior which is conventional in the peer-group. Self-control and criticism, and empathy with others, were comparatively rare here. Girls tend, relatively more, towards "normative judgment" that reflects adherence to peer-group conventions with minimal reflexivity.

An unexpected correlation we found was between age and general profile of moral judgment. Students of upper grades tended to "absence of judgment", while students of lower grades tended to "ambivalent judgment" which is less distant from "human judgment". Students of the lower grades tended towards "self-interest judgment" in the Internet environment more than in daily life.

Another correlation was found between religiosity and general profile of judgment. Religious adolescents reached moral decisions more frequently than those whom we categorized as "traditional". But the latter came to such a decision more frequently than the "secular" adolescents. Youths of all faith categories used moral judgment less

in the Internet environment than in daily life. We also found correlations between length of exposure to Internet usage (measured by numbers of years) and general profile of judgment. Experienced Internet users tended to minimize the use of moral judgment in both the Internet environment and in daily life. With increasing Internet experience the tendency towards "normative judgment" increased in both situations. In the Internet environment in particular "self-interest judgment" increased. Similar results, and increasingly so, were found upon correlating with Internet surfing (measured by hour per day usage).

We found correlations between varieties of moral judgment and self report of actual behavior. All the negative activities mentioned above were positively correlated with surfing, and with immoral types of judgment.

Finally, we explored the roles that parents and educators might play in the choice of type of judgment of adolescents. We found that adults offered very little verbal guidance on expected behavior in the Internet environment. However, to conclude on a somewhat positive note, we also found that, to the limited extent that adults did offer guidance that correlated with increased usage of "moral judgment" on the part of adolescents, and thus had a positive educational effect.

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