

11-22-1996

The Psychology of Moral Judgment: Applications for Counterintelligence and Personnel Security

Editor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Other Political Science Commons](#), [Other Psychology Commons](#), [Social Psychology Commons](#), and the [Theory and Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Editor (1996) "The Psychology of Moral Judgment: Applications for Counterintelligence and Personnel Security," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol1/iss4/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Psychology of Moral Judgment: Applications for Counterintelligence and Personnel Security

Author: Editor

Volume: 1

Issue: 4

Date: 1996-11-22

Keywords: Espionage; Moral development

Several events occurred in the last week that highlight the psychology of how people perceive and then act on right and wrong. First, Alger Hiss died. Up to the last, the ex-staff officer with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Congressional committees, the Justice Department, and State Department, the Secretary General of the 1945 San Francisco conference at which the United Nations charter was ratified, and the ex-president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace was still professing innocence, still denying any linkage with Communist espionage activities. Also in the last week, the review of the decision to bar Richard Nuccio, a current State Department official, from access to classified information continues. The review was directed by the Director of Central Intelligence, John Deutsch. At issue is Nuccio's providing classified information to a member of the House Select Committee on Intelligence. The information suggested that members of the Central Intelligence Agency were withholding information that one of their Guatemalan agents might have been involved-- directly or indirectly-- in the murders of one U.S. citizen and the husband of another or in the cover-up of complicity for these murders.. On a different order of magnitude, although still with personnel security and counterintelligence import, military commissioned and noncommissioned officers continue to be accused, investigated, prosecuted, and, in some cases, convicted of sexual harassment, engaging in inappropriate personal relations, and even rape of sexual subordinates.

Most recently, Harold Nicholson has been identified as a 16-year Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) GS-15 officer, a former station chief in Romania, deputy station chief in Malaysia, and section chief at the CIA counterterrorism center, who allegedly received \$120K from the SVRR, the Russian Federation Foreign Intelligence Service, successor to the KGB, in return for divulging classified information. Apparently the damage assessment is still ongoing, but Nicholson probably divulged (1) identities, backgrounds, and missions of future U.S. undercover agents, (2) U.S. intelligence operations methods in Romania, Malaysia, Japan, and the Philippines, and (3) U.S. intelligence data and analysis on issues of interest to the Russian government. If the allegations are true, Nicholson is the first CIA station chief ever to be publicly acknowledged as committing espionage against the U.S. Government.

This was the week that was and it brings up yet again the dilemma for directors, chiefs, supervisors, and co-workers involved in the obtaining and protecting, of sensitive information: how to ensure that people follow the rules--be this behavioral compliance, identification, or internalization. One psychological research tradition relevant to this dilemma is that of moral judgment levels. Of special note is the work of the late social psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg.

Kohlberg posited five levels of moral judgment. He theorized and marshaled significant cross-cultural data to support the notion that people transited at least some of these levels during their life course. Some made it all the way to level 5, some remained at level 1. At level 1, people follow the rules to avoid punishment. Or they obey for the very sake of obedience or to avoid physical damage to persons or property. At level 2, they follow the rules only when it is in their own immediate interest or in the interest of an ally, or if it seems to be an equal exchange-- a fair deal or agreement. At level 3, they obey the rules because it is generally expected of people, because it is instrumental in maintaining desired relationships. At level 4, they follow the rules because they have agreed to do so and because obedience

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

is viewed as a contribution to society, a group, or organization. Or as a social contract. Finally at level 5, they follow the rules for reasons similar to those at level 4, but they withhold the right to violate these rules because certain values, e.g., life and liberty, must be upheld as a higher goal.

The implications for personnel security and counterintelligence experts are many. For example, the different people in an organization will do right or violate what's right for both similar and different reasons. One takes different routes to exploit individuals or to reinforce their virtue. And people at least have the probability of changing with time. What keeps them in line at one point may not at another. And although level 5 was viewed as the most morally advanced by Kohlberg, personnel security managers might prefer their charges to remain no higher than level 4. To the managers, level- 5 people may appear too much like loose cannons, like the antithesis of team players, even if the values they seek to uphold to the detriment of the organization's rules are the very ones allegedly esteemed by that organization.

The biggest problem, however, is how one creates and manages a personnel security system which must simultaneously handle so many different kinds of people. The likelihood is that what keeps one type of person in line may increase the probability that another type strays off the path. A case in point is increasing the penalties for espionage. Certainly, this increase is more likely to keep a level-1 person obeying the rules. However, it might make the option of a rules transgression more necessary for a level-5 person who views behavioral freedom as the essence of liberty and the increased penalties as a call to glory.

Kohlberg's research on moral judgment certainly can generate hypotheses and new perspectives on maximizing the probability that people obey the rules. There will still be motives untouched. And it is important to note that even the right moral judgment may not elicit or lead to the right behavior. Sometimes, in fact often, according to Kohlberg and many other social psychologists, there are disconnects. Another body of psychological research on the consistency among attitudes, belief systems, and behavior can shed light on this.

There is personal and professional import here. For who knows what was going on in Kohlberg's own deliberations of right and wrong when he decided to kill himself, and then acted on it? Was this right behavior impelled by a judgment that such behavior was right? Or did Kohlberg know it was wrong, but went ahead anyway, much as many people involved in espionage have done? Was this his and their own mode of figuratively killing the self, their country, of merging from chrysalis to butterfly. Or like Lucifer, did a sense of entitlement doom them to fall from Grace? (See Author. Joint press release of the U.S. Department of Justice and the Central Intelligence Agency. An employee of the Central Intelligence Agency was arrested November 16 for spying on behalf of Russia. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ciaspy/ciaspy.htm>); Kohlberg, L. (1984.) *The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages.* (1st ed.) San Francisco: Harper & Row.) (Keywords: Espionage; Moral development.)