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# Prisoners' Perception of Informing to the Authorities: An Analysis in Terms of Functional Moral Judgment

Yuval Wolf  
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**Abstract:** *A series of functional measurement experiments show that prisoners modulate their moral judgments of violations of their in-group regulations. The participants were 67 women and 80 men, sentenced for at least three years for murder, robbery, drug-traffic or white collar offenses. Each was asked, individually, to imagine a series of incidents where incriminating information on in-group or out-group inmates is delivered to the prison authorities or to an in-group source and to rate the deserved denigration of the informer, who was characterized as a leader or not and as a drug-addict or not who had a prison-leave or not. An assignment of approximately equal weight for social status, drug use and prison leave was found, beyond gender and type of offense. In line with the hypothesis of judgmental modularity, informing to an out-group source was judged much more severely than informing to in-group arbiter and than informing on an out-group inmate.*

**Keywords:** *prisoners; informing; moral judgment; judgmental modularity; functional measurement*

This article is a preliminary attempt to show that the moral infrastructure (schema) of incarcerated offenders, as reflected in their functional moral judgment, is modular, that is, changeable as a function of the beholders' goals at the moment of observation. It was already shown that moral-judgmental modularity typifies normative children and adults (see a literature review in Wolf, 2001). The viability of this phenomenon in the context of offenders' society is, however, yet to be shown.

For normative society, the term *offenders* is loaded with labeling connotation; in other words, criminal intentions are persistently attributed to those labeled as such. A similar implication derives from the most prevailing literature on human morality, which adheres to dictates of the cognitive developmental approach. There are, however, well-argued claims that the measures used as operational definitions of this approach (i.e., psychometric tests based on constructivist-structural postulates) are blind to the prospect of moral-judgmental modularity.

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Unlike these tools, the framework adopted in the present study—*functional measurement*—is sensitive to intraindividual changes in his or her moral schema as a function of the subject's goals at a given moment. We expect that supportive findings might facilitate a more lenient and optimistic public view of offenders' morality. One desirable consequence could be an increased willingness to invest in correction services.

### **PERCEPTION OF INFORMING: A KEY TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF PRISONERS' MORAL JUDGMENT**

According to Genet (1964, 1965, 1966; see also Blackburn, 1994), offenders are rejected by the normative society and develop their own norms and values. Offenders have informal, albeit powerful, controlling regulations and institutions. All group members view normative society as an enemy who, at the same time, serves as a fundamental source of living (Clancy, 1994; Stastney & Tyrnauer, 1982).

Prisoners are a relatively homogeneous and autonomous subgroup of offenders in terms of moral norms, mores, and behavioral codes (Wolfgang, 1989). As such, *they are in the focus of our interest in offenders' morality*. Incarcerated inmates can not afford any tolerance toward violations of the regulations of the only social circle available for them, prisoners' society (Kellerman, 1991; Kenny, 1994; Meloy, 1988; Reid, Dorr, Walker, & Bonner, 1986; Sheley, 1989; Toch, 1977).

The first commandment of prisoners' society is as follows: Do not inform to the prison's authorities. Nothing deserves more denigration than informing. Prisoners jump quickly to an extremely severe *moral judgment* (i.e., labeling) of their peer suspected to be an informer. Such a person is a target of continuous and extremely stinging abuse, mentally and physically.

Sooner or later, the prison authorities define these inmates as *protected prisoners*, who should be isolated from their abusing peers (Eshet-Sabbag, 1995). This chain of events exemplifies the deadly power of moral judgment in the context of offenders' society. Although an intriguing phenomenon, prisoners' moral judgment is elusive and hard to assess as reflected in the absence of solid scientific knowledge on this topic.

### **CONSTRUCTIVIST-STRUCTURAL MEASUREMENT OF MORAL JUDGMENT**

An interest in moral judgment from a developmental perspective can be found already at the end of the 19th century (Schallenger, 1894). Since then, most related issues have been studied within the framework of the *cognitive develop-*

*mental* approach, which adopted *structural-constructivist* principles (e.g., Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Demetriou, 1988; Piaget, 1965; Rest, Turiel, & Kohlberg, 1994). As derived from the *phenomenology principle* of this approach, examinees are required to describe (verbal reasoning) their personal considerations in conditions of *moral dilemmas*. This verbal material is assumed to reflect the beholders' morality (i.e., "You have what you see"; e.g., Astor, 1994; Blair, 1997; Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997; Walker, De Vries, & Trevethan, 1987).

The scientific viability of knowledge gathered via this framework was soundly criticized (e.g., Anderson & Cuneo, 1978; Wolf, 1995, 2001; Wolf & Algom, 1987) for its inability to relate to the complex and dynamic nature of individuals' moral perceptions. The validity of the cognitive developmental tests of moral judgment was questioned as well, due to the tests' use of abstracted and standardized dilemmas (i.e., the same dilemmas for all examinees regardless of their psychosociological background).

Overall, these tests are nearly situation-blind (Wolf, 2001). In other words, they serve as a sort of diagnostic tool, deliberated to "identify" each examinee's fixed level of morality. Thus, attempts to use such tests in the context of prison and prisoners might *contribute* to the conventional tendency to mark (i.e., label) offenders as morally deviant.

## FUNCTIONAL MEASUREMENT OF MORAL JUDGMENT

A conceptual and methodological solution to this issue is suggested by the *functional theory of cognition* and its methodological counterpart, functional measurement (Anderson, 1982, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1996). According to the theory, an individual's response to any morally loaded stimulation is based on all relevant determinants, such as the perpetrator's *culpability* for his or her harmful acts and the *consequences* of these deeds.

Anderson (1991d, 1996) conceived such processes in terms of *everyday life psychodynamics of blaming*. An individual's blaming responses are assumed to reflect his or her *blame* (moral) *schema* (see below). The hypothesis of *judgmental modularity* (Wolf, 2001) is based on Anderson's postulate that everyday-life moral judgment is complex, as is moral reality. One important derivation from this presumption is that the severity allocated to wrong acts, when evidence on each of the relevant schema's determinants is available for the subject, shifts as a linear function of changes in the *individual's social goal* at the moment.

A formal representation of blame schema is presented in Equation 1. In this equation, the symbol  $\oplus$  denotes a simple algebraic rule (shown to be *averaging* in the context of moral judgment). Such rules are used for cognitive integration of information on subcomponents (molecular) of the generalized (molar) determinants called *culpa* and *consequences* (e.g., foresight or intention, and objective or subjective damage, respectively).

$$\text{Blame} = \text{Culpa} \oplus \text{Consequences} \quad (1)$$

As required by functional measurement, multifactorial models serve as operational definitions of individuals' blame schemata. In such models, each molecular element of culpa and consequences (e.g., intent and physical damage, respectively) has at least two levels (e.g., much and some). Procedurally, the subject is exposed to a series of incidents; he or she is usually asked to form a vivid mental image of related scenarios. In each incident, there is a specific combination of the levels of each component of the schema (e.g., intent and physical damage).

In the above example (Foresight  $\times$  Physical Damage), the entire set of combinations of the levels of the two factors is as follows: (a) *Some intent* is combined in a specific incident with *some damage*; (b) *some intent* is combined with *much damage*; (c) *much intent* is combined with *some damage*; and (d) *much intent* is combined with *much damage*. Graphic descriptions of the entire set of judgments provide a satisfactory reflection of each individual's blame schema. Relevant and friendly examples can be found in Wolf, Battash, Addad, and Walters (1992) and in Bonny and Wolf (2002). These studies showed that juvenile delinquents use validly normative blame schema as follows:

$$\text{Blame} = \text{Intent} \oplus \text{Damage} \quad (2)$$

Another study (Haimov & Wolf, 2002; based on Howe & Loftus, 1992; Moore & Gump, 1995) dealt with prisoners' judgment of eyewitness testimony regarding armed robbery based on information on *intent*, *damage*, and the *confidence* of the eyewitness in the viability of his testimony. This evidence in which offenders use a nonnormative three-component schema (Intent  $\oplus$  Damage  $\oplus$  Confidence) can be regarded as a meaningful step forward in the study of offenders' moral judgment and morality.

The present study is a further step in that direction. It has attempted to facilitate the use of schema specific to prisoners' morality. A preliminary study in the present context showed that informing produces the strongest moral reactions in prisoners. Unlike the normative blame schema (Intent  $\oplus$  Damage; see Equation 2), informing schema includes *three components of culpa* (not consequences).

One component of informing schema is *social status*. Leaders, unlike ordinary prisoners, are expected to serve as models of loyalty to the values of the group. Another component is *drug use*. Drug addicts (including leaders) are considered defective in terms of their ability to foresee the meaning and consequences of informing. The third element, *prison leave*, is eminent in prison culture. Prison leave is rare and conditional. Any prisoner (including nonaddicted leaders) who has not experienced recent leave is viewed by his or her peers as being less resistant to temptations to elevate the likelihood of prison leave. A formal representation of this three-component schema is presented in Equation 3:

$$\text{Blame for informing} = \text{Social status} \oplus \text{Addiction} \oplus \text{Prison leave} \quad (3)$$

According to Hypothesis 1, based on the open questioning in the preliminary study, prisoners are expected to assign meaningful importance to all three components of informing schema. According to Hypothesis 2, the severity of judgment should change as a function of the jeopardy potential of informing in terms of the identity of the receiver of the incriminating information and the identity of the victim (out-group versus in-group).

## EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION OF THE VIABILITY OF INFORMING SCHEMA

### METHOD

*Participants and design.* The participants were 147 men ( $n = 80$ ) and women ( $n = 67$ ), incarcerated in Israeli jails for the following four offenses: murder, robbery, drug trafficking, and white-collar offenses, with 20 men and 20 women in each category (but only seven women were incarcerated for murder at the time of the study). Background information is presented in Table 1. The table shows that the different subsamples, formed by all combinations of gender (male and female offenders) and type of offense (murder, robbery, drug trafficking, and white-collar offenses), are considerably homogeneous in terms of age (mid-thirties), education (elementary school and sometimes a little more), and incarceration history (around two incarcerations).

The interviewer was a well-trained prison psychologist, well versed in forming a collaborative atmosphere in individual meetings with prisoners. This skill is necessary due to the suspicious approach of prisoners toward any attempt of a normative person to communicate with them. The level (*yes* or *no*) of each of the three components of informing schema (see Equation 3) was specified for the participant during the presentation of each of the eight ( $2^3$ ) incidents. That is, the interviewer noted whether or not the perpetrator is a leading figure, whether or not he or she is a drug addict, and whether or not he or she recently had a prison leave.

*Procedure.* The experimenter met each participant individually. Following a preliminary warm-up and calibration phase, the participant was asked to form a vivid mental image of informing incidents. In the context of each incident, the experimenter specified the appropriate combination of the levels of the three components. For instance, in the allegedly most severe incident, the informer was presented as a nonaddict leader who recently had a prison leave. In the least severe incident, the informer was presented as a drug-addicted regular prisoner who did not have recently a prison leave. The other six incidents were in between in terms of perceived severity of informing.

In each incident, following a guided attempt of the participant to reiterate the salient specifications, he or she rated the degree to which the informer deserves

**TABLE 1**  
BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

	Age	Education	# of Incarcerations	Present Incarceration
Robber men	32.6 (6.4)	9.5 (2.1)	2.6 (1.8)	6.8 (2.7)
Robber women	32.1 (7.2)	8.3 (3.8)	2.4 (1.5)	4.4 (1.6)
Murderer men	38.6 (9.4)	7.2 (4.5)	2.4 (1.6)	3.2 (**)
Murderer women	43.6 (6.5)	14.6 (3.2)	1.4 (0.8)	9.0 (**)
Drug-using men	32.7 (5.1)	8.0 (3.4)	3.3 (2.0)	3.6 (1.4)
Drug-using women	35.0 (6.2)	8.7 (3.1)	1.5 (0.8)	3.0 (1.4)
White-collar men	35.2 (6.8)	10.8 (2.5)	1.4 (0.6)	3.7 (1.8)
White-collar women	34.5 (7.8)	9.2 (3.5)	2.3 (1.5)	5.0 (4.1)

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations and double asterisks in parentheses (\*\*) represent no standard deviation.

the label of *informer* on a 0-10 scale. This procedure was repeated in another session a month later. In the first session, the informer delivered the incriminating information to the prison authorities; in the second session, the receiver of the incriminating information was an underworld (in-group) arbiter.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

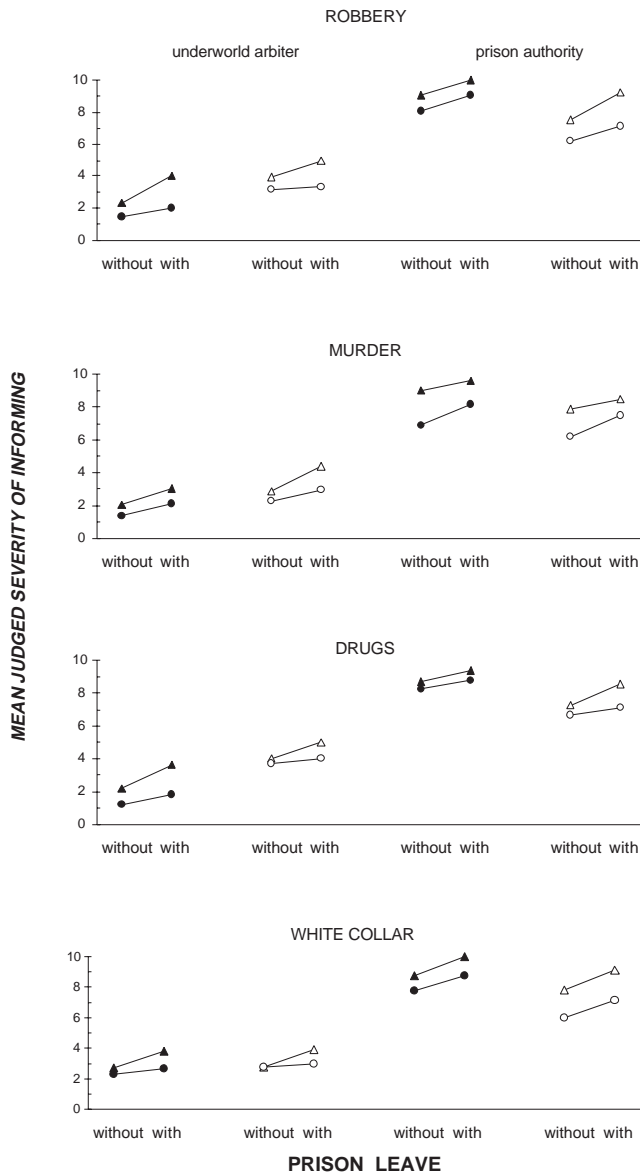
A preliminary visual screening of the individual participants' patterns of judgment revealed an unusual interindividual homogeneity (another example of such homogeneity of judgmental patterns can be found in Wolf et al., 1992, on juvenile delinquents). Consequently, the judgments in each condition of the original model (Social Status  $\times$  Drug Use  $\times$  Prison Leave =  $2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8$  conditions) were averaged and are presented in Figure 1a (men) and Figure 1b (women) in each combination of *judgmental perspective* (incriminating information was delivered either to the prison authorities or to another prisoner).

Visual inspection of the results indicates that in each graph, the vertical difference between the two four-dot graphs in each combination of offense and perspective is approximately similar to the difference between the two-dot curves. Moreover, these differences are similar to the difference between the two dots in each curve (slope). Namely, approximately equal importance was assigned to all three components of informing schema (social status, drug use, and prison leave).

Functional Measurement designates much informative value to functional graphs, especially when the same graphical shape is replicated again and again. In such cases, inferential statistics are practically redundant. Nevertheless, 16 three-way (Status  $\times$  Drugs  $\times$  Leave) ANOVAs for repeated measurements, eight analyses for men and eight for women (Offense  $\times$  Perspective =  $4 \times 2 = 8$ , for each gender), were conducted. The results for all 16 conditions look alike. All support the visual impression that meaningful importance was assigned to all three compo-







**Figure 1b** Mean Judgments of Women Incarcerated for Four Types of Offenses, in Both Experimental Conditions—Underworld Arbiter and Prison Authority, and in the Different Conditions of Schema Related Parameters: Status—Ordinary Prisoner and Leader (Left and Right Side, Respectively, in Each of the 16 Graphs), Drug Addiction – Yes and No (Lower and Upper Line in Each Graph) and Prison Leave (Specified Above)

nents of informative schema. The analysis of the judgments of informing to the prison authorities made by men incarcerated for robbery is discussed here to exemplify the replicated trend.

In that part of the overall design, as well as in the other 15 parts, only the three main effects—social status, drug use, and prison leave—met the criterion of  $p < .01$  (no interaction coefficient met this criterion), the respective  $F$  values (1, 19) being 86.11, 67.11, and 43.46. The apparent left-to-right fan shape in about two thirds of the graphs does not meet the criterion of  $p < .01$ . The possibility of some interaction between drug use and prison leave can, however, be looked for in follow-up studies designed to focus on this issue. A careful conclusion can be raised on the basis of the present finding: Judgment of a nonaddict leader who recently received a prison leave tends to be most severe.

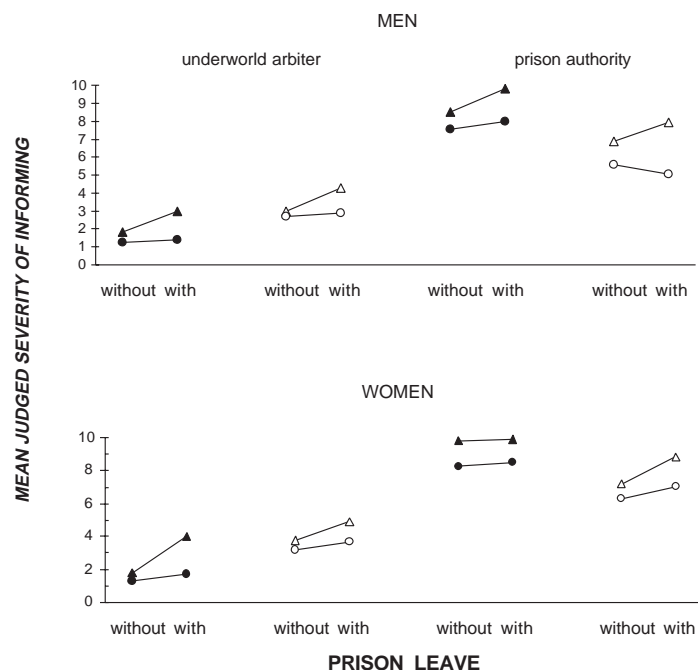
Overall, it can be concluded that the assignment of meaningful importance to all three components of prisoners' informing schema is in line with Hypothesis 1. Content-wise, an informer known to be a leader and nonaddict who recently had a prison leave was judged most severely, whereas a regular nonaddict who had been deprived of prison leave was judged least severely.

As can be seen in Figure 1a and 1b, all judgments in the two left panels are concentrated in the lower half of the rating scale (0-5), but all judgments in the two right panels are concentrated in the upper half of the scale! (6-10). This unusual and unequivocal trend can not be considered an instance of methodological constraint such as *cut of range*, *ceiling effect*, or *floor effect*, because all three determinants of the hypothesized blame schema appear in the graph in a near-balanced (equal weight) form, as implied from the above exposition of the results. It implies that informing schema is enacted in its most severe and denigrating form when prisoners realize that their own group's norms are jeopardized.

This clear picture is in accord with the notion of judgmental modularity (Hypothesis 2), especially due to the extremely lenient judgments when the act of informing is not loaded with jeopardizing potential. That is, when the receiver of the incriminating information is an in-group (underworld) arbiter, all judgments in this condition are concentrated in the lower half of the scale! The very fact that the range of all judgments in the former condition is 6-10 whereas all judgments in the latter condition are 5-1 makes any further analysis of the results completely redundant; the observed difference is striking.

### METHODOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL PURIFICATION OF THE FINDINGS

In the original experiment, all participants were exposed to the moderating condition (in-group receiver of incriminating information) in the second stage (session) of the experiment. For an ad hoc control of the order of conditions, the 40 inmates incarcerated for robbery participated three months later in a replica-

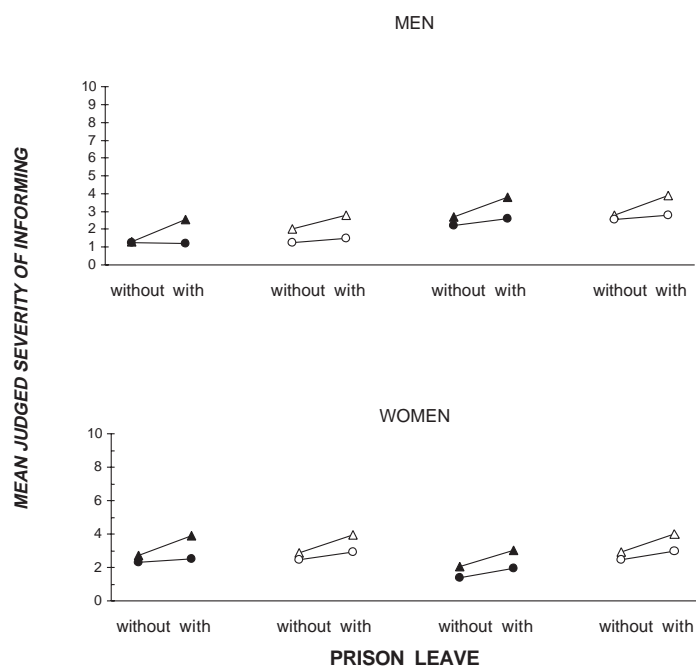


**Figure 2** Mean Judgments of Men and Women Incarcerated for Robbery, in Both Experimental Conditions—Underworld Arbiter and Prison Authority, and in the Different Conditions of Schema Related Parameters: Status—Ordinary Prisoner and Leader (Left and Right Side, Respectively, in Each of the 16 Graphs), Drug Addiction—Yes and No (Lower and Upper Line in Each Graph) and Prison Leave (Specified Above)

tion of the original design. This time, however, the condition of informing to an in-group person took place a week before the condition of informing to an out-group source. Mean judgments of informing are presented in Figure 2. As can be seen in this figure, the overall trend is evidently similar to the original finding (see Figure 1).

According to the hypothesis of judgmental modularity, judgments of informing to prison authorities when the *victim of informing* is an *out-group inmate* (i.e., a [nondelinquent] person jailed for political offenses) should be notably lenient, as was found when the receiver of incriminating information was an in-group inmate (i.e., an incarcerated underworld arbiter).

This expectation was examined one month after the completion of the reversed-order experiment based on partial replication of the design and the procedure of the original experiment. The only change was the social identity of the victim of informing to prison authorities, namely a nondelinquent (out-group) prisoner instead of a delinquent one (in-group).



**Figure 3** Mean Judgments of Men and Women Incarcerated for Robbery, in Two Experimental Conditions—Out-Group Victim and In-Group Victim, and in the Different Conditions of Schema Related Parameters: Status—Ordinary Prisoner and Leader (Left and Right Side, Respectively, in Each of the 16 Graphs), Drug Addiction—Yes and No (Lower and Upper Line in Each Graph) and Prison Leave (Specified Above)

The participants were 10 men and 10 women sampled arbitrarily from the original group of inmates incarcerated for robbery. Their averaged judgments are presented in Figure 3. In a complete accord with the hypothesis of judgmental modularity, the most capturing characteristic of the results is the reflection of an extremely lenient judgmental approach when the victim of the incriminating act is an out-group inmate.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The findings show that prisoners modulate their judgments of acts jeopardizing a basic in-group commandment (i.e., do not inform). The same complex and well-balanced blame schema—Social status  $\oplus$  Addiction  $\oplus$  Prison leave—appears either in the upper part (ranks of 6 and above) of the rating scale (0-10) or in its lower part (ranks of 5 and below). The severity of judgment depended on the perceived affiliation of the protagonist (informer or victim of informing) within prisoners' society. The judgments of informing were extremely severe when the

incriminating informing was delivered to an out-group element (prison authorities). When the receiver of the same information was an in-group (underworld) arbiter and when the victim of informing was an out-group inmate (convicted for political offenses), an extremely lenient approach typified the judgments.

#### THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

From a theoretical perspective, the findings are valuable in two respects. In accord with the functional theory of cognition (Anderson, 1996), the participants repeatedly and persistently used a well-balanced (equal weight) three-component blame schema. This finding implies that prisoners' morality is multidimensional, as is their moral reality. Namely, they do not simplify moral issues. Thus, the conventional tendency to label them as morally inferior has no solid empirical ground. Presumably, prisoners differ from normative people in terms of moral commitment (in-group versus state law, ethnic culture, or religion), not in the quality of moral infrastructure. This implication is unlike the latent *agreement* between the "person in the street" and the cognitive developmental approach. Second, in tandem with this implication and with the notion of moral-judgmental modularity, although its shape remained balanced, the schema shifted from one side of the rating scale to the other side of the scale as a function of the incriminating load of the to-be-judged act.

The successful application of functional measurement has meaningful methodological implications. First, unlike most functional experiments, the content of the to-be-judged incidents was based on an orderly preliminary exploration of the basics of prisoners' morality. This presearch indicated that violations of in-group regulations produce the most loaded moral judgment. This presearch has marked three meaningful determinants of prisoners' functional judgment of informing: social status, addiction, and prison leave.

The viability of this procedure is reflected in the emergence of the three-component schema in all variations and replications of the core design. Such an orderly and informative presearch can be incorporated into the routine procedure of functional measurement. Another methodological implication is rooted in the exemplification of a unique type of judgmental modularity, that is, a functional shift in the severity of the overall set of moral judgments, recalling that the majority of the related studies exemplified weighting shifts (Wolf, 2001).

#### APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

Applied implications are suggestive as well. The findings imply that prisoners develop judgmental schemata of their own aside from the accommodation and assimilation of the normative Intent  $\oplus$  Damage schema. This presumption is in line with the findings of Wolf et al. (1992), who exemplified a shift of juvenile delinquents from their own type of schema (an assignment of extreme relative

importance to damage and negligible importance to intent) to a normative-like schema (meaningful increase in the relative importance assigned to intent). The findings of Bonny and Wolf (2002), which showed that, following 10 years of extensive and intensive investment in correction programs, juvenile delinquents use a nearly balanced Intent  $\oplus$  Damage schema, is in line with our main goal, that is, showing that delinquents' morality is changeable as a function of the application of corrective programs.

The findings of Wolf et al. (1992, 2002) and the present findings converge and form a meaningful implication: Offenders can speak two moral languages (schemata), their own and the normative one. Presumably, they can shift from one language to another. If followed up, such functional lawfulness should downgrade the explicit and implicit labeling of offenders as being morally deficient. Correction and rehabilitation programs might thus relate to offenders' moral modularity as a key element, that is, attempt to smooth the between-language path, reinforce a shift from an offenders' morality to a normative one, and moderate the other way around.

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