

THE MORAL VALUE ORIENTATIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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This article is an output of the project: KEGA 025PU-4/2020 Development of students' moral and critical thinking in teacher training programmes.

Abstract: Moral value orientations are of a general nature, which means that they also influence other values. In the case of students preparing for the teaching profession, their moral value orientations are key because teachers should systematically help students to integrate them. The aim of this study is to compare the levels of moral value orientations in students of teaching and non-teaching programmes of study and to find out whether there are differences according to age, gender, university, teaching vs. non-teaching study programme, year of study and level of religious belief. The Ho Po Mo questionnaire was used for the study. The research sample consisted of 624 women and 447 men (n = 1.071) studying at eight public universities in all Slovak regions. The results showed a significantly higher level of moral orientation of students of teaching programmes in comparison with students of non-teaching programmes.

Keywords: Moral value orientations. University students. Teaching and non-teaching programmes of study.

1 Introduction

Values and value orientation are currently among the topics discussed at the societal level. We have observed a boom in the use of these terms with reference to their meaning and connection, as well as with the expectations upon them in relation to the potential formation of societal processes. At the same time, we have observed that some social groups state that values have declined and in the past things were better in this respect. In addition, we see an ever-decreasing societal consensus on which values are important to the individual and society, and should therefore be binding. This discussion also covers the education and training that takes place in schools. Values are expected to offer a solid foundation to provide a reliable orientation to people and society, especially in a situation where everything is changing. However, values are not immune to this movement either.

In the field of values today we can observe several trends: 1. Especially in professional circles, there is a noticeable attempt to update traditional values to current conditions, which is in some cases associated with the statement that some values are no longer sustainable at present. 2. Chaos in values – what is an indisputable value to one person is despised by another. 3. Individual groups (ideological, political, cultural, intellectual ...) question the values of opposition camps. 4. The questioned values are redefined by groups that consider them important to update them to today's conditions, illuminate their original essence and meaning, or rootedness in history, thereby strengthening their importance and social need. 5. Bipolar validity – values are lost because their society has stopped accepting them, on the other hand, there is an effort to preserve existing or build new values.

2 Values

According to Oyserman (2015), values are internalized cognitive structures that guide choice by evoking a sense of right and wrong (e.g. moral values), a sense of priorities (e.g. personal success versus group good) and create a willingness to make sense and see patterns (e.g. trust versus distrust).

The socio-psychological conception of a value is a subjective appreciation or degree of importance that an individual attaches to certain things, phenomena, symbols, other people. (Průcha – Walterová – Mareš, 2013, p. 92). Hartl and Hartlová (2000, p. 192) define a value similarly, as a property that an individual assigns to a certain object, situation, event, activity, but in connection with the satisfaction of his needs and interests. Kolář et al. (2012) determine a value as an attitude, a person's belief in what is important, necessary, valuable, what is to be strived for.

Values refer to everything that brings satisfaction, or they speak of values in a narrower sense, as basic cultural categories that reflect the higher things - moral, social and aesthetic tendencies, norms and ideals of a person. Values are therefore created by human evaluation. Some values can be shared by whole groups or the whole of society. Certain values (e.g. moral) have permanent absolute validity, others are variable and of short duration.

From a pedagogical point of view, the value systems of young people are important. Education is a social value, and the role of education is important for the life of the individual and for the development of society. Values in the form of the goals and contents of school education are explicitly conceived in educational programmes (Průcha – Walterová – Mareš, 2013, p. 92). Through education, it is possible to influence the creation and hierarchy of socially recognized values by connecting three basic components of a value - emotional, cognitive and behavioural. Value education, which is also referred to as teaching values or teaching for values, cultivates value-based thinking, feeling, action, value-based attitudes (Kolář et al., 2012) and the transfer of the value canon in intergenerational continuity, which has much broader educational effects than just the cultivation of values (Jedličková, 2017). Passing on values in the educational process is a fundamental and essential role (Pintes, 2011).

An individual, a social group, or a society as a whole professes a number of values, but these are not of equal importance. Under the influence of the family and all groups in which the individual is socialized, a classification of values is created based on their importance, i.e. a value system, which is a hierarchically arranged list of values that reflects the real order of values shared by the particular population group. It is detected by special research, which clarifies e.g. differences in the value systems of the younger generation and adults (Průcha – Walterová – Mareš, 1995, p. 77).

3 Overview of work on the topic

The question of values is richly represented in the literature. We could say that this is a phenomenon that is receiving considerable attention in professional and scientific literature. Scientific and professional publications systematize the issue of values; represent different perspectives on the question; present the results of research on the values of specific groups and nations; describe how values can be built as part of the educational process; or what influence the family, the media, peer groups and the societal atmosphere have on the formation of values. The pedagogical interest in value research in young people can take two forms: authors want to determine the extent to which students can adapt to the value system valid for a certain society, or they want to find out what values young people can bring to the next generation.

Research dealing with values varies in many dimensions – there are varying research areas, goals, country, or countries of research – but particularly there are varying the degree of theoretical and methodological elaboration. In relation to the rest of the world, the Slovak environment is limited in many ways: the number of researchers dealing with values, financial resources, the level of universities and research institutions, methodological and theoretical trends, and to some extent the language barrier. From the huge amount of value-oriented research, we select examples of studies of two categories for the needs of this paper: Research on the values, structure and changes of the value system of university students: (Al-Yahyai, 2019; Kar, 2018; Karadeniz Hacisalihoğlu, 2018; de Agrela Gonçalves Jardim et al. 2017; Głaz, 2015; Oliveros et al. 2015; Cortés-Pascual, 2014; Albert – Thilagavathy, 2013).

Programmes, techniques and factors influencing the values of university students: (Chen, 2020; Husin, 2019; Lakshmi – Paul,

2018; Zakharova, 2018; Hernández et al. 2015; Zajda, 2014; Jarrar, 2013).

4 Research problem

The aim of the research was to determine the level of moral value orientations in university students. We chose moral value orientations for two reasons. The first is the universality of moral values in the sense that they influence all other value orientations and at the same time they influence the thinking and actions of the individual in the most general sense. The second reason is the effort to find out whether there will be significant differences between students studying teaching and non-teaching programmes. In the case of students preparing for the teaching profession, we consider moral value orientations to be key, precisely because teachers have to help students integrate values.

4.1 Hypotheses

Teaching programmes include the study of theoretical knowledge and practical training aimed at justifying, explaining and integrating values, so the first hypothesis has the following wording: H1 The level of the moral value orientations of students of teaching will be higher than that of students of non-teaching subjects.

An individual with a strongly integrated religious faith is under the considerable influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which the moral dimension is emphasized based on respect for the transcendent plane. This led us to establish the second hypothesis: H2 level of the moral value orientations of Strongly religious students will be higher than that of weakly believing / non-believing students.

There is no reliable measuring tool for measuring the level of religious faith, therefore we made the division into strong believers or weak/non-believing students based on the respondents' subjective evaluation. They could indicate the level of their religious faith on a scale from 0 to 10. If they marked values 8, 9 or 10, we included them in the category of strong believers. The others, who marked values from 0 to 7, were in the category of weak believers / non-believers.

5 Methodology

To investigate the research problem, we used the standardized HO PO MO questionnaire from Vonkomer. Specifically, we used the part that examines value orientations. It contains 11 real situations, each of which has 5 alternative answers that examine the following value orientations: a) educational, b) aesthetic, c) moral, d) economic, e) social. The respondents sort the individual options into order. The respondents select as first the alternative to which they attach the most importance and they assign it the numerical value 5. The answer with the least meaning to them is placed in the fifth place, where it is assigned the numerical value 1. From the above situations and alternative answers, it follows that each value orientation can range from 11 to 55. In order to make the results easier to interpret, we present the percentage of individual averages from the measured values. We determined the level of subjects' moral value orientations in relation to gender, age, year of study, university and subjective level of religious belief – believers or atheists.

The sample examined is representative in terms of the gender ratio. According to statistical data valid as of 31.10.2019¹, fulltime students at Slovak public universities with Slovak citizenship were 57.76% women and 42.24% men. The sample consists of 624 women and 447 men studying at eight universities in all Slovak regions (UKF Nitra, KU Ružomberok, TU Košice, UK Bratislava, UPJŠ Košice, PU Prešov, UMB

Banská Bystrica, SPU Nitra). We divided the respondents into five age groups: 19-20 years, 21-22 years, 23-24 years, 25 and more years.

6 Moral value orientations

Students of teacher-training programmes had about 3.4% higher scores in moral value orientations than non-teaching students. This is a statistically significant difference at the 1% level of significance. This confirmed hypothesis no. 1. We measured a significant difference with an approximately 5.6% higher score among Comenius University students in Bratislava compared to students at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. This is a statistically significant difference at the 1% level of significance. Students at Catholic University in Ružomberok had approximately 3.2% higher scores than UKF students in Nitra, which is a statistically significant difference at the 5% level of significance.

The overall averages of moral value orientations increased by year of study, from 50.2% in the first year to 52.6% in the fifth year. We can also identify an increasing trend with increasing age, where the average levels of moral value orientations increased from 50.3% in the 19 - 20 years age category to 53.7% in the 25 years and over category. The same tendency is visible in the regression analysis for moral value orientations (Table 1). The lower the age group, the lower the level of moral value orientations compared to the base group - the group of students aged 25 years and over. However, it should be emphasized that there is no statistically significant difference in any age group and also that the level of moral values holds a stable third place among the five value orientations throughout the study.

We identified a higher level of moral value orientations among strongly believing respondents (those who evaluated the level of their religious faith on a 10-point scale with values of 8, 9 or 10). They showed a level higher by approximately 1.5% compared to respondents who evaluated the level of their faith with values from 0 to 7, which was a statistically significant difference at the 10% level of significance. This confirmed hypothesis no. 2.

6.1 Discussion

The preparation of future teachers includes theoretical subjects and practical training, which emphasizes the transfer of values. Teachers are expected to express specific values and practice them in the educational process and also in other areas of life. In addition, teachers are trained to help integrate values into the lives of the pupils and the students they work with. If necessary, they are obliged to identify and correct incorrect or presumed values at the very beginning of the acquisition process in order to avoid their internalization (Petrová – Kozárová, 2018). An important role in this process is played by the level of critical thinking of students and teachers (Kosturková, 2019; Kosturková – Ferencová – Šušáková, 2018) as well as the means and motives of social communication (Határ, 2019). For a certain part of society, contact with the transcendent world also has a role (Feník – Lapko, 2019) and it is seen as the determining standard for all values (Kučerková – Režná, 2014).

In the case of moral values, we can say that among the five values examined, but also overall, they have the most general character. This means that practicing or not practicing them has a significant impact on all the other values and areas of life. For this reason, teachers can be expected to have a higher level of moral value orientations. However, it must be said that this research does not provide a clear answer to the question of the extent to which the higher level of moral values was caused by the university and to what extent by the students socialization and education up to that point. However, as there was a slight increase in moral value orientations during the period of study, this could indicate that higher education strengthened the orientation that respondents brought to university, but did not fundamentally change it.

¹ *Vysoké školy k 31. 10. 2019 – verejné, denná forma.* [online]. Centrum Vedecko-technických informácií SR. Podpora vedy, výskumu, vývoja, inovácií a vzdelávania. [cit. 2020.04.05.] Dostupné na: https://www.cvtisr.sk/cvti-sr-vedecka-kniznica/informacie-o-skolstve/statistiky/statisticka-rocenka-publikacia/statisticka-rocenka-vysoke-skoly.html?page_id=9596.

Table 1 Results of regression analysis with dummy variables for moral value orientations

Moral -r	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf.	Interval]
women	.0030827	.0083188	0,37	0,711	-.013241	.0194065
age 19-20	-.0250712	.0181743	-1,38	0,168	-.060734	.0105915
age 21-22	.0217578	.0145751	-1,49	0,136	-.050358	.0068423
age 23-24	-.0172927	.0136999	-1,26	0,207	-.0441754	.0095901
university KU	.0323322	.0141976	2,28	0,023	.0044728	.0601916
university TU	.0195039	.0148184	1,32	0,188	-.0095736	.0485815
university UK	.0556079	.0175833	3,16	0,002	.0211049	.090111
university UPJS	.0137637	.0183772	0,75	0,454	-.0222973	.0498246
university PU	-.0135822	.0143453	-0,95	0,344	-.0417314	.014567
university UMB	-.0023271	.0152709	0,15	0,879	-.0276383	.0322926
university SPU	.0107103	.0250045	-0,43	0,668	-.0597756	.038355
teaching prog.	.0336917	.0108803	3,10	0,002	.0123416	.0550417
year of study 2	.0001642	.0119307	0,01	0,989	-.0232469	.0235753
year of study 3	.0032906	.0160715	0,20	0,838	-.0282459	.0348272
year of study 4	-.0017152	.0146836	-0,12	0,907	-.0305282	.0270978
year of study 5	.0012281	.0181674	0,07	0,946	-.0344211	.0368772
believer	.0152903	.0081377	1,88	0,061	-.000678	.0312586
non-believer	-.01595	.0111382	-1,43	0,152	-.0378061	.005906
atheist	-.0172233	.0118028	-1,46	0,145	-.0403836	.0059369
cons	.5051243	.0256867	19,66	0	.4547203	.5555284

The importance of the explicit formation of moral values in the educational process is underlined, for example by Javed et al. (2018), who in their research compared the tendency towards forgiveness and the level of moral values in 9 to 12-year-old students at private and public schools. For both the examined indicators, significantly higher scores were found among students of private schools and they explained that these schools have more resources for better teachers, there are fewer students in the classroom so teachers can pay more attention to them, but especially every day the teaching process begins with moral value lessons. In contrast, public schools do not have such teaching, nor do they have other formal ways of bringing moral values to students. It should be emphasized that although the students were aged 9-12 years, which is a completely different age category than the respondents to this research, the aforementioned research by Javed et al. (2018) confirms the important of explicit teaching for moral values, which in this case could be further strengthened by the age, at which it is easier to pass on these values to the pupils and to integrate them.

If, as stated above, it is true that students of teaching programmes have already come to university with a higher level of moral value orientation, then it is necessary to answer a further question: why did they choose teaching programmes? We can express our satisfaction with this, in the sense that it is a required prerequisite for the teaching profession. But that does not answer the question. Since this characteristic does not change fundamentally during university studies, it could indicate that there is a relationship or connection between a preference for specific values and the choice of profession, or at least university studies. This statement has logic, because if some values are integrated, then the individual behaves in accordance with them in specific situations. In this case, they highly esteem moral values and so choose a profession where they can live those values and at the same time help the pupils and students in their charge to integrate those values. This fact is also supported by the findings of Kaliská and Kaliský (2014), who state that in the assessment of the differing levels of moral competence between students and teachers of ethical education, they did not find significant differences.

The proportion of respondents who professed one of the Christian denominations was 87.95%. This religion places emphasis on moral norms derived from the Ten Commandments. We assumed that strongly believing respondents would have higher levels of moral value orientations, which was also confirmed. However, it should be borne in mind regarding this question that the level of religious faith cannot actually be measured exactly, so we rely on the respondents' subjective evaluation. They may use different criteria to indicate the level of faith, so that different contents may be under the same designations. e.g. the level of religious faith marked with the value 10 - the highest possible level - may indicate a significantly different content or level for specific respondents. Another question that ought to be mentioned is whether religious faith positively correlates with the integration of moral norms proclaimed by the particular religious denomination. The research presented did not examine this question.

We measured a higher level of moral value orientations compared to the base group –students at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra - in respondents from Comenius University in Bratislava (a statistically significant difference at the 1% level of significance) and in respondents from Catholic University in Ružomberok (a statistically significant difference at the 5% level of significance). Students of Catholic theology - future priests (theologians), who were part of the research sample of both mentioned universities, could have a strong influence on this result. The preparation for the vocation of a priest emphasizes moral values derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition in both theoretical and practical areas. However, even here it is necessary to be careful when assessing the impact of higher education, in terms of what share of influence the family, other social environments and previous school education have had on the current situation.

However, in the case of the training of future priests, the community way of life or education may also have a significant role. Theologians live in a closed community in which they pray and study together. In this context, we give an example of socialization of moral values, cited by Akpakpan and Akpakpan (2018). This is the educational activity within the closed Mbopo community (in the Ibibio area in Nigeria) ensuring the transition or initiation of young girls into womanhood. According to the authors, this community has been and remains a real medium for maintaining morals among young women. When a girl reaches the age of about sixteen, her parents will provide her with access to a fattening room. This is where the girl prepares for the role of mother and wife. The girls are kept in closed isolation and must consume the food presented, regardless of their appetite. The only visits allowed in this isolation are older women from the community, who teach traditional lessons on marital etiquette, social customs, and behaviour. Traditional music and dance are used to strengthen the desired effect.

From our point of view, this is an unacceptable way of preserving tradition, in which there is no respect for personal freedom, justification, explanation and, ultimately, human dignity. On the other hand, this example illustrates how a closed community can convey specific values.

The family is also a somewhat closed community, although as a child gets older, the closed nature of the family is eliminated as the child enters other communities. The constant presence of the child among family members from an early age, the same views, norms, demands, and even sanctions for punishing deviations from the required behaviour and rewards that strengthen compliance with standards. Because the child, until a certain age, does not have the ability to judge what the family demands of them, they will naturally acquire the values, norms, and behaviours that become their lifelong heritage. At a later age, of course, they can move away from family norms, though with some effort needed to overcome the norms rooted in family socialization in combination with other influences – education, media, social environment. An example is Mendel's research (2018), which examined attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation from the perspective of three generations – grandparents, parents and university students. The research showed

statistically significant differences between the generation of grandparents compared to the generations of parents and students. As many as 70% of grandparents agreed with the need for marriage (fully agree 48% and mostly agree 22%). Among parents it was 45% (fully agree 14%, mostly agree 31%) and in the category of university students only 34% (fully agree 11%, mostly agree 23%). This example illustrates the fact that the values acquired in family socialization are not necessarily permanent.

7 Conclusion

The results of the research confirmed the higher level of the moral value orientations of students of teaching programmes compared to students of non-teaching programmes. We consider this to be positive in relation to the profession for which students are preparing. Their educational work will include helping students integrate values into their lives. On the other hand, we realize that no student comes to school as a tabula rasa; they are influenced by socialization in the family or other influences, so the teacher's work in this direction is not the only one. We consider it all the more important that teachers not only teach values, but that they are an inner part of their personality.

The research did not show significant differences in the level of moral value orientation by age, gender, university and year of study.

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