Moral Taste and Moral Education –
An Interview Study

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In recent research on moral psychology, the human consciousness has been compared to a tongue, with different taste buds, which together can cause a variety of sensations. According to this theory, people in general have a preparedness to react to situations, which can provide opportunities or pose threats in a social context. Moral psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, has described these receptors as pairs, for example: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/ betrayal, authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation. Which of these foundations the individual develops a taste for depends, largely, on the social and cultural context. Hence, the choices teachers make of which issues to address and in what way can contribute to a learning environment that influences their pupils' moral outlook. The purpose of this study is to investigate which of these moral intuitions or taste preferences that teachers want to endorse and cultivate in their pedagogical practices. Against this background, a number of qualitative research interviews were conducted with experienced teachers in the non-confessional subject religious education (RE), who have a particular responsibility for moral education in the Swedish school system. The interviews were based on a modified version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which was deliberately developed to determine the participants' moral taste, and the participants were asked to elaborate their answers. The results indicate that the participants tended to favour harm and fairness over loyalty, authority and sanctity. As one of the participants puts it: "many of my examples relate to the weak and vulnerable or the ones that are denied their rights in society… these pedagogical choices are based on the content of the curriculum but also mirror my own preferences". In this paper we analyse the interviews with the RE teachers and critically discuss the consequences the moral foundations theory has for moral education.

Keywords: moral education, ethics education, moral psychology, moral foundations theory

Introduction

In recent research on moral psychology, the human consciousness has been compared to a tongue, with different taste buds, which together can cause a variety of sensations. According to this theory, people in general have a preparedness to react to situations, which can provide opportunities or pose threats in a social context (Haidt, 2012; 2013). Several researchers have considered this a paradigm shift within moral psychology but the interest from educationalists has so far been

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limited. Maxwell and Narvaez (2013) have, for instance, stated that despite the important influence of new moral psychology "on how many contemporary social psychologists understand moral information processing and explain people's moral reactions, few attempts have been made to assess its significance for theory, research and practice in moral development and education" (p. 271). More recently, there has been a growing interest in moral psychology among educationalists, but very few of their contributions to the debate contain empirical studies. In this paper, we want to make a contribution to the current debate, on how moral psychology and empirical investigations can be relevant to educational studies.

The moral taste preferences may come naturally or be acquired in a social and cultural context. This is why teachers' choices of content and working methods may contribute to a learning environment, which influences their pupils' moral and political outlook. The purpose of this study is, thus, to investigate which of these moral intuitions or taste preferences that teachers want to endorse and cultivate in their pedagogical practices. Against this background, a number of qualitative research interviews were conducted with a group of experienced teachers in the non-confessional subject religious education (RE), who have a particular responsibility for moral education in the Swedish school system. The interviews were based on a modified version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which was deliberately developed to determine the participants' moral taste, and the participants were asked to elaborate their answers (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2008). We believe that this kind of study can be important as it may provide educators with knowledge that can facilitate informed choices of activities, teaching methods and pedagogical models.

Selected Literature Review

Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory

Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has suggested that people, in general, have an innate preparedness to react to certain situations that occur in a social context. Just as the attention is automatically headed to a snake in the grass, it will also be directed to certain types of events in social contexts. An act of disrespect or cruelty, for example, tends to trigger intuitive reactions, e.g. of sympathy or anger (Haidt, 2012, p. 144; Haidt, 2013, p. 290). This preparedness means that some moral ideals will be easier for children to absorb than others depending on the extent to which they are consistent with our intuitive responses. Haidt describes this preparedness in terms of *moral foundations*:

> Foundations are the universal psychological preparednesses (Seligman, 1971) that make it easy for children to learn some moral ideas (e.g., if someone hits you, hit him back), but hard to teach others (e.g., if someone hits you, turn the other cheek with love in your heart). (Haidt, 2013, p. 290)

This is the reason why moral psychologists compare the human consciousness to a tongue, with different taste buds, which together can cause a variety of sensations. Haidt (2012; 2013), has described these receptors as pairs, for example: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion and sanctity/ degradation. Which of these foundations the individual develops a taste for depends, largely, on the social and cultural context (Graham, Haidt, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Haidt, 2012, p. 146, p. 197).

The choices teachers make, of which issues to address and in what way, can contribute to a learning environment that influences their pupils' moral outlook. This becomes even more important considering that Haidt and his colleagues have been able to demonstrate a connection between those who adhere to *individualizing values* (harm and fairness) and a liberal political position and those who also embrace *binding values* (loyalty, authority and sanctity) and a conservative political position (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). These results were confirmed by an extensive quantitative study that gathered over 34 000 participants. The participants were asked to grade, on a scale of 0-5 (where 0=not at all relevant and 5=extremely relevant), which considerations that they thought were relevant to decide whether something is right or wrong (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2008). The study showed that self-reported liberals, on the one hand, tended to favour harm (3.67) and fairness (3.74) over loyalty (2.07), authority (2.06) and sanctity (1.27). Self-reported conservatives, on the other hand, distributed their valuations more evenly between harm (2.98), fairness (3.2), loyalty (3.08), authority (3.28) and sanctity (2.98) (p. 28).

Haidt has described how the results made him, as a liberal, work consciously to broaden his taste in moral emotions, to go beyond harm and fairness, and has called for teachers and researchers to do the same (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010, p. 842; Haidt, 2012, p. 118). Hence, the choices teachers make of how to treat these moral foundations may also shape their pupils' political outlook. The question of which intuitions or taste preferences that teachers want to endorse and cultivate in their pedagogical practices is not just an innocent matter of individual choice but can have far-reaching consequences for their pupils.

The Moral Foundations Theory in Educational Studies

The Moral Foundations Theory has attracted attention and caused debate among moral psychologists, ethicists and philosophers. However, even if the theory could have important pedagogical consequences, it has not been discussed to the same extent within the educational field (Maxwell & Narvaez, 2013, p. 271).

Some researchers have criticized, for example, what they perceive as conceptual and methodological ambiguities in the new moral psychology. They have problematized the use of distinctions, between emotion and cognition and liberal and conservative, as too influenced by self-report data collection and imbued by the cultural context where the studies were performed (Haste, 2013; Blum, 2013). Others have criticized the new moral psychology for avoiding empirical evidence of how it is possible to develop critical thinking and the ability to make

considered judgements as part of character development (Musschenga, 2008; Kristjánsson, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2016). Still other researchers have discussed if the Moral Foundations Theory could contribute to the pupils' understanding of themselves (Murphy, 2014) or competing value systems (Musschenga, 2013). Some have even suggested that the theory could be used for the pupils to embrace a wider set of values than other moral pedagogical models (Maxwell & Beaulac, 2013). These educational researchers remain critical of the Moral Foundations Theory despite the vast support of the new moral psychology in psychological and neurological studies (see Graham et al., 2011; Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2012).

There are relatively few empirical studies on how the new moral psychology can affect teaching and several researchers have pointed to the need for more research in the field (see e.g., Maxwell & Narvaez, 2013; Haste, 2013). Some researchers have tried to establish a connection between the experience of threat and embracing binding values (Wright & Baril, 2013). Others have tried and failed to establish a connection between adhering to harm and fairness and a high score on a defining issues test (DIT) designed to measure moral development (Glover et al., 2014). Yet others have examined if specific emotional reactions could be linked to different moral foundations (e.g., compassion could be linked to care and disgust could be linked to purity) but often the connections are not as clear as the theory predicts (Landmann & Hess, 2017). None of the existing empirical studies investigates which of these moral intuitions or taste preferences that teachers want to endorse and cultivate in their pedagogical practices, which is the purpose of this study (see Wright & Baril, 2013; Glover et al., 2014; Landmann & Hess, 2017).

An Interview Study Based on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire

We conducted a number of qualitative research interviews in order to investigate which moral intuitions or taste preferences RE teachers want to endorse and cultivate through their pedagogical practices. The participants were seven licenced RE teachers, with approximately 10-30 years of experience in the profession (Teacher 1-7), who are considered to have a special responsibility for moral education in the Swedish school system.

The interviews were based on a modified version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which was deliberately developed to determine the participants' moral taste: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation. The original questionnaire consists of 32 questions, in total, tracking five moral foundations. In the study, a shortened version - consisting of ten questions in total - was used, where two questions were selected to track each of the five foundations. The participants were asked to grade, on a scale of 0-5 (where 0=not at all relevant and 5=extremely relevant), which considerations are relevant to decide whether something is right or wrong (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2008). Afterwards, the teachers were asked to motivate their answers and encouraged to illustrate with examples from their pedagogical practices (see Yin, 1994; Kvale, 2007). These questions were posed to examine which values the teachers wanted to

endorse and cultivate through their pedagogical practices. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to enable further analysis and serve as a background to the upcoming discussion (see Kvale, 2007, pp. 92-97).

We briefed the teachers who took part in the study of the general purpose and invited them to participate voluntarily. The teachers were informed that they could discontinue at any time and that their answers would be anonymized and used for research purposes only. We did not store any sensitive personal data or pose questions of a sensitive character, e.g., concerning political, philosophical or religious conviction. The interviews were carried out at the schools where the teachers work and on two occasions at Umeå University. Thus, the study was designed to ensure compliance to the general research ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and precautious use of collected information (SRC, 2017).

In this study, we use the Moral Foundations Theory, which was introduced in the background, to analyse the teachers' answers and determine which moral taste preferences that they wanted to endorse and cultivate through their pedagogical practices. As the Moral Foundations Questionnaire is used in quantitative data collection we also have an opportunity to use supplementary questions to identify different positions which may or may not support the standard interpretation of the empirical content. We intend to apply the model in a context-sensitive manner to give a fair representation of the answers from the interviews (Lindström & Samuelsson, 2021). The purpose is to make a critical and empirically informed contribution to the ongoing debate.

Results: Teachers' Views on Moral Foundations and Educational Values

The teachers, who participated in this study, seem to favour *individualizing values* (harm and fairness) over *binding values* (loyalty, authority and sanctity). The results from the questionnaire were used to let the teachers elaborate on how these considerations affected their teaching in ethics during RE courses in the Swedish school system. The main focus of this part of the paper is how the teachers motivate their choices and how they are enacted in their pedagogical practices. This qualitative information, we believe, can make an important contribution to studies based on the quantitative Moral Foundations Questionnaire and especially when applied to an educational context. Table 1 shows the teachers' (T1-T7) views of which considerations are relevant to ethical judgement (see Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2008).

Table 1. Factors Teachers Consider Relevant to Ethical Judgements

	Moral foundations	**Whether or not someone:**	**T1**	**T2**	**T3**	**T4**	**T5**	**T6**	**T7**	**A**
Individualizing Values	care/harm	cared for someone weak or vulnerable	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	**4.9**
		suffered emotionally	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	**4.6**
	fairness/ cheating	was denied his or her rights	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	**5**
		some people were treated differently than others	5	5	4	3	3	5	?	**4.2**
Binding values	loyalty/ betrayal	showed a lack of loyalty	3	2	2	5	1	4	5	**3.1**
		did something to betray his or her group	3	2	3	2	1	3	?	**2.3**
	authority/ subversion	conformed to the traditions of society	1	3	2	2	2	2	?	**2**
		showed a lack of respect for authority	2	1	4	1	1	3	5	**2.4**
	sanctity/ degradation	violated standards of purity and decency	5	1	3	5	3	3	?	**3.3**
		acted in a way that God would approve of	3	2	3	2	2	1	5	**2.5**

Table 1 shows the teachers' (T1-T7) views of which considerations are relevant to ethical judgement (see Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2008).

Factors not Relevant to Ethical Judgements

The teachers' questionnaires indicate that they do not generally consider binding values as authority, loyalty and sanctity to be important when making ethical judgements. Hence, these values are not something they want to endorse or cultivate in their pedagogical practices. When the teachers are allowed to motivate why they do not consider these factors relevant, one of them expresses that authority is "negatively charged" and continues: "I am critical to a conservative approach [to ethics]… I believe that we need to be able to re-evaluate different phenomena depending on which context we are considering" (Teacher 4). Another teacher elaborates on a similar point and expresses that an emphasis on authority and loyalty may prevent the pupils from making "their own ethical assessments", which is an important part of RE (Teacher 5). An interpretation is that these teachers associate authority with a lack of flexibility that is needed when making assessments in different contexts of a modern society where conditions may change rapidly. The answers also seem to suggest that trust in authorities limits individual freedom and that the teachers rather want to encourage the pupils to make autonomous decisions and take responsibility for their choices.

Several of the participants are critical of binding values as they consider them incompatible with autonomy or critical thinking and believe has had negative consequences. One teacher expresses, for instance, that to follow authorities or traditions would be to "dismiss the heritage from the enlightenment" and pave way for "a return to the Middle Ages" (Teacher 2). Another teacher considers binding

values to be associated with a problematic relationship to the environment and connected to religious convictions:

> When it comes to our way of treating the planet, there are good reasons to question whether our traditions would be a reasonable starting point for judging what is right or wrong. There are writings in the legislation about the rights of the weak and vulnerable, which is good, but I do not perceive them primarily as traditions. Otherwise, the starting point for assessments has often referred to shame and guilt within Puritan morality, which is something that remains within the culture but which there are good reasons to leave behind. (Teacher 1)

The teachers seem to express negative views on binding values but, even so, several of the participants in this study consider them a part of the subject RE in the Swedish school system. Some of the participants seem to think that authority and tradition are "important parts of various religions and life views" (Teacher 4) and that it is essential to "problematize" these cultural manifestations "without criticizing them too hard" (Teacher 6). One teacher expresses that tradition may be more important in comprehensive school because of the task to convey a set of fundamental values to the pupils. In upper secondary school "I am more focused on them [the pupils] finding their own argumentation, their own approach, that could play a role and have a meaning [for their ethical judgements]" (Teacher 5). Thus, authority and tradition seem to be considered the subject matter of religious studies rather than part of the normative content related to the task of conveying values and fostering democratic citizens.

Factors Relevant to Ethical Judgements

The teachers' questionnaires indicate that they consider individualizing values, as harm and fairness, to be important when making ethical judgements. Hence, these values are something they want to endorse and cultivate in their pedagogical practices. Several of the participants in this study express a connection between care for the weak and vulnerable in society and fairness or rights. One teacher expresses that "some pupils are exposed and in difficult positions" and that it is important that "nobody is denied their rights at school" (Teacher 6). Another teacher wants to dissociate herself from "meritocracy or elitism" and says that it is important to understand that: "the pupils do not come to school to show what they know but to develop as human beings. I am grateful, as a teacher, to have the opportunity to learn so much together with my pupils every day" (Teacher 7). Yet another teacher stresses the significance of "acting according to the human rights in the society… and that should permeate the education" (Teacher 2).

The participants in this study seem to consider care and fairness as desirable on every level from personal, social, national and international relationships. An interpretation is that the individualizing values are considered to provide the pupils with possibilities rather than like binding values limit them. From that perspective, the attempt to endorse and cultivate individualizing values could become a vehicle to promote equal opportunities in society. Even if a majority of the teachers, who

participate in this study, share this perspective on harm and fairness there are some exceptions.

One of the teachers expresses how he becomes "aware of [his] own pedagogical practice" during the interview: "It is important to take the time, which I do not always do, to critically examine one's own teaching in relation to the fundamental values of the curriculum. Many of the examples I use in my teaching relate to the weak and vulnerable or the ones that are denied their rights in society… these pedagogical choices are based on the content of the curriculum but also mirror my own preferences". He continues:

> I notice that some of these examples touch the pupils and that they become committed to the issues we are considering… The choice of which examples to use and how to present them is important, to be able to raise the level of commitment in the classroom and make the issues urgent, for the pupils and me as a teacher. To understand that these are serious matters, there are values at stake, and that it really means something. This is not only an intellectual problem. It is important for how we choose to lead our lives. (Teacher 5)

This teacher is the only of the participants in this study who acknowledges himself as a part of a philosophical or ideological tradition. He struggles to explain how these convictions influence his teaching in a way that is coherent with the requirements of the curriculum. The teacher has chosen examples to evoke a sense of "solidarity" with less fortunate groups in society which can be interpreted as endorsing binding values. However, these exercises also require that the pupils develop an awareness of certain societal problems and can provide reasons for their judgements, which can be interpreted as conveying individualizing values. The analysis of this specific case suggests that it is possible to use examples, which involve harm and fairness, to appeal to a variety of binding and individualizing values. Thus, the strict division between binding and individualizing values posited within the Moral Foundations Theory, appears hard to maintain in an educational context.

Discussion

According to the Moral Foundations Theory people, in general, tend to react intuitively to various kinds of events that occur in the immediate social context. These intuitive reactions follow certain patterns and most of us can sense a variety of *individualizing values* and *binding values*. The point of departure of this study is that the choices teachers make of which issues to address and in what way can contribute to a learning environment that influences their pupils' moral and political outlook. The purpose of this study has been to investigate which moral intuitions or taste preferences that Swedish RE teachers want to endorse and cultivate in their pedagogical practices.

The results from the Moral Foundations Questionnaire show that the RE teachers who participated in this study tended to favour individualizing values

(harm 4.9/4.6, fairness 5/4.2) over binding values (loyalty 3.1/2.3, authority 2/2.4, sanctity 3.3/2.5) (where 0=not at all relevant and 5=extremely relevant to moral judgements).[1] These results are possible to compare to previous studies, where self-reported liberals favoured individualizing values (harm 3.67, fairness 3.74) over biding values (loyalty 2.07, authority 2.06, sanctity 1.27) whereas self-reported conservatives distributed their valuations almost evenly across the five foundations (harm 2.98, fairness 3.2, loyalty 3.08, authority, 3.28, sanctity 2.98) (Graham et al., 2011, p. 28). An interpretation is that the RE teachers who participated expressed an unusually liberal moral outlook.

This reading was confirmed when the teachers were given the opportunity to elaborate on how their preferences were reflected in their pedagogical practices. A consistent pattern in our interviews is that the teachers' values influenced their selection of issues they let their pupils treat in classroom exercises. The teachers stated that they often let their pupils discuss examples about the weak and vulnerable or those who were denied their rights in society. The pupils were consequently expected to be able to provide reasons for their own judgements regarding these matters. This would suggest that the purpose of these activities was not only to let the pupils pay special attention to issues related to individualizing values in society but also on them making and defending personal choices. A reasonable conclusion seems to be that the teachers who participated in this study selected examples and provided tasks that influenced the pupils' moral taste to include primarily individualizing values.

However, when we shift focus and analyse the teachers' reasons to dismiss binding values the picture of their pedagogical choices becomes more complex. The teachers who participated in this study argued that authority and tradition could not provide a solid foundation for ethical judgements. They seemed to view the ideals, norms and values that they wanted to endorse and cultivate as separated from a specific tradition. Yet, some teachers referred explicitly to traditions, as the enlightenment and the legislation, when they dismissed other traditions as the basis of ethical judgments. An interpretation is that the majority of these teachers did not regard their own values in connection to any social, cultural and historical context or as a part of a tradition. There are few indications of teachers participating in this study weighing various traditions or their value systems against each other. It is possible that qualitative studies of this kind will reveal deficiencies in the Moral Foundations Questionnaire as a self-report style of data collection. An example of this is that the teachers' dismissal of tradition as the basis of ethical judgement does not apply to their own individualist, liberal and democratic tradition.

The Moral Foundations Theory implies that the choices of issues and activities in the classroom may potentially have a political dimension since individualizing values have been associated with a liberal political position while binding values which have been associated with a conservative political position. The teachers' almost unanimous ambition to treat issues that endorse and cultivate individualizing

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[1]Since we used two questions to track each moral foundation we report one average per question (see Table 1).

values in the classroom would suggest that the pupils' moral taste preferences were influenced in a liberal direction. Nevertheless, one of the teachers (Teacher 5) who participated in the study stated that he had chosen examples about the weak and vulnerable or those who are denied their rights in society. If we use Moral Fundations Theory to categorize these examples, they are related to the individualizing values, harm and fairness. The teacher described how he used these examples to evoke a sense of "solidarity" with less fortunate groups in society that can be interpreted as endorsing binding values. We have suggested that it is possible to use this kind of examples to appeal to a variety of binding and individualizing values. This would dissolve the strict division between binding and individualizing values, posited within the Moral Foundations Theory, in an educational context.

Conclusions

In this study, we have conducted qualitative interviews based on a modified version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which was deliberately designed to track the participants moral taste preferences. We have used this approach as a complement to previous quantitative studies in order to examine which values Swedish RE teachers want to endorse and cultivate in their pedagogical practices. The participating teachers' ways of motivating their choices and giving examples of classroom practices problematizes self-report data collection since they dismiss traditions as the basis of ethical judgements and yet rely on them in their own assessments. We have also argued that the use of examples based on harm and fairness to evoke a sense of solidarity to the weak and vulnerable in society seems to dissolve the strict division between binding and individualizing values, posited within the Moral Foundations Theory, in an educational context.

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