

# The association of moral competence and moral orientations with emotion regulation difficulties

Lucia-Elisabeta Faiciuc

Senior Researcher

The Social-Humanistic Research Department Of The Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca Branch

[luciafaiciuc@yahoo.com](mailto:luciafaiciuc@yahoo.com)

Q & A Zoom link:

<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/4880928040?pwd=ZmFkd2lvMGtwSTFkSkxoOXM4SUpNQOT09>

## Abstract

The link between moral life and emotion regulation is an understudied issue. In the present research, this link was studied using the Moral Competence Test (MCT, Lind, 1978,1985) and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS, Gratz & Roemer, 2004). At the research participated 71 second year students at a university of fine arts (mean age: 20,22 years, 48 female, 19 males, and 4 with undisclosed gender). **Moral competence correlated negatively with the limited access to emotion regulation strategies, and immature moral orientations (judgments) correlated positively with emotional dysregulation and several of its measured aspects:** the lack of emotional clarity, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, the lack of emotional awareness, and impulse control difficulties.

## Theoretical background

The present research contributes to the understanding of the link between moral life and emotion regulation, which is an understudied issue. The few existing studies in this respect are focused on the relationship between emotion regulation strategies (particularly the reappraisal one) and utilitarian/deontological answers at moral dilemmas (e.g., Feinberg, Willer, Antonenko and John, 2012; Lee & Gino, 2015; Szekeley & Miu, 2015; Zhang, Li, Wu & Zhang, 2017). **To my knowledge, there are no studies that investigate the relationship of moral competence and orientation (as defined by Lind, 2008) with general emotional dysregulation and its various aspects.** Only one research (Dewi, 2019) examined if the level of moral judgment (measured with the Defining Issues Test 2.0: DIT-2, elaborated by Rest, 1979) and Machiavellianism are associated with emotion regulation, but in its positive manifestation, as emotional intelligence. No association was found between the preference for higher levels of moral judgment and emotional intelligence, but emotional intelligence correlated negatively with Machiavellianism. Another research (Zhang, Kong & Li, 2017) explored the association between emotion regulation difficulties and the preference for moral judgment foundations in different domains. Its results indicated that emotional regulation difficulties could significantly predict immoral judgment.

## Hypotheses

**1. Moral competence is expected to be associated negatively with emotional dysregulation and its aspects** not only considering the above-mentioned results, but also mainly based on the operational definition of the moral competence given by Lind (2008). In the interpretation of Prehn and Heekeren (2009), this definition means that *moral competence indicates "how consistently or, in Lind's terms how competently a person applies a certain moral orientation in the decision-making process independently of whether arguments are in line with the personal opinion on a particular issue or not."* (p. 144). Such a definition suggests that **moral competence involves an emotion regulation ability**, required in order to control the egocentric emotions elicited by the arguments that are in the favor or in conflict with the personal opinion regarding the solution for a moral dilemma.

**2. Moral orientation was defined by Lind (2016) as the preferred moral principle.** Lind (2016) distinguishes *six types of moral orientations, ranging from the most immature ones (Type 1) to the most mature ones (Type 6)*. It is possible that between emotion regulation and moral orientation to exist a circular causality. Emotional dysregulation may impede the development of more matures levels of moral judgments, on the one hand, whereas immature levels of moral judgments may impede the development of emotion regulation, on the other hand. Given the above-mentioned empirical results and theoretical considerations, the following hypotheses were formulated. **Emotional dysregulation and its aspects should be associated positively with the immature moral orientation (type 1, 2, and 3 moral arguments), and, tentatively, negatively with the mature moral orientation (type 4, 5, and 6 moral arguments).**

**3. A secondary objective of the present research was to find out if all emotional dysregulation aspects are associated with moral competence and orientation or only some of them.**

## METHOD

Correlational study

**Participants** :71 second year students at a university of fine arts from Romania (mean age: 20.22 years, 48 female, 19 males, and 4 with undisclosed gender)

**Instruments**:

**Moral Competence Test:** MCT (formerly Moral Judgment Test, MJT), elaborated by Lind in 1978, in its Romanian version (Lupu, 2009). It is an instrument for which there are numerous studies regarding its validity (see Lind, 2000).

**Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale:** DERS (elaborated by Gratz and Roemer, in 2004, translated into Romanian by the author of this research, and administrated in this version). It is a 36-item self-report measure with six facets of emotion regulation (nonacceptance of emotional responses, difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior, impulse control difficulties, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, lack of emotional clarity). Items are rated on a scale from 1 ("almost never [0–10%]") to 5 ("almost always [91–100%]"). Difficulty in emotion regulation is indicated by higher scores. The cited authors report for the whole questionnaire a high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .93$ ), and, for each subscale, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was higher than .80.

**Procedure:** The two instruments were administered collectively, on paper, in separated sessions, with no time limit. For MCT was computed the moral competence index: index C (through which it is assessed the consistent agreement with the moral arguments of a certain type, no matter if they are pro- or contra the preferred solution for the two moral dilemmas of MCT), and the preference scores for each of the six moral orientation types. For DERS was computed a global score, and one for each of the six facets of emotional dysregulation assessed with DERS.

## RESULTS

**Table 1** Rank correlations of the moral competence index and the six types of moral orientation with emotional dysregulation (DERS total score) and its six aspects (one-tailed).

	Moral competence (C index)	Type 1 immature moral orientation	Type 2 immature moral orientation	Type 3 immature moral orientation	Type 4 mature moral orientation	Type 5 mature moral orientation	Type 6 mature moral orientation
<b>Total score DERS (emotional dysregulation)</b>	$\rho = -.193$ , p = .077, N = 56	$\rho = .330$ , p = .006, N = 57	$\rho = .186$ , p = .085, N = 56	$\rho = .243$ , p = .035, N = 57	$\rho = .07$ , p = .301, N = 57	$\rho = .107$ , p = .214, N = 57	$\rho = .033$ , p = .404, N = 57
<b>Nonacceptance of emotional responses</b>	$\rho = -.09$ , p = .235, N = 67	$\rho = .117$ , p = .170, N = 69	$\rho = .067$ , p = .293, N = 68	$\rho = -.041$ , p = .371, N = 68	$\rho = .127$ , p = .148, N = 69	$\rho = .173$ , p = .078, N = 69	$\rho = .142$ , p = .122, N = 69
<b>Difficulties engaging in goal directed behavior</b>	$\rho = -.082$ , p = .256, N = 66	$\rho = .101$ , p = .207, N = 68	$\rho = .012$ , p = .461, N = 67	$\rho = .002$ , p = .494, N = 67	$\rho = .036$ , p = .384, N = 68	$\rho = .125$ , p = .155, N = 68	$\rho = .160$ , p = .096, N = 68
<b>Impulse control difficulties</b>	$\rho = -.078$ , p = .268, N = 65	$\rho = .241$ , p = .026, N = 66	$\rho = .110$ , p = .192, N = 65	$\rho = .267$ , p = .015, N = 66	$\rho = .014$ , p = .456, N = 66	$\rho = .066$ , p = .299, N = 66	$\rho = .010$ , p = .468, N = 66
<b>Lack of emotional awareness</b>	$\rho = .038$ , p = .381, N = 66	$\rho = .293$ , p = .008, N = 68	$\rho = .161$ , p = .097, N = 67	$\rho = .315$ , p = .005, N = 67	$\rho = .184$ , p = .066, N = 68	$\rho = .032$ , p = .396, N = 68	$\rho = .134$ , p = .139, N = 68
<b>Limited access to emotion regulation strategies</b>	$\rho = -.273$ , p = .012, N = 68	$\rho = .403$ , p < .001, N = 70	$\rho = .247$ , p = .02, N = 69	$\rho = .190$ , p = .059, N = 70	$\rho = .113$ , p = .117, N = 70	$\rho = .135$ , p = .133, N = 70	$\rho = .043$ , p = .361, N = 70,
<b>Lack of emotional clarity</b>	$\rho = -.070$ , p = .287, N = 67	$\rho = .261$ , p = .015, N = 69	$\rho = .217$ , p = .038, N = 68	$\rho = .212$ , p = .041, N = 68	$\rho = -.028$ , p = .408, N = 69,	$\rho = .027$ , p = .412, N = 69	$\rho = -.033$ , p = .393, N = 69

Statistically significance threshold  $p = .05$

Nonparametric rank correlations were used, because C index was asymmetrically distributed.

*Mediational analysis*

In order to find out if the association between the C index and the limited access to emotion regulation strategies is mediated by the preference for the immature moral orientation of type 1 or type 2, the corresponding nonparametric partial correlations were computed.

- Taking as control variables the type 1 moral orientation, the coefficient for the above-mentioned was  $r = -.149$ ,  $p = .259$ ,  $N = 65$ , two-tailed.
- When the control variable was the type 2 moral orientation, the coefficient for the above-mentioned was  $r = -.217$ ,  $p = .078$ ,  $N = 65$ , two-tailed.
- In the same time, the association between the immature moral orientation of type 1 and the limited access to emotion regulation strategies, when the C index was controlled, was  $r = -.335$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $N = 65$ , two-tailed.

## Discussion and conclusions

Hypotheses were supported by data only partially.

Moral competence was associated negatively only with one aspect of emotional dysregulation: limited access to emotion regulation strategies. This association was mediated by the preference for the type 1 immature moral orientation.

As expected, immature oral orientations were in general associated positively with emotional dysregulation, especially the one of type 1 and of type 3. Of the six aspects of emotional dysregulation, four of them were positively associated with immature moral orientations: the lack of emotional clarity (for all three types of immature moral orientations), limited access to emotion regulation strategies (for the type 1 and type 2, and marginally also for the type 3 moral orientations), the lack of emotional awareness and impulse control difficulties (mainly for the type 1 and type 3 moral orientations). Two of them, nonacceptance of emotional responses and difficulties engaging in goal directed behavior, were not associated with immature moral orientations.

Mature moral orientations were not associated negatively with emotional dysregulation.

The obtained results support the idea that emotional dysregulation as such is not related with a low moral competence. Nevertheless, for those people with a tendency to prefer immature moral orientations (mainly of type 1), their limited access to emotion regulation strategies may be involved in the poor control of the emotions generated by that tendency. As a consequence, their moral competence will be low also, because they are not able to overcome the tendency to support their personal position at all costs.

Further studies, on larger and more heterogeneous samples and with other instruments, are needed in order to replicate the presented results.

## References

- Dewi M. K. (2019). How Ethical Are Emotionally Intelligence People?. *Jurnal Akuntansi, Manajemen dan Ekonomi*, 21(2), 42-49.
- Feinberg, M., Willer, R., Antonenko, O., & John, O. P. (2012). Liberating reason from the passions: Overriding intuitionist moral judgments through emotion reappraisal. *Psychological science*, 23(7), 788-795.
- Gratz, K. L., & Roemer, L. (2004). Multidimensional assessment of emotion regulation and dysregulation: Development, factor structure, and initial validation of the difficulties in emotion regulation scale. *Journal of psychopathology and behavioral assessment*, 26(1), 41-54.
- Lee, J. J., & Gino, F. (2015). Poker-faced morality: Concealing emotions leads to utilitarian decision making. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 126, 49-64.
- Lind, G. (2000). *Review and appraisal of the moral judgment test (MJT)*. University of Konstanz. Retrieved in May, 2013, from [http://www.unikonstanz.de/ag-moral/pdf/Lind-2000\\_MJT-Review-andAppraisal.pdf](http://www.unikonstanz.de/ag-moral/pdf/Lind-2000_MJT-Review-andAppraisal.pdf)
- Lind, G. (2008). The meaning and measurement of moral judgment competence - A dual aspect theory. In D. Fasko & W. Willis, *Contemporary philosophical perspectives on moral development and education* (pp. 185-220). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Lind, G. (2016). *How to Teach Morality. Promoting Deliberation and Discussion, Reducing Violence and Deceit*. Berlin: Logos Verlag.
- Lind, G. (Ed.). (1978). *Wie misst man moralisches Urteil? Probleme und alternative Möglichkeiten der Messung eines komplexen Konstrukts (How Does One Measure Moral Judgment? Problems and Alternative Possibilities of Measuring a Complex Construct)*. In G. Portele (Ed.), *Sozialisation und moral* [Socialization and morality] (pp. 171–201). Weinheim, Germany: Beltz.
- Lupu, L. (2009). *Moral, lernumwelt und religiosität: Die entwicklung moralischer urteilsfähigkeit bei studierenden in Rumänien in abhängigkeit von verantwortungübernahme und religiosität* (PhD thesis). University of Konstanz, Germany. Retrieved in May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 from <http://kops.ub.uni-konstanz.de/handle/urn:nbn:de:bsz:352-opus-95865>
- Prehn, K., & Heekeren, H. R. (2009). Moral judgment and the brain: A functional approach to the question of emotion and cognition in moral judgment integrating psychology, neuroscience and evolutionary biology. In J. Braeckman, J. De Schrijver, S. Vanneste, & J. Verplaetse (Eds.), *The moral brain. Essays on the evolutionary and neuroscientific aspects of morality* (pp. 129-154). Netherlands: Springer.
- Rest, J. R. (1979). *The Impact of Higher Education on Moral Judgement Development*. U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare National Institute of Education.
- Szekeley, R. D., & Miu, A. C. (2015). Incidental emotions in moral dilemmas: The influence of emotion regulation. *Cognition and Emotion*, 29(1), 64-75.
- Zhang, L., Kong, M., & Li, Z. (2017). Emotion regulation difficulties and moral judgment in different domains: The mediation of emotional valence and arousal. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 109, 56-60.
- Zhang, L., Li, Z., Wu, X., & Zhang, Z. (2017). Why people with more emotion regulation difficulties made a more deontological judgment: the role of deontological inclinations. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 2095.