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Reason and Emotion –
How Teachers Respond to Ethical Problems

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Reason and Emotion –
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Abstract

Teachers frequently face ethical problems in their everyday practice – ranging from pedagogical choices affecting their pupils to pressing conflicts that need to be solved – and they are expected to respond to such problems in a professional manner. Given the centrality of the ethical dimension to the teaching profession, an important question is how teachers tend to approach such problems. While some studies have been carried out regarding how teachers in particular approach ethical problems, there are interesting studies revealing how people in general tend to respond ethically to situations involving ethical aspects that evoke strong emotional reactions. Aiming to fill parts of this gap, the present paper is based on a survey of Swedish teacher students and religious education (RE) teachers for which we have borrowed two examples from such general studies (carried out by Jonathan Haidt among others). These examples were chosen on the basis that one of them clearly represent a social taboo in a Swedish context while the other one does not. Letting the teacher students and RE teachers respond to both examples give us an indication of whether there is any significant difference in their approach to an example evoking a strong emotional reaction as opposed to a more neutral one. It is clear from our survey that there is such a difference: the respondents generally make rationally motivated judgments when confronted with the neutral example, while most of them seem to rely on gut feeling in the more provoking case. If these results can be taken as an indication of how teacher students and teachers tend to respond to real life situations, a provoking or emotionally laden context is likely to enhance the risk of making ethical choices which are not based on rational reasoning. We argue that these results emphasize the importance for teacher students as well as already practicing teachers to study, and cultivate the ability for, moral reasoning.

Keywords: Moral education, Ethics education, Social Intuitionist Model, Jonathan Haidt, Ethics and education, Teacher ethics, Moral reasoning

Introduction

Teachers frequently face moral problems in their everyday practice, ranging from pedagogical choices that affect their pupils to pressing conflicts that need to be solved, e.g. conflicts between pupils, conflicts between colleagues, and conflicts between teachers and parents. This is often considered a well-known fact among scholars and researchers within the educational field. Some researchers, such as Hansen (2001, 826), has noted that any act a teacher undertakes in the classroom is "capable of expressing moral meaning" and more important "influence students". Other researchers, such as Campbell (2013, 414), has described teaching as a "moral activity" where the complexity of the classroom "enrich and complicate the professional work of teaching". Yet other researchers, such as Bullough (2011, 27), has stated that "ethics are at the heart of the teacher's disciplinary knowledge". Which ethical dilemmas teachers frequently face, and how well prepared they are to handle them in their pedagogical practices, have subsequently been subject for a number of empirical studies (e.g. Lyons, 1990; Colnerud, 1997; Pope et al. 2009; Tirri, 2010). Hence, teaching can been considered a morally laden activity where sensitive questions are treated, in a more or less conscious way, as an integrated part of the profession. In order to handle such problems, teachers need to be able to respond in a professional and thoughtful manner to the various ethical aspects involved.

However, the recent development within moral psychology has contributed to change the traditional view of how people in general make ethical judgements (e.g. Greene, 2001, 2007, 2014, Haidt, 2001, 2012, Damasio et al. 2007). One of the proponents of this theory, the philosopher Joshua Greene, has summed up the basic idea: "We decide what's right or wrong on the basis of emotionally driven intuitions, and then, if necessary, we make up reasons to explain and justify our judgments" (Greene, 2007, 36). Williams and Bargh (2008), for instance, discovered that persons holding a hot cup of coffee were more likely to describe others as "warm" than those holding a cold beverage. This is one of many examples in the literature, where people make judgements for reasons unknown to them, and then try to provide reasonable justifications. If this is any indication of how teacher students and teachers respond to real life situations in their pedagogical practices this would raise new questions of how to treat ethics in the teacher education, further training and professional development.

Against this background, we have conducted a survey, with teacher students and religious education (RE) teachers, to investigate how these groups are likely to deal with ethical dilemmas in their pedagogical practice. In this paper, we compare the results of our survey with the results of previous studies and discuss some of the conclusions drawn from these. Our overall aim of this paper is to relate the recent development within moral psychology and moral pedagogy to the ethical dimension of the teaching profession. Thereby we hope to demonstrate that how teacher students and teachers tend to deal with moral problems is relevant to the question of how it is appropriate to work with the ethical dimension in teacher education, the further training of teachers and professional development.

Theoretical Background

Jonathan Haidt has performed studies where he lets respondents review a number of stories, which do not involve any harmful intentions or consequences, but violate certain cultural taboos. The stories involve, for instance, someone who uses a flag to clean the bathroom, has the family's departed dog for dinner, or gets involved in an intimate relationship with an adult sibling. The results indicate that the majority of our moral judgements are made automatically based of how we react emotionally in different situations. Afterwards (*post hoc*) we try to find rational justification for our judgements, for instance with reference to the risk that someone would come to harm. The reasons are often given without regard to anything that speaks against the immediate reaction and are intended to justify our judgement to others in a social context. The fact that an individual makes a moral judgement in turn affects people in his or her social setting regardless of the strength of the rational arguments put forward. One reason for this is that people in general are sensitive to group norms and therefore tend to adapt to them in the same social context (Haidt, 2001, 818-819; Haidt, 2012, 47).

However, it is possible to base moral judgements on reason in a way that contradicts the initial emotional response. It is for example possible to trigger new intuitions by trying to put oneself in the shoes of another person, which sometimes is called *role-taking*. An individual can also develop an ability to pass rational judgements, even in disturbing cases, e.g. through extensive training in ethics or philosophy (cf. Haidt, 2001, 815-820, 829). Thus, Jonathan Haidt constructs what he labels *the Social Intuitionist Model* (SIM) in which moral judgements involve two cognitive processes, emotions and rationality, where the significance of the latter traditionally has been overestimated (Haidt, 2001, 815; Haidt, 2001, 815-819; Haidt, 2012, ch. 2-3).

The insight that emotional judgements precede their rational justification is, according to Haidt, important for teachers in order to help improve the quality of their pupils' moral judgements and behaviour (cf. Haidt, 2001, 815). In general, individuals have a tendency to seek evidence to confirm their beliefs, a so-called *confirmation bias*. To engage in discussion with other people is therefore one way to develop a more nuanced thinking. Even if each of the participants in a discussion would be inclined to seek confirmation for their beliefs, they would be challenged by others, making the outcome of such a procedure easier to justify (cf. Haidt, 2001, 828; Haidt, 2012, 79; Haidt, 2013, 288; Samuelsson and Rist, 2016; Samuelsson and Lindström, 2017).

Jonathan Haidt's *Social Intuitionist Model* has attracted a great deal of attention and caused debate among moral psychologists, ethicists and philosophers. If the model would prove to be right, it could have far-reaching consequences for how to address ethics in education. Yet, the model has not been discussed to the same extent within the educational field. Most researchers in the educational field discuss, more or less critically, *if* and *how* the *Social Intuitionist Model* can be applied in education (Musschenga, B. 2008; Kristjánsson, 2016; Murphy, 2014; Musschenga, A. W. 2008). However, few studies have been performed, within this theoretical framework, in order to investigate how teacher students or teachers approach ethical problems.

We believe that such surveys are particularly important because if the results show that the same patterns can be distinguished among teacher students and teachers, this should have consequences for how to address, for example, ethics in education.

Methods and Research Procedure

A survey was designed in order to investigate the attitudes of teacher students in general and RE teachers in particular. Both groups were presented with two stories, previously used by Haidt among others, in more extensive international studies. The stories were intentionally constructed not to involve any harmful intentions or consequences but to evoke an emotional reaction. We have chosen these stories as they illustrate a minor and a major violation of cultural taboos in a Swedish context. The respondents were asked to evaluate the content of the stories and give a justification of why they passed their judgements.

> *Flag:* A woman is cleaning out her closet, and she finds her old flag. She doesn't want the flag anymore, so she cuts it up into pieces and uses the rags to clean her bathroom. (Haidt, Koller and Dias, 1993, 617)[1]

> *Kissing:* A brother and sister like to kiss each other on the mouth. When nobody is around, they find a secret hiding place and kiss each other on the mouth, passionately. (Haidt, Koller and Dias, 1993, 617)

We see two main reasons to carry out this study. First, a survey of how teacher students and RE teachers reason about ethical dilemmas can be an indication of how they deal with real problems that arise in their pedagogical practice. Second, the *Social Intuitionist Model* predicts a difference between various individuals and groups depending on to which extent they have undergone ethics education. This makes it especially interesting to compare teacher students in general, with a limited experience of ethics education, with RE teachers in particular, with a more extensive experience of ethics in their education as well as in their teaching. In addition to this, RE teachers are often considered to have a particular responsibility for moral and ethics education in the Swedish school system (cf. Almén, 2000; Hartman, 2008; Larsson, 2009; Franck and Löfstedt, 2015). An increased awareness of how different groups pass moral judgements will provide the basis for our discussion of how to address ethical questions in teacher education and further training.

In the survey that we conducted, 197 teacher students and 45 RE teachers participated under the condition that they could discontinue at any time. The participants were informed that their answers would be anonymized, treated as confidential, and used for research purposes only. We have not stored any personal data or used questions of sensitive character concerning political, philosophical or religious conviction that would have motivated an ethical review (Ethical Review Act, 2003, Personal Data Protection Act, 2006). In this way, we have ensured

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[1]In our survey we added that no one gets to know about the woman's cleaning habits. We take this to be presumed in previous studies based on this example.

compliance to the general research ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and secrecy (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

A difficulty in applying Haidt's model is to distinguish between emotional and rational judgements since any kind of justification is likely to be considered a *post hoc* rationalization. For that reason, we will use a characterization of emotional and rational justifications based on philosopher Joshua Greene's research in order to interpret the answers from our survey. Hence, when respondents motivate their moral judgment based on whether it promotes a sense of belonging and respect within a group or simply refer to certain rules, we will understand them as emotional. Similarly, when respondents motivate their moral judgements based on consequences for individuals or try to balance conflicting interests to maximize benefit, we will understand them as rational.[2]

The distinction between emotional and rational justifications of moral judgements and it's relation to different ethical theories has rendered a thorough debate through history and it is not our intent to evaluate alternatative positions in this paper. In this paper, the distinction is rather to be considered an analytical tool to identify and describe general patterns, or ways of moral thinking, among the respondents' answers (cf. Greene, 2007, 37-38; Samuelsson and Lindström, 2018). It is our intention to apply the model in a context-sensitive manner where we will pay special attention to judgements contradicting the emotional response the stories are supposed to evoke. It is also important to emphasize that the distinction between emotional and rational justifications alone is not sufficient to determine the validity of certain moral judgements.

Findings

A clear majority of both teacher students (68%) and RE teachers (67%) in our survey report that they do not regard the behaviour of the woman in the flag example as morally wrong. They typically motivate their answers by appealing to some (or several) of the following considerations (for each consideration we give examples of a teacher student and an RE teacher who appeal to the consideration in question):[3]

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[2]Greene (cf. 2001, 2007, 2014) has performed several empirical studies, sometimes using advanced fMRI technology, on how ethical issues are likely to be treated from a neurological perspective. For example, he has detected that when an ethical dilemma is given a personal formulation there is more activity in the part of the respondent's brain that is associated with emotional reactions (*ventromedial prefrontal cortex*) than when the same kind of dilemma is given an impersonal formulation. Greene's conclusion is that, from a neurological perspective, impersonally formulated moral dilemmas tend to be processed in the brain in a way that resembles non-moral reasoning, and judgements about such dilemmas tend to be motivated rationally (Greene et al., 2001, 2105-2107; Greene, 2007, 70). Greene argues that his results indicate that when moral judgements are justified with reference to rules they are generally based on *post hoc* rationalizations of emotional responses whereas when moral judgements are justified with reference to consequences they are generally based on rational considerations (Greene, 2007, 36).

[3]We have translated the answers that we use as examples from Swedish to English (throughout the paper).

(a) The woman has the right to do whatever she wants with her own flag.
Teacher student: "It is her property and she can do whatever she wants with it."
RE teacher: "It's hers to do whatever she wants with."

(b) A flag does not possess any intrinsic feature that makes it morally relevant.
Teacher student: "I don't regard a flag as anything special, it's just a piece of cloth with some colour on it".
RE teacher: "It's a piece of cloth, neither more nor less."

(c) No one is harmed or takes offence because of the action.
Teacher student: "As long as no one takes offence…"
RE teacher: "If the flag as such does not possess any symbolic value to the woman and no one else sees it [what she does] and takes offence, then the flag is no more valuable than any other piece of cloth."

(d) It is a good thing to recycle the flag.
Teacher student: "It is good that the lag comes to use."
RE teacher: "Handy and climate-smart."

We take an appeal to each of these four types of consideration to represent a rational approach to the example, where the respondent aims to motivate her judgement in a factual manner, seeking substantial arguments to justify her views. In the minority group of teacher students (25%) and RE teachers (29%) who claim that the woman behaves wrongly, a different pattern emerges. Among these respondents the guiding idea is mainly that her behaviour is in some way disrespectful:

(a) It is important to show respect for what the flag symbolizes.
Teacher student: "The flag represents our country. It feels like it's disrespectful to cut it up into pieces and clean the bathroom with it."
RE teacher: "I think one should respect the flag irrespective of one's own relation to it since it symbolizes Sweden."

(b) It is important to respect other people.
Teacher student: "It depends, one can view this in different ways. The flag is a sort of symbol of fellowship, of a long history of hard working people. To be disrespectful towards a flag is to indirectly bemock the work of our ancestors, their blood, sweat and tears."
RE teacher: "It's disrespectful to those who honour it [the flag]."

We take it to be a reasonable interpretation of the answers of the respondents in this group that they largely motivate their judgements on the basis of considerations regarding group belongings and respect within a group, which is characteristic of emotional responses. Some of them also write explicitly in terms of how they themselves "feel", or "think".

It is particularly interesting that some of these respondents themselves express surprise at their own judgements. One RE teacher writes: "I'm surprised at my own answer. I'm not a person who really thinks that flags are more important than other pieces of cloth. But in some way it still feels wrong". Another RE teacher writes: "Feels wrong. But find it hard to really motivate why it should actually be considered wrong." This might indicate that these respondents reflect on the conflict between their emotional responses and what they themselves are inclined to consider the rational approach to the example. However, this reflection does not result in them adjusting their judgements accordingly. Jonathan Haidt identified a similar pattern among some of the participants in his studies, who condemned certain practices, without being able to provide any rational justification. In many cases, the participants expressed surprise but were unwilling to change their initial judgements, a phenomenon he labelled *moral dumbfounding* (cf. Haidt, 2001, 817).

A large majority of both teacher students (69%) and RE teachers (69%) report that they find the behaviour of the kissing siblings in the kissing example morally wrong. They typically motivate their answers emotionally, as illustrated by the following examples:

> Teacher students: "One doesn't kiss one's sibling in that way. That amounts to incest. It's disgusting."; "It's illegal and repugnant and sad. They should be able to find someone else to kiss instead."; "Somehow it just feels wrong."

> RE teachers: "Feels essentially wrong."; "Incest is not okay."; "Incest is surrounded by a taboo which makes their behaviour seem wrong. The kissing may further lead to deeper feelings which can pose problems for them in the future since they may have difficulties having relations due to the same taboo."

Most of the respondents deprecate the siblings' behaviour and explicitly motivate their judgement on the basis of emotional reactions. Some of the respondents also follow a pattern identified by Haidt and reinterpret the example in a way that makes it possible for them to motivate their judgement with reference to people's reactions to the siblings' behaviour (even though the example makes it clear that no one gets to know about it) or the risk of inbreeding (even though the example makes it clear that the siblings merely kiss each other on the mouth). In that way they can provide a seemingly rational motivation that fits their gut feeling, but at the cost of misrepresenting the example (see Haidt, 2001, 829). Hence, even such answers are reasonably treated as essentially based on emotional responses.

To illustrate the difference between the typical responses to the two cases – "Kissing" and "Flag" – among our respondents, it is illuminating to consider how the same respondent has reacted to each of them. Here are some examples:

> Teacher student A
> Flag: "She probably has a newer flag that she can raise. Material things such as a flag, which are not historical (by historical I mean a runestone or the like) can be replaced."
> Kissing: "It feels wrong."

Teacher student B
Flag: "There doesn't need to be any other reason than that she wanted the piece of cloth to be used for something rather than just thrown away… Recycling!"
Kissing: "Not okay."

Teacher student C
Flag: "Her acting doesn't affect anybody negatively."
Kissing: "Incest!"

RE teacher A
Flag: "Just a flag."
Kissing: "Difficult. Incestuous."

RE teacher B
Flag: "It's good to recycle things – good for the environment and your economy."
Kissing: "Incest is not okay."

RE teacher C
Flag: "Blatantly, it may be seen as an insult towards the Swedish flag but in reality it's just a piece of cloth to which some humans have ascribed a value."
Kissing: "Well, two adult humans who consent to something should not really be wrong, but on an emotional level it becomes problematic in light of the societal norms surrounding incest."

What these examples show is how respondents who provide rational grounds for their judgements regarding the flag-example abandon this approach and give more emotional motivations with respect to the kissing-example, which describes an act that is considered much more taboo in a Swedish context. Only a few teacher students and RE teachers provide a clearly rational judgement with respect to the kissing-example. Most of these respondents do not regard the siblings' behaviour as wrong and motivate this judgement with reference to the view that, roughly, they are adult human beings who have the right to do what they want with their own bodies as long as no one else gets harmed.

Results

Our findings show that when teacher students and RE teachers are faced with a situation like "Flag", which (in a Swedish context) does not commonly evoke a strong emotional reaction, they tend to give rational arguments for their responses. However, when faced with a situation like "Kissing", which does evoke a strong emotional reaction, their responses tend to become purely emotional. Hence, one important thing to note is that the character of the example that the respondents are presented with seems crucial to their way of reacting to it. A taboo case like

"Kissing" gives rise to a large amount of emotional responses whereas a less taboo case like "Flag" gives rise to a large amount of rationally motivated responses. This result is also in line with previous research. For example, Joshua Greene has detected that when an ethical dilemma is given a personal formulation there is more activity in the part of the respondent's brain that is associated with emotional reactions (*ventromedial prefrontal cortex*) than when the same kind of dilemma is given an impersonal formulation. Greene's conclusion is that, from a neurological perspective, impersonally formulated moral dilemmas tend to be processed in the brain in a way that resembles non-moral reasoning, and judgements about such dilemmas tend to be motivated rationally (Greene et al., 2001, 2105-2107; Greene, 2007, 70). In this respect, a taboo example is like a personally formulated moral dilemma in that it tends to evoke emotional reactions, making it more likely that respondents abandon their rational thinking and let their responses be emotionally guided to a much larger extent than in the case of a non-taboo situation.

Another important point that we want to stress is that none of the teacher students and only a few of the RE teachers in our investigation explicitly reflect on how they motivate their judgements in the two situations. In the few cases where this happens, the respondents (RE teachers) reflect on the conflict between their own emotional response, evoked by the example presented to them, and the way it seems to them rational to react to this example. But they do not alter their moral judgement, which is based on their emotional response, as a result of this reflection. Furthermore, there is nothing in our material indicating that the respondents themselves perceive the difference in how they deal with the two cases. In our study the majority of both the teacher students (76%) and RE teachers (80%) express that they regard themselves as applying reason and emotion equally when making moral judgements. However, our study indicates that they rather use reason *or* emotion depending on the character of the example they are presented with.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

While it is certainly important to be careful when drawing practical conclusions from studies based on theoretically constructed non-authentic examples, it seems to us plausible to think that people's reactions to the situations in such examples to some extent reflect their reactions to similar, albeit more complex, situations in real life (cf. Greene et al., 2001, 2107; Haidt, 2001, 824; Greene and Haidt, 2002, 517-522; Koenigs et al., 2007, 908; Haidt, 2008, 69). If the results of our investigation thus provide a hint as to how teacher students and RE teachers, respectively, tend to approach concrete moral situations in their pedagogical practices, this would mean that they tend to respond rationally in situations that do not evoke strong emotional reactions, while they tend to abandon this rational approach in situations that do evoke strong emotional reactions. Hence, we find it likely that when teachers find themselves in sensitive, difficult or delicate moral situations, there is generally a higher risk that they do not manage to make moral judgement based on rational reasoning (e.g. Haidt, 2001, 829). Yet, such situations are typically such that one will

be expected to (rationally) justify one's reactions with respect to them to e.g. pupils, colleagues and parents.

In relation to the previous point it is particularly interesting to note that our survey shows no noticeable difference in how teacher students and RE teachers approach the two situations they were presented with.[4] In light of Haidts theory one would have expected the opposite to be the case, since it involves the idea that ethics education can contribute to the development of one's ability for (rational) moral reasoning even in sensitive situations (e.g. Haidt, 2001, 829). Accordingly, one might have expected the RE teachers, with their more comprehensive ethics education and experience, to be more reflecting in their approach also to the taboo example. We do not want to take issue with Haidt on this point. On the contrary, it seems to us very reasonable – and in line with our own experiences – that ethics education can contribute to the development of one's ability for moral reasoning. Rather, we take the crucial question motivated by this result to be *how* ethics education should be designed in order to have this potential, especially within teacher education. Hence, we contend that this is an important question for further research. We have ourselves previously argued for a certain methods-based approach to teaching ethics as a promising alternative in this respect (Samuelsson and Lindström, 2017).

Moreover, even if the RE teachers in our investigation have undergone a more comprehensive ethics education (by finishing the teacher education) than the not yet graduated teacher students, ethics education is not a very prominent ingredient in the Swedish teacher education to start with. Nor is its focus in general on moral reasoning. The methods-based approach to ethics education that we have suggested, on the other hand, takes its starting point in a few basic methods for moral reasoning.[5] Working actively with such methods, applying them to realistic examples together with one's co-students or colleagues, might be a good way to develop one's ability for moral reasoning that could prove effective even in sensitive situations. Making this kind of moral reasoning a natural ingredient in one's moral thinking could be one way of fending off the kind of direct unreflective emotional response – or "gut feeling" – that tends to take precedence in particular in sensitive situations. More research is needed, however, in order to say something more conclusive about the relation between various forms of ethics education and the ability for moral reasoning in different situations.

Nevertheless, the most important (albeit tentative) conclusion that we want to draw from our survey at this point is that it is important for teacher students as well as already practicing teachers to study, and cultivate the ability for, moral reasoning. Even if such education in moral reasoning would turn out to be futile with respect to the prospects of handling sensitive moral situations in a rational manner, it would still raise awareness about this fact among teachers and make them better prepared to take

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[4]Except in the way that some respondents in the former group, but none in the latter, expressed surprise at their own emotional response (although they did not alter this response as a result of finding themselves surprised).

[5]Very roughly: Collect relevant correct information; Represent this information vividly; Reason coherently on the basis of this vividly represented information (see further Samuelsson & Lindström, 2017).

appropriate measures to counterweigh it, and it would also give them means to reflect about their own moral reasoning and moral views.

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