

# Moral Beliefs: Patterns of Crystallization and Individual Stability — Findings From a Panel Study

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## 1. Introduction

Behavior is the product of motivational and situational contingencies. Understanding it and its development therefore requires the inclusion of attitudes and situational opportunities into the research design. In the longitudinal research tradition in criminology, in contrast to the theoretical tradition, however, delinquency is usually explained only in the light of the earlier delinquency, the interventions by the criminal justice system, and the social characteristics of the offender. Attitudes and situational opportunities are neglected. In view of the available data — mostly documents in social control agencies — this is quite a "natural" approach. But even when interview data have been used, the basic approach has often been similar, and data on moral attitudes have hardly been assessed.

Given the neglect of attitudinal data on deviance we know very little about their patterns of crystallization and individual stability. In the realm of political objects, studies have shown that a high rate of individual turnover exists even when the responses on the aggregate level are stable and short-time periods are covered. This has been interpreted as an indication of scarcely crystallized attitudes or "nonattitudes" (see Converse, 1964, 1970). Whether the same pattern applies to moral attitudes is beyond our knowledge. It could be argued that the findings of instability in political attitudes are due to the low political interest of most people. The less interest and reflection, the greater the instability. Moral attitudes, partially acquired early in childhood and youth and figuring prominently in day-to-day affairs, should be more crystallized and hence more stable.

In the following we want to deal with the question of attitudinal crystallization, as assessed by the individual level of stability over time. We start with the hypothesis that longer held orientations are more crystallized and stable. Consequently, the moral evaluation of new types of offense should be more fluctuating than that of old ones. And younger respondents, given the shorter passage of time, should have less stable orientations than older respondents.

## 2. *Methodology*

Our analysis was based on a longitudinal study covering roughly half a year and using a general population sample rather than adolescents alone (as in most of criminological research). The offenses mainly consisted of those against the state and the public. Newly evolving types of offense, such as destruction of electricity masts and boycotting the census, were included. Some of the offense formulations were taken from a study by W. Kaupen (1973), the first nationwide study in West Germany on peoples' attitudes toward law and offenses. Other offense formulations were newly developed. The response categories used were identical to the Kaupen study: Respondents had to indicate whether they considered the type of offense to be "very bad", "somewhat bad", or "not so bad".

The research was based on a random sample of the adult population of West Germany over the age of 18. The study was performed in the midst of the public debate about the German census.<sup>1</sup> The first panel wave was conducted by the GETAS institute in May 1987, shortly before the census started; the last wave in December 1987 after the data collection for the census was completed. The offenses were included in the first and the last wave; a few selected ones were additionally incorporated into the second wave. The number of respondents participating in all three waves was 1,192. Kendalls  $\tau_b$  coefficient is used as a measure of agreement in the following. It constitutes an appropriate instrument for ordinal responses and attains its highest value when all the responses are concentrated in the diagonal (see Galtung, 1970, p. 227; Meulemann, 1984, pp. 209–210).

## 3. *Aggregate and Individual-Level Stability*

At the aggregate level, most offenses had a stable rating over time (see Table 1). Noteworthy differences, encompassing a difference of more than five percentage points, only concerned the census boycott offenses: In cases of boycotting the census, the moral evaluation had become more negative. Similar though smaller trends could be found for "giving false replies to the census interview". Given the fact that most of the public debate and campaigns focused on boycotting the census and not on cheating, the findings indicated that moral evaluations are susceptible to the contents of public campaigns, but that reevaluations are restricted to the specific objects of the debate. There was no spillover to other types of offense; no general strengthening of the public sentiment on crime and deviance.

Tab. 1: Moral Evaluation of Offenses: Aggregate and Individual Stability

Offenses	Rating as "very bad, fairly bad" (in %)			Difference (in % ) 1st vs. 3rd wave*	$\tau_{ab}$
	1st wave	2nd wave	3rd wave		
Use of public transport without paying (1)	60	—	65	+5%	.37
Work without paying taxes (2)	48	—	49	+1%	.33
Tax evasion (3)	89	89	90	+1%	.29
Damaging telephone (4)	98	—	98	0%	.28
Damaging traffic sign (5)	80	—	81	+1%	.29
Destruction of electricity pole (6)	93	—	94	+1%	.36
Blockade of traffic (7)	59	—	62	+3%	.37
Change of residence without registration (8)	44	53	50	+6%	.32
Boycotting of the census (9)	32	52	50	+18%	.41
Faking the census (10)	65	76	72	+7%	.45

1st wave: March-May 1987,  
 2nd wave: June-July 1987,  
 3rd wave: Nov. 1987-Jan. 1988

## Note:

- \* Correlation between 1st and 3rd wave, taken as indicator of individual stability, is based on the three response categories "very bad", "fairly bad", and "not so bad". "don't know" and "no answer" are excluded.

## Appendix: Translation of the questionnaire

Please look at these cards. Each card describes a situation or behavior. For each card, please state whether you personally consider the described behavior to be very bad, fairly bad, or not so bad. ("Bitte sehen Sie sich diese Kärtchen an. Auf jedem dieser Kärtchen ist eine Situation oder Verhaltensweise beschrieben. Sagen Sie mir bitte zu jedem Kärtchen, ob Sie persönlich das beschriebene Verhalten sehr schlimm, ziemlich schlimm oder nicht so schlimm finden".)

1. Somebody uses public transport without paying. ("Jemand fährt absichtlich ohne Fahrschein mit öffentlichen Verkehrsmitteln wie Bus oder Bahn").
2. Somebody is moonlighting on weekends and does not pay taxes for his additional annual income of 5,000 DM (about \$ 3,000). ("Jemand arbeitet am Wochenende schwarz und versteuert sein Nebeneinkommen von jährlich 5000,-DM nicht").
3. A businessman takes a part of his earnings, let us say DM 250,000, abroad in order to evade taxes. ("Ein Geschäftsmann bringt einen Teil seines Vermögens, sagen wir Dm 250.000, ins Ausland, um keine Steuern zahlen zu müssen").
4. Somebody wilfully destroys the phone in a public telephone box. ("Jemand reißt mutwillig in einer Telefonzelle den Hörer ab").
5. A car driver damages a traffic sign when parking and drives off without reporting it. ("Ein Autofahrer knickt beim Einparken ein Verkehrsschild um und fährt heimlich davon").
6. An opponent of nuclear energy saws down an electricity mast. ("Ein Atomkraftgegner sägt einen Strommast ab").
7. Protesters block the rush-hour traffic on the freeway for half an hour. ("Demonstranten blockieren eine halbe Stunde lang den Berufsverkehr").
8. Somebody has changed his residence without registering it with the authorities. ("Jemand ist umgezogen und hat sich nicht umgemeldet").
9. Somebody does not complete the census questionnaire. ("Jemand füllt den Fragebogen der Volkszählung nicht aus").
10. Somebody is intentionally giving false replies to the census interview. ("Jemand füllt den Fragebogen der Volkszählung absichtlich falsch aus").

As indicated by the  $\tau_b$  coefficient, a change of response was not unusual. But as further data showed, it did not seem to be totally random. When change occurred it tended to go to adjacent categories; transgressions to totally different answers were rare.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to our assumptions, census offenses did *not* turn out to have the lowest individual stability. On the contrary: They had the highest. This was even more noteworthy, since aggregate stability was the lowest in this case, increasing the chance of individual change. Two points can be made out of this finding: Firstly, it is not only aggregate stability that is compatible with individual instability, as has been shown in the literature. Aggregate instability is also compatible with individual stability.<sup>3</sup> And secondly: the recency of the offense does not reduce individual stability; it seems to increase it.

Perhaps individual stability is greatest when people have recently thought about the issue regardless of how long it existed before. People might have given more thoughts to the less controversial topics in the past. The issues might have meanwhile faded out of their minds, leading to some kind of decrystallization of opinions. Possibly Elizabeth Bott's observations on how people construct their social-class conceptions are useful in this connection: According to her findings, people do not have ready-made answers in the interview. What takes place instead is an active memory search on the part of the respondent for experiences, attitudinal elements, and cognitions. These elements are then pulled together, made sense of, and structured into a coherent frame, as far as this is required by the interviewing task (Bott, 1957, pp. 159–191).

If such processes take place in other attitudinal areas apart from social-class conceptions, it would imply: The more often people have heard about a topic or talked with others about it, the more cognitions and arguments have *already* been activated and structured into a consistent frame. Opinion crystallization in this way becomes a matter of past and present mobilization, dependent not only on an individual's characteristics but also on the prevailing social historical circumstances. That processes of mobilization and reflection make up for greater attitudinal crystallization and stability is indicated by studies showing that attitudinal correlation tends to increase in panel studies from the first to the second wave (see Jagodzinski et al., 1987) and that attitudes tend to become more coherent during election campaigns (see Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, pp. xi, xxxviii).

#### 4. Age and Individual Level Instability

It is a common assumption that younger people are especially prone to attitudinal change. They have had less experience with social reality and have undergone less cumulative socialization. The more time passes and the older they get, the more stable their attitudes are said to become (see, e.g., Mannheim, 1970, pp. 509–511). If one takes aggregate change over time as a yardstick, there is — although not without exceptions — in fact evidence for greater change among younger people (see, e.g., Glenn, 1974; Reuband, 1980a, pp. 548–550, 1988, p. 83). And if one studies data on party identifications on the individual level, the findings take the same direction: The older people are, the more often they consider themselves strongly attached to a party (see, e.g., Butler and Stokes, 1969, pp. 78–80; Converse, 1976, pp. 43–45). However, some reservations about these findings have to be made: Aggregate change must not necessarily run parallel to individual attitude change, as we have seen. And party strength might be a bad example, since party orientation is something that is *enacted* in the form of repeated voting and thereby reinforced again and again.

Tab. 2: Stability of Attitudes Toward Specific Offenses According to Age — 1st Versus 2nd Panel Wave ( $\tau_{ij}$  Coefficient)

Offenses	Age				Total
	18–30	31–45	46–60	> 60	
Use of public transport without paying (1)	.38	.31	.40	.29	.39
Work without paying taxes (2)	.37	.38	.29	.23	.33
Tax evasion (3)	.33	.25	.26	.11	.29
Damaging telephone (4)	.33	.26	.27	.22	.28
Damaging traffic sign (5)	.36	.28	.26	.26	.17
Destruction of electricity pole (6)	.35	.37	.28	.25	.36
Blockade of traffic (7)	.38	.43	.28	.28	.37
Change of residence without registration (8)	.33	.30	.25	.24	.32
Boycotting the census (9)	.46	.38	.42	.30	.41
Faking the census (10)	.46	.43	.42	.39	.45

If we look at our data (Table 2), we find a pattern that deviates from the assumptions of time as a determinant of attitudinal crystallization. Stability tended to decrease with age in most of the listed offenses. The fact that younger respondents had a higher level of education, which in turn makes for greater attitudinal stability, did not account for the pattern. It basically remained the same, even when the level of education was controlled. In order to understand the age relationship, perhaps one has to look at the same principles of mobilization as mentioned before. One might have to look at the time period when conscious confrontations take place with the topic under investigation. Crime and deviance are concentrated in young age (Farrington, 1986); with older age the rate decreases. Parallel to that, the reflections on the morality of these acts should vanish; morality being increasingly taken for granted and not made the object of debate. This might make for less consciously held attitudes.

Moreover, it could be argued that the process of summarizing the attitudinal bits of information becomes more difficult as the number of experiences people make increases: Respondents might now think of the various situations in which they themselves or their acquaintances had been. They might think of the different actors who commit the offense and their possible motivations. In other words: There might evolve conflicting evidence among the older in favor of *and* against the act, creating some forms of cross-pressure and ambivalence in summarizing their position along the pre-given response categories. Although different in emphasis, the inherent mechanism is similar to the one mentioned before: Cognitive imbalance makes for instability as long as it has not recently become the object of reflection and been structured into a coherent cognitive frame.

There were only a few exceptions to the prevalent age pattern, and two referred to the census offenses: In the case of boycotting the census, the age relationship was irregular; in the case of false reply, it was continuous but smallest in size. In fact there was nothing linking them to age-specific experiences and a process of "memory loss" (except indirectly due to political interest in it). Rather than being a contrast to our interpretation, the findings seemed consonant with it, given the different developments in time.

## 5. *Conclusions*

What do the findings mean for the longitudinal study of deviant behavior? In order to understand behavior one cannot rely on attitudes assessed in earlier waves of the longitudinal study. One also has to look at those of the present in

their different aspects. And one has to obtain access to the "deeper", latent form of thinking. Perhaps the stability in opinions is smaller, the less reflective the respondent is on this topic and the more conflicting evidence is held: People might think of various situations in which the specific act is performed, making it serious and somewhat less serious in their evaluation. If this is so, it would imply that we have to assess the prevailing, although vague, orientations that cut across the situation-specific attitudes. Multiple indicators for the same offense, but specified on a more specific level, could be a starting point in this direction. Instead of giving a global description, the various ways in which people come to practice the delinquent act have to be listed. Pulling together the separate evaluations should allow a more adequate assessment of the prevailing attitudinal orientation.

### Notes

- 1 The study was part of a large research program at the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung (Cologne) focusing on the attitudes and participation of the German population in the 1987 census. (Project director: Prof. Dr. E.K. Scheuch; researchers: S. Kühnel and L. Gräf). The author was involved in the construction of the offense list.
- 2 In between 51 and 77% of the cases, the same response was given in the later wave. Given the three categories available in the interview schedule ("very bad", "fairly bad", "not so bad") and the marginal distribution, high rates of agreement might have been partially determined by chance. Under these circumstances, the correlation coefficient is more useful for indicating the level of agreement. Concerning the kind of change taking place in 7 out of the 10 offenses, the tendency was to go from a lenient evaluation ("not so bad") to a less lenient with increasing age. Respondents thus gave a more conservative reply. With regard to the severe rating ("very bad"), the turnover was less systematic. If there was a tendency, it entailed the younger respondents switching somewhat more often to a less serious rating. Older and younger respondents seemed to lean toward the climate of opinion that was characteristic in their age group. The shifts seemed to cancel each other out.
- 3 For a general discussion of individual and aggregate stability and instability see Reuband (1980b, p. 149).

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