Some aspects of moral values among university students in three societies: Poland, Australia and the Philippines

J.J. Smolicz, D.M. Hudson and M.J. Secombe
Graduate School of Education, Adelaide University

The paper reports the findings from a comparative study of moral values undertaken among university students from five universities in the Philippines, Poland and Australia. The aim of the study was to compare the way students brought up in different cultural traditions, but subjected to the homogenizing trends of globalization, evaluated what they deemed as the most appropriate solutions to some of the basic life dilemmas facing individuals today. The respondents were senior undergraduate and postgraduate students drawn from education and social science faculties in two independent Catholic and three secular state universities.

A total of 448 students participated in the study, with 80 to 100 students originating from each university. This paper presents a detailed analysis of one example from each of three categories of moral dilemmas, in which students were asked to state their position in relation to twelve issues including abortion, extra-marital affairs and stealing. In addition to providing concrete data on themselves, students indicated whether they believed the actions listed were wrong, acceptable or dependent on circumstances.

The students’ responses to the issues showed a generally consistent position for each university along a value orientation continuum ranging from Traditional Christian to ‘Post-modern Individualist’. The degree of support for Traditional Christian values varied, however, from issue to issue according to the university and country under investigation.

moral values; abortion; infidelity; stealing; tertiary students; international.

INTRODUCTION

As a result of global secular influences, it could be expected that responses to moral dilemmas would have become more uniform across different cultural and ethnic and religious groups. In order to ascertain any possible modification to or rejection of traditional moral values cross-culturally, the study sought the views of young people who were university students in three different countries and in institutions with different ideological profiles. The researchers had access to the collection of comparable data in Poland, the Philippines and Australia - countries very different in their regions, cultures and histories. It should be stressed that the study did not aim to take the form of a statistical analysis of variables to test a pre-established hypothesis which could lead to any predictions for a wider population.

1 This comparative study was not funded by any organisation, but was the result of co-operative efforts among colleagues in the three countries concerned. The authors, in particular, would like to express their gratitude to Ms Monika Koniecko, Professor Elzbieta Halas, Dr Illuminado Nical, Ms Susana Manzon and Mr Robert de la Serna for the contribution they have made to the data collection and analysis of this paper.
The theoretical framework of the study is based on the humanistic sociological conceptualization of Znaniecki, in which the term ‘moral values’ refers to the meanings which group members are expected to accept as a guide to right and proper conduct and the way in which they should act in their daily life. Znaniecki (1963: 267-70) draws an important theoretical distinction between the ideological attitudes which individuals profess in terms of the religious and moral values of their group, and the tendencies to action which these same individuals reveal in the specific contexts of daily life.

**UNIVERSITY PROFILES**

Data were gathered from a total of 448 respondents, drawn from five different universities. The number in each institution ranged from 80 to 109 (80 in Leyte and Adelaide; 89 in Warsaw; 90 in UA&P and 109 in KUL).

In Poland, the student respondents were drawn from two universities. One of these can be regarded as firmly set within the Catholic tradition. In 1918 the Catholic Church established the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) as a privately funded institution in a provincial centre in the east-central part of Poland. Over the period of Communist rule, it functioned as the bastion of Catholic religious and moral values in Poland. Today it is a medium-sized university with faculties reflecting its religious base: Theology, Canon and Civil Law, Christian Philosophy, Humanities, and Social Sciences as well as specialised institutes in Polish Church History, Higher Religious Education and Migration. Many of its students have gone to the priesthood and a variety of leadership positions in the Church and society at large.

The second Polish university which provided respondents for this study was Warsaw. A state institution, originally founded in the early nineteenth century, Warsaw is a very large university, with a full range of humanities, social science and natural science faculties. Its position in the heart of a capital city, renowned for its high culture in music, art, literature and the theatre, yet traditionally strongly linked to the Polish Catholic Church, has had an important influence on its ethos in providing access to moral values based in the Catholic tradition, as well as its more atheistic, anti-clerical counter-tradition.

Two other groups of respondents were drawn from universities in the Philippines. One set was provided by the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P), which is a private university in Manila, established by the Opus Dei order of the Catholic Church. Its ethos reflects the Opus Dei dedication to Catholic spirituality and emphasis on intellectual, political, educational and business leadership. It is best known for its high profile research specialisations in economics, political economy and business management, as well as its undergraduate College of Arts and Sciences. Its fee-paying structure and high entrance standards make it an élite institution, both socially and academically, and its total enrolment of around two thousand students is still relatively small.

The second Philippines institution from which respondents were drawn was the provincial state university at Tacloban on the island of Leyte in the eastern Visayas. The Leyte Institute of Technology (LIT) sees its role as providing for the practical educational needs of the surrounding community which has maintained a strong commitment to Catholic values reflecting the local community. It offers degrees in vocational disciplines, applied science and technology and teacher education, with a particular emphasis on post-graduate studies in education. At present time there are around seven thousand students enrolled at the Leyte Institute.

The two universities in the Philippines were chosen to provide contrasting communities within the overall Catholic ethos of the country. UA&P could be regarded as an intellectual centre closest to the teachings of the *magisterium* of the Church. Opus Dei is rightly regarded as a bastion of traditional Catholic teaching because it has scrupulously upheld the full and undiluted doctrine of the church. LIT, in contrast, is a comparatively small regional university,
chosen because it had no metropolitan glitter about it, was state-run and attracted a technically oriented clientele from financially and socially modest homes, in one of the poorest provinces of the country. The strong Catholic orientation of the Philippines was very apparent, however, in that seminars were normally begun with a prayer and Catholic feast days were regularly observed, even though it was a state university.

For the Australian section of the study, respondents were drawn from Adelaide University, which was established as a public institution in the late nineteenth century, the third oldest university in Australia. Situated in the capital city of the state of South Australia, it offers a wide range of degrees across the disciplines of science, agriculture, engineering, the professions, economics, music, humanities and social sciences. The student body currently numbers close to thirteen and a half thousand. Like most government-funded educational institutions in Australia, Adelaide University is strongly secular in ethos and has traditionally regarded religion and theology as sectarian pursuits, inappropriate for university students, while its philosophy department has been openly atheistic (Duncan and Leonard, 1974). The students participating in the study came from the Graduate School of Education.

Poland and the Philippines, the two predominantly Catholic countries investigated in this study, both inherited a strong Catholic tradition anchored in the post-Tridentum spirit. The respondents from the four Polish and Filipino universities who claimed to be Catholic (over 80%) would formally be expected to uphold the religious and moral values prescribed by their church and know that any deviation would be regarded as a sin. Evidence on which values were being rejected or regarded more relativistically and how frequently constitutes valuable information on changes taking place in moral values in countries which have long been regarded as strongholds of Catholicism.

METHOD

Student participants from the five universities were asked to complete a questionnaire on their religious and moral beliefs. For students in the Philippines and Australia the questionnaire was in English, but a Polish version was used for the respondents from Poland. Some questions were designed to gather concrete data concerning the respondents’ background: gender, age, language use, level of parental education and religious affiliation. There was also a series of questions to gather cultural data i.e. these were concerned with the students’ beliefs and moral perceptions and other attitudes in relation to the moral/religious convictions among them.

Responses to Specific Moral Issues

When presented with moral issues which epitomized contemporary moral dilemmas, participants were asked to indicate whether they agreed that action concerned was wrong: whether its moral status depended on the situation; or whether they considered the action not wrong. The range of responses available was:

- Considered Wrong
- Situation dependent
- Not wrong
- No opinion

The questions and responses were thus deliberately framed in terms of the maintenance of traditional moral values.

Data were initially summarized in frequency distributions for each university. Of the twelve situations presented to the respondents, one example from each category of issues will be discussed, viz. Abortion - classified as a ‘Life and Death issue’: Extra-Marital Affairs was
one issue from the category of ‘Sex and Marriage’: Stealing was one of two issues classified as ‘Human (Social) Relations’.

**Abortion: A Life and Death Issue**

This issue proved important in the analysis because of the polarisation of data. There was a clear distinction between the percentage of responses which considered abortion to be wrong from the three Catholic oriented universities, including LIT, and the two more secular ones. Traditional moral values on abortion were strongly maintained on this issue especially at the three Catholic oriented universities: UA&P (93%), KUL (80%) and LIT (74%) while in Warsaw (49%) only half gave evidence of supporting these values. Even lower, the Adelaide figure of 25% who considered abortion to be wrong, could be seen to reflect a society where abortion is legally available, virtually ‘on demand’.

In the case of responses rejecting traditional values, Adelaide respondents (44%) stood out as having the highest percentage of rejectors of traditional values. Warsaw (12%) is aligned with LIT on 15% in this response - an indication of much lower rejection among students who lived in predominantly Catholic societies, than the secular society of Adelaide which largely accepted abortion.

Abortion was an issue of debate, depending on the situation, for students from Adelaide (30%) and Warsaw (34%) rather than for the three Catholic-oriented universities LIT (4%), UA&P (6%) and KUL (14%). These students were upholding the traditional Catholic teachings. The situational response indicated that some students considered an issue was neither right nor wrong in itself. If they had doubts about it, they could choose this option to record individual responses.

**Extra-Marital Affairs: A Sex and Marriage Issue**

There was a marked convergence of responses in relation to this issue. The majority of students from all five universities agreed in maintaining traditional opposition to such actions: UA&P were unanimous on 99%. Warsaw (70%) and Adelaide (69%) showed a similar stance in opposing this issue. In this regard, Warsaw and Adelaide respondents almost matched the frequency levels from LIT at 73% and KUL at 85%. The ‘ranking’ of the university responses is similar to the previous issue, abortion, but there is general consensus.

The responses on the upholding of traditional moral values had their mirror image in the data showing rejection of such values. There was strong evidence of less acceptance for ‘extra-marital affairs’ at Warsaw (1%) and Adelaide (5%) where responses to this option were at a very low level, comparable to UA&P (1%) and KUL (1%). The respondents at LIT (14%) showed some approval of the issue but the number was relatively small.

The third response option, reflecting a more situational approach, was valuable in highlighting issues where there was a high degree of ambiguity or uncertainty. Low scores, in contrast, suggested that the respondents in the group concerned had made up their minds to be either upholders or rejectors of traditional morality. The relativistic view was comparatively high and shared by as many as 26% from Warsaw and 23% from Adelaide indicating the doubts some students expressed depending on the situation.

**STEALING: A Human Relations Issue**

The issue of ‘stealing’ was also striking in the way a large degree of consensus was displayed among students from all universities but the pattern of response differed markedly from those shown for the other two issues. ‘Stealing’ elicited the highest response of moral rectitude with over 70% of students in all universities and over 80% in three of them considering stealing as ‘wrong’. ‘Stealing’ was also the issue which elicited the highest level of support for any traditional value among Warsaw students (87%). With a corresponding figure of 82% at KUL,
stealing seems to evoke a particularly strong sense of ‘wrong’ among Polish students. It is interesting to note that UA&P students, who were the highest upholders of moral values on virtually all other issues, were below Warsaw at 81% in the case of ‘stealing’. Adelaide students with their dual Protestant and secularist orientations, also demonstrated greater acknowledgment of ‘stealing’ as ‘wrong’, than for any other issue (74%). At Adelaide 41% of respondents indicated that they belonged to one of the Protestant denominations whilst 30% claimed that they had no religion - a response which did not occur at all in any of the other groups of participants.

The remarkable unanimity of responses for this issue from students at all universities was also seen in the complementary rejection of traditional values, in that only very few claimed outright that ‘stealing’ was not wrong. Only LIT showed a relatively high proportion of those rejecting traditional values, amounting to 14%. In contrast, while on most moral issues Warsaw and Adelaide displayed a high degree of permissiveness, Adelaide showed no more than 4% of respondents, and Warsaw had no-one who condoned stealing. The figures for KUL and UA&P were minimal - 3 and 2%. Overall stealing was not acceptable as an issue.

The minimal number of students at Warsaw and KUL, UA&P and Adelaide who openly condoned stealing has to be considered alongside the proportion who expressed relativistic attitudes by indication that their judgement of whether stealing was ‘wrong’ or ‘not wrong’ would depend on the circumstances. Respondents from Adelaide (21%) and UA&P (17%) expressed some doubt in relation to stealing which was somewhat higher than Warsaw (12%) and KUL (16%). The figure for LIT was as low as 6% which reflects the pattern for all universities as seeing stealing as ‘wrong’.

These findings suggest that moral issues in social relationships are not necessarily seen to be tied directly to Christian beliefs, despite their specific prohibition in the Ten Commandments. Findings raise questions such as: Is stealing related to established ‘legal’ rather than ‘moral’ codes? For some Protestants, what constitutes sin and restitution for sin becomes very much more a matter for the individual conscience and there is a greater tendency to adopt relativistic attitudes where what constitutes right and wrong depends on personal judgement of the situation.

CONCLUSIONS

The various responses to these three issues provide valuable information on the relative ‘holding power’ of Christian (mainly Catholic) beliefs in Poland and the Philippines when compared with mainly Protestant (or religiously indifferent) Australia. The responses also throw light on differences among the various moral values examined, in the extent of their support or rejection.

In the three predominantly Catholic universities (UA&P, LIT and KUL), traditional Christian values continued to be upheld for ‘abortion’ in the life and death issue. In the two universities where there has been a tradition of secularist values, there is a much greater rejection of traditional moral values, together with a substantial number of those with a relativistic orientation expressing an essentially ambiguous stance. One issue on which Warsaw and Adelaide join forces with the Catholic oriented University is on the issue of ‘extra-marital affairs’, a ‘Sex and Marriage Issue’, with about two third of responses upholding a traditional negative view of such practices. This particular value appears to hold no relationship to Christian religious belief or non-belief, assuming a virtually universalistic dimension.

The same situation appears to hold for the ‘social relationship’ issue - stealing. Responses from students in all five universities favour the upholding of traditional moral values for this issue which is considered more frequently ‘wrong’ by Warsaw students than by respondents from all other universities. There is a minimal rejection of the traditional norms that condemn ‘stealing’.
It is the rejection of certain moral propositions when the respondents openly admit that certain actions which are contrary to traditional morality are no longer ‘wrong’ which put them in conflict with the religious authority to which they officially subscribe. What is clear is that some of the traditional values are changing within the orbit of particular Christian denominations.

The results suggest that believers display a spirit of selectivity among moral values showing traditional disapproval for certain actions, while revealing a proclivity for greater permissiveness in relation to others.

The issue of abortion shows that in the Catholic oriented universities, there is little evidence of collapse of traditional values and that globalization trends have not seriously undermined other traditional values. The other two moral issues discussed, extra-marital affairs and stealing, where there is a greater convergence of responses, can be viewed as highlighting more universalistic values which appear to go beyond the confines of any particular religious belief.

REFERENCES
