

COGNITIVE DYNAMICS IN MORAL JUDGMENTS

by

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A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

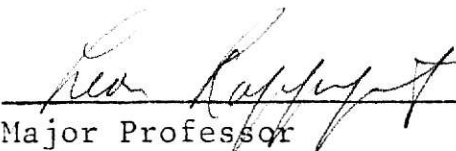
MASTER OF SCIENCE

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1981

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family and friends for their patience and encouragement. Appreciation is also expressed to Ricky L. Cameron who assisted me on this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Leon Rappoport for his advice and assistance. His wisdom and patience helped me not only on this project but during my tenure at the university.

I would like to express special thanks to Dr. Stephen Misovich of Providence College. He had more confidence in me than I had in myself.

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## CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Burgeoning social conflicts over such issues as abortion and capital punishment are indicative of moral crises in American society. Pro-life groups argue that abortion terminates a life and therefore is murder. However, the same point, sanctity of human life, is ignored by those who support capital punishment. In essence there is an asymmetry in the apparent logic concerning support for legalized abortion and capital punishment. This asymmetry often goes unquestioned. It is this asymmetry and the cognitive process making it possible which are the points of study.

The purpose of this study is not to determine whether abortion and capital punishment are morally right or wrong. Rather, the intent is to examine the way in which these issues may be perceived as being either consistent or inconsistent with personal values concerning morality.

Capital punishment may be supported because it satisfies the victim's and the public's desire for retribution or social retaliation. According to Mittendorf (1971) there are five reasons for punishment: retribution, general deterrence, special deterrence, incapacitation, and reformation. He suggests that retribution is a continuously persistent goal of punishment. Moreover, he states that no penal system, legislator, or judge can ignore the so-called people's sense of justice. The sense of justice is a psychological reality. Therefore, a penal system which does not satisfy this psychological reality may result in the people taking the law into their own hands. Consequently, it appears that the need for retribution overrides the contradictory logic of support for both legalized abortion and capital punishment.

It is hypothesized that retribution, in the form of the people's sense of justice, may be sustained by a belief in a just world. The belief in a just world is a pervasive cognitive tendency linking goodness and happiness, or wickedness and punishment (Lerner, 1965). The links, in fact, are so strong that given one of these conditions the other is frequently assumed. Thus, people see a harmonious fit between happiness and goodness, or between wickedness and punishment. This fit between conditions becomes the objective reality ought.

Ought is the moral standard which "is considered to belong to the objective reality that is the same for everyone" (Heider, 1958; p. 230). The two major defining characteristics of the moral standard ought are: (1) different people should perceive the same ought demands in a given situation (consensual validation), and (2) ought demands should manifest themselves across situations (cross-situational consistency) (Ross and DiTecco, 1975; p. 92). Thus, moral standards are defined, as are all external attributions, by consistency over time and over modalities and consensus among different persons in their reactions.

In the above example the justice ought suggests people merit their misfortunes. Therefore, when conditions do not coexist as they should, the imbalance is discordant. This motivates people to establish a fit so the situation exists as they think it should. By suggesting a fit between wickedness and punishment, capital punishment may be viewed as an instance of justifiable retribution for transgressing against society's laws. In evaluations of capital punishment and legalized abortion it appears that: (1) since others support capital punishment and deny legalized abortions the individual will do so (consensus) and (2) since all bad behaviors