

## ***Panic and the Lack of Moral Competence. How We Can Help to Prevent Panic Pandemics***



Georg Lind

(University of Konstanz; Germany; georg.lind@uni-konstanz.de)

ORCID: 0000-0002-2235-5465

**Abstract:** Often we have to decide on difficult problems and conflicts. For this, a certain level of moral competence is needed, in order to solve them as quickly and adequately as possible. Otherwise these problems and conflicts can overwhelm us, triggering a feeling of fear and panic, and making us react too slowly or inadequately, or both. Fear and panic can make us ignore problems and conflicts, attempt to “solve” them through brute force or deceit, or declare them to be beyond our responsibility and let an authority decide what to do. Often such makeshift solutions seem to work, but, more often, they have damaging effects. Therefore, society tries to curb criminal and anti-democratic activities through coercion, that is, through laws, law-enforcing institutions, and correction facilities – at high costs, and often with little efficacy.

In this article I show that such coercion would not be needed if we gave all citizens an opportunity to develop their ability to solve conflicts and problems through thinking and discussion. Moral competence would immunize us against fear and panic, and thus also against immoral practices. Moral competence is not inborn in us, and it does not develop unless it is fostered through proper learning opportunities. Therefore, if we want to live together peacefully in a democratic society, we need to provide proper learning opportunities for everyone, not only of a few people. If the masses are infected by panic, a few rational people cannot stop this pandemic.

**Keywords:** Moral competence; panic; pandemics; panic pandemics.

### **Fear and Panic**

Why and how are fear and moral competence connected? Let us start by looking at the nature of fear and its extension – panic. Fear is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, fearful reactions can save us when we encounter a threat, especially when a quick reaction is required. But it can also harm or even kill us when it prevents us from fully understanding the threat and leads us to make the wrong decisions. If fear is so strong that it prevents us even from reflecting on, and learning from, our decisions, then we are dealing with panic.

What happens in our brain when we feel fear? When we encounter a threat, a snake for example, our body is immediately activated in order either to fight the threat or to flee from it. Both reactions may save us from being killed by the snake. But both can also make things worse for us. If we decide to fight, the snake might bite us. If we decide to flee, we may fall into an abyss and break our neck.

LeDoux (1994) has studied what happens in our brains when we see, hear, or smell a threat, and when this triggers fear in us. When the information from our senses is recognized by the brain areas for seeing, hearing and smelling, they send a signal to our limbic system in the lower part of the brain. This area comprises the amygdale, the seat of our emotions, the thalamus, which relays information to the other parts of the brain, the hypothalamus and the hippocampus, the locations of homeostasis and of memory consolidation, respectively. The hippocampus seems to store our encounters with threats. That is, our brain recognizes situations as threats only when we have stored respective threatening experiences (e.g., with snakes) or have stored warnings from trusted authorities (parents, teachers, media, government, etc.) or peers. As parents, often we have to warn our children to stay away from harmful things like a hot oven because they would touch it fearlessly and burn themselves. Fear is more often learned from other people than from experience, though the latter may be more lasting.

Fear is triggered not only by immediate dangers like wild animals, thieves or explosions but also when we encounter challenging tasks at school, at the workplace, in the political domain, or when our health is at stake. In those instances, we have to answer difficult moral questions. To which alternative should we give priority? Should we try to solve the task in a math test or should we just guess, or should we copy the answer from others? Should we tell a patient that we do not know how to help him or should we prescribe some pills to please him? Should we elect the candidate who would improve my life conditions or the candidate who is best for the country? To give a more current example: Should we get vaccinated against a certain virus, or should we distrust the safety and effectiveness of the vaccination? Like other questions, this decision also triggers difficult moral questions that may overburden our ability to solve dilemmas (see Figure 1 below) and thus create fear in us, or even panic (this example is taken from Engelbrecht & Köhnlein 2020).

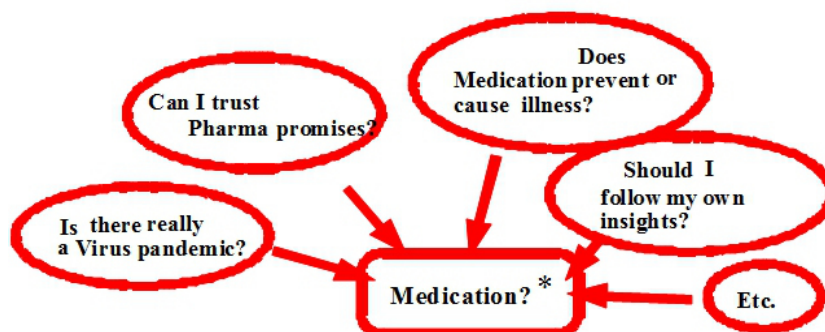


Figure 1: What can make a decision so difficult (examples for such decisions are found in the article by Engelbrecht and Köhnlein (2020).

### **Panic Is Shared Fear**

If several people, a whole community or a whole nation feel the same kind of fear – like fear of a common foe or fear of a virus pandemic – we can refer to this as panic. In general, we feel panic less intensively than fear, because when everybody shares the same fear, it feels more normal and acceptable. At the same time, it may have a stronger impact on our behavior and on society, because we assure each other that the cause for the panic still persists, even long after it has gone. Panic cripples our thinking and discussion more than individual fear, because there is hardly anyone left who may stimulate our thinking and start a discussion. Panic tends to become chronic because we reinforce each other's fears, and also because, after a while, the brain shrinks parts of the frontal lobe when they are not used for a longer time, just as the muscles of our legs shrink when we do not use them. Even if we want to think again, we cannot think as well as before, because our brain lacks the necessary "hardware," that is, dendrites and synapses. Because we tend to see our panic as normal, it hardly ever shows up in surveys. However, it can be observed in our behavior. There are some sure signs of a pathological state of panic: When we suffer from panic, we tend to avoid thinking and talking about our object of fear at all. If someone happens to mention it, we tend to end any conversation or change the topic. Blinded by our panic, we think that these people are sick, crazy, or prejudiced against the truth, and had better shut up or be locked up so that they cannot bother us anymore. If we are arguing, our arguments lack any logic. Panic makes us contradict ourselves. A newspaper wrote about the coronavirus: "The infection rate is still rising. But the death rate remains very low. This is because people do not get sick." Sure, if nobody gets sick, the death rate is unlikely to increase. But why do people not get sick if the virus is so deadly? Is it not so dangerous after all? But if the answer is yes, we would not need to panic anymore! Does this thought let us bias our logic? Panic, it seems, wants to keep itself alive by allowing us an illogic which under normal conditions we would never accept.

When in a panic, we use anecdotes and examples for defending our truth, rather than scientifically based numbers, tables and graphs. When a close friend has become sick with a certain virus, we are sure that this is proof enough of the existence of a pandemic. Even if there are many statistics which show that the virus is not a "killer" but a normal flu, our panic leads us to believe more in single cases than in the statistics. When in a panic, we also tend to discard other, potentially greater dangers for our health, like polluted air and water, or false medication. This is because our brainstem can only handle single causes and does not allow our frontal lobe to bother us with alternative causes as explanations for a threat.

The same is true for the means which we consider for fighting the threat. Again, when panic blocks our ability to think, our options are confined to only one means. To use our example, we are happy that our government tells us that there is only *one* way to protect us from the virus, namely through vaccination, in spite of the fact that many experts

believe that the search for a vaccine must fail, and that our immune system (the “T-cells”) can protect us more effectively<sup>1</sup>. When we are in a panic, we cannot weigh the arguments for and against vaccination because this would overburden our thinking ability. Hence, we choose the sources of information which we trust more. In normal times this would be science. But in a state of panic, we tend to trust the more powerful source.

This shift of focus from the message to the messenger is typical for panic behavior. In a state of panic we can ignore discomfoting information. But we cannot ignore the people who confront us with it. We think of them as enemies who do not deserve respect and civil conversation, but defamation (“ill-minded liars,” “misled dumb-heads,” “conspiracy theorists”)<sup>2</sup>.

As Gustave Le Bon (1897) showed 120 years ago in his seminal book *The Psychology of Masses*, panic is often used for political repression. Politicians are tempted to use our panic for their purposes because panic paralyzes not only our thinking but also our willingness to ask questions and fight for our rights. We let them restrict our civil rights, e.g., our rights of free speech and of free movement, because when we are in a state of panic, we find it hard to make use of our freedom. We should remember that these threats do not have to exist in order to cause panic, but need only be communicated by sources that we trust, like our favorite newspaper, TV program, or politician.

Besides politicians, other actors, like the media and businesses, might also be tempted to exploit our panic. When we perceive a danger, we buy more newspapers and watch more TV. In times of international tensions, we expect our government to order more weapons and security devices. When we are afraid of a virus pandemic, we demand distancing rules, face masks, mass testing and mass vaccination. In that case, the beneficiaries are many: manufacturers and distributors of masks, medicines, tests and vaccines, and their shareholders. What reasons should these actors have to declare the end of the panic when the statistics show that there was only a common flu and that this has already ended? These actors may even be tempted to keep our panic alive with (fake) information about an allegedly ongoing pandemic, like we did to the girls when we were young: “Watch out, the spider is still on your back.”

Eventually panic feeders may find themselves caught in a vicious circle, namely when they cannot stop the panic-pandemic anymore, even when its costs have become unbearably high. Now citizens might believe so deeply in the existence of a pandemic that they demand the lockdown be continued. This explains why panic can persist even when the damage done by the panic far exceeds the damage caused by the original danger. Sometimes, a panic will end in a fatal disaster (LeBon 1897).

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1 For extensive information and scientific articles on this issue see the CHD’s website: <https://childrenshealthdefense.org/>.

2 For example, Dr. Wolfgang Wodarg, who has decades of experience and competence as a physician, epidemiologist and health politician, believes that the current corona “pandemic” is just an ordinary flu. For this belief, which is supported by many scientific studies, he is vilified in television programs and was thrown out of an association of which he was a member of the board. His videos on the internet were blocked several times.

## **Fostering People's Moral Competence Can Prevent Panic**

Yet there is hope, at least for the future. Studies show that not all of us become panic-stricken and behave irrationally when we are faced with a (real or a communicated) threat. Many of us are able to weigh alternatives and to discuss controversial matters with others, and to make our decisions on the basis of our moral principles. For these people, difficult problems and conflicts are no threat and do not cause them to panic. When we understand why they can handle problems and conflicts under pressure and do not show signs of panic, we may be able to say how we can help the others to achieve the same.

The key to this understanding is *moral competence*, the technical term for our ability to solve problems and conflicts, which involve moral principles, through thinking and discussion (Lind 2019a). Favorable learning opportunities are necessary to develop this competence (Schillinger 2016). Because people differ greatly with regard to the number and quality of such opportunities, they also differ widely with regard to their moral competence. If we had too few such opportunities, it is very likely that we will fail to solve problems and conflicts through thinking and discourse, and that we will have to use means which we consider immoral ourselves: ignorance, violence, deceit and blind obedience to an authority. The importance of moral competence may become clear when we look closely at some classical psychological experiments.

Stanley Milgram (1974) showed in his famous experiment that obedience to an authority can paralyze our moral conscience. The experimenter, who assumes the authority of a psychological researcher, instructs participants to give learners electric shocks when they made an error in a learning task. The shocks and the reactions of the victims are fake, but the participants are not aware of this. The findings show that most obey the instructions, although they cannot see the great pain that they cause. Milgram concluded from this finding that human behavior is fully under the control of external authorities, and that inner instances like a moral conscience cannot influence people's behavior.

Erich Fromm contradicted this interpretation. For him, Milgram's study actually shows the "presence of conscience in most subjects, and their pain when obedience made them act against their conscience" (Fromm 1973, 75). His interpretation is supported by the reports which the participants gave after the experiment was finished, and by fact that some stopped torturing the learners prematurely.

But why did they stop, and why not the others? What enabled them to do so? Milgram in advertently gives us a hint. He reports that participants with a higher level of education were more disobedient than those with a lower level (Milgram 1974, 234). Do resisters possess an ability which has been stimulated through their education? The answer seems to be yes, as Kohlberg (1984) has shown in an experiment similar to Milgram's. He not only recorded how obedient the participants were, but also assessed their moral competence.

Kohlberg created a clinical interview method for measuring moral competence. This scale is known as the Moral Stages. On the basis of my new understanding of moral competence and following a critical analysis of the clinical interview method (Lind 1989), I have developed an objective method of making moral competence visible in the pattern of people's responses to an experimentally designed test, the Moral Competence Test (see Lind 1978; 1981; 2019a). In terms of showing the power of moral competence in people's behavior, we can consider both methods as equally valid.

In his experiment, Kohlberg found that obedience to authority was indeed strongly correlated with moral competence. Of the participants with a high moral competence (Stage 5 "principled morality"), 75% resisted authority, compared to 13% in the group of lower moral competence (Kohlberg 1984). This finding suggests that if our moral competence is sufficiently developed, we can solve difficult problems and conflicts without the need to panic.

Franz-Josef Mansbart (2001) has shown that in fact participants with low moral competence scores need considerably more time for solving dilemmas than high scorers ( $r = -.36$ ; my calculation, see Lind 2002).

Kristin Prehn and her colleagues were even able to find the main location of these processes, namely in the right dorso-lateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC). We may call it the seat of moral competence. Whereas all the parts of our nervous system are more or less involved when we are confronted with a moral dilemma, the DLPFC is the busiest part of our brain. The correlation between the amount of activity (measured by the BOLD level) in that area and the C-score of the *Moral Competence Test*, was unusually high;  $r = -.47$ . As in Mansbart's experiment, the participants with low moral competence needed much longer for deciding behavioral dilemmas than the participants with a high moral competence. Li *et al.* (2016), who ran a similar series of experiments, corroborated Prehn's finding.

More support for our hypothesis comes from studies of conformity behavior. Solomon Asch (1955) showed that most of us are ready to let others think for us. He showed that we often trust our own thinking less than the thinking of other people if they are more numerous. Psychologists call this phenomenon *conformism*. In his experiment, Asch asked the participants which of three lines on a sheet of paper had the same length as the line on another piece of paper. When the other participants, who had been prepared by the experimenter, gave the same wrong answer, most of the participants changed their correct answer in order to agree with the majority. Obviously, they trusted the opinion of the majority more than their own thinking. But, like Milgram, Asch forgot to ask why some of them resisted the temptation of conformity? Aida Mofakhami (2019) repeated Asch's experiment online, but also measures her participants' moral competence. Indeed, participants with high moral competence were less prone to the conformity effect. Her effect was weak, maybe because the social conformity pressure was mitigated by the online medium and, therefore, not as strong as in Asch's experiment with real groups of participants.



Sharon McNamee (1977) found that participants with low levels of moral competence were less likely to help people in distress. However, these participants were not less willing to help but, as they reported afterwards, they felt paralyzed by the conflicting thoughts and feelings that the helping situation had elicited in them.

The importance of moral competence for solving problems is also shown in the study by Beke Lenz (2006) on youths' drug consumption. She found that adolescents who faced severe life problems (e.g., losing a friend, getting of bad grades in school, suffering from their parent's divorce) tend to use drugs to calm down their feelings – but only when they had a low moral competence. These youths were not able to cope with their problems through thinking or through consulting with their parents, friends or teachers. Therefore, they had to fight the emotions which these conflicts caused through alcohol, smoking or other drugs. In contrast, participants with higher moral competence were apparently able to cope with their problems and, therefore, did not need to use drugs in order to calm their emotions.

These and many other experimental studies suggest (a) that moral competence really is a very important determinant of our behavior, and (b) that there seems to be a certain level of competence which must be attained if we want to solve our problems and conflicts successfully through thinking and thus avoid panic (Lind 2019a; 2019b). In terms of measurement, this critical level is marked by a C-score of 20.0 in the *Moral Competence Test* (see Figure 2). I should mention that this C-score is not a clear cut-off score but a statistical signpost. It should not be applied to individuals but only to groups of people.

If we are unable to develop this level of moral competence, we mostly feel overburdened by living in a free, democratic society. We feel permanent stress and easily panic when something unusual (like a virus pandemic) happens. In order to reduce this stress-feeling we try to “solve” problems and conflict in everyday life by ignoring them, or, if we cannot ignore them, by using violence and deceit, or, if this does not work, by letting authorities think for us and solve our problems.

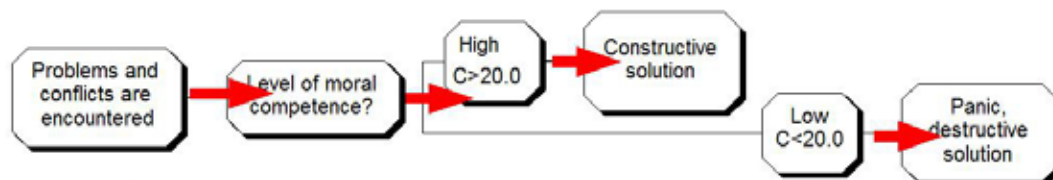


Figure 2: The critical level for moral competence to become relevant for behavior.

When citizens lack even a minimum amount of moral competence, society must spend a big share of its budget for law-making, law-enforcement, judicial decision-making, correction facilities, making reparations to victims and fixing the damage caused by criminal behavior. Just imagine that a small misdemeanor like traveling by bus without

a ticket can result in a prison sentence of several months. Such a small damage of a few dollars can cost society several thousand dollars, in terms of punishing the transgressors. I believe that this money could be better spent on fostering their moral competence. So if we want to maintain and to improve our democracy, we must, above all, foster the moral competence of all citizens. This can neither be achieved by classical education nor by conventional civic education, as J. Westheimer rightly argues:

In study after study, we come to similar conclusions: the kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in curricula that hope to foster democratic citizenship usually have more to do with voluntarism, charity, and obedience than with democracy. In other words, good citizenship to many educators means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen - not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to learn how to do (Westheimer 2015, 472).

If they want to serve our democracy well, our schools have to foster our children's ability to think for themselves, to trust their own thinking, and to discuss controversial issues with opponents. That is, in order to lift the overall level of moral competence in our societies to the needed minimum level, its schools have to provide their students with sufficient opportunities for using and training their moral competence, and to participate in exchanges with others (Figure 3).

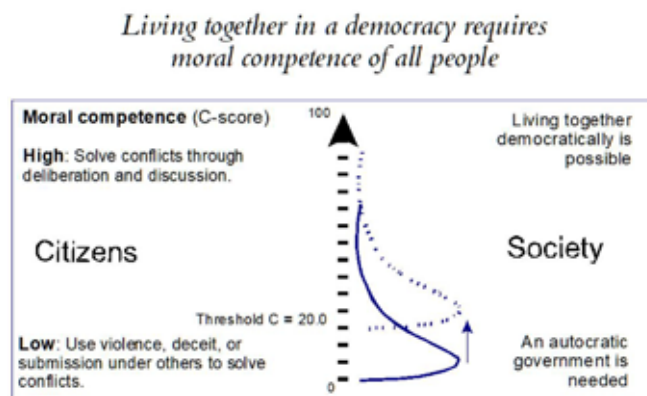


Figure 3: The current level of moral competence in most societies (solid line) is too low for living together peacefully in a democracy. We must it above the threshold (dotted line).

This implies a big shift in teaching methods. Students' thinking and discussions must not be guarded and graded by an authority (the teacher) but must follow moral-democratic principles. Actually, it must follow only one basic principle, namely the free speech-principle: everyone is allowed to say anything he or she wants, but must never qualify (praise or blame) any other participant. Having over twenty years of experience of working with this simple principle, I feel entitled to say: It works! Never has any participant transgressed. All I needed to do was to announce this principle and "threaten" to remind anyone who would break it. I never had to remind anyone.

This principle is the center piece of the *Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion*®



(KMDD), which I have developed on the basis of Blatt and Kohlberg's (1975) method of dilemma discussion (Lind 2019a; Reinicke 2017). The KMDD has been tested and evaluated many times (Lind 2019a). The KMDD is a very effective and yet not very complex method for the promotion of moral competence. However, the KMDD's effectiveness depends on the quality of the training of the teachers who use it. Hopefully, institutions of higher education will begin to offer such training. I would gladly assist.

## Conclusions

In this article I have shown that we do not need to coerce people into democracy, which is rather paradoxical, if we foster everyone's ability to solve the conflicts and problems, which democracy inevitably confronts us with, through thinking and discussion. This moral competence would immunize people against fear of freedom and against panic, and thus also against immoral practices. Moral competence is not inborn and does not develop unless it is fostered through proper learning opportunities (Lind 2000, 2020; Schillinger 2006). Therefore, if we want to live together peacefully in a democratic society, all people must be provided with sufficient opportunities for using their moral competence. This is the most honorable task of schools in a democracy.

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