

This Week's Citation Classic

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Haan N, Smith M B & Block J. Moral reasoning of young adults: political-social behavior, family background, and personality correlates.

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During the 1960s, activists of various bents and nonactivists were compared with one another with respect to their political-social views, moral maturity, and personalities and family backgrounds. Active protesters were found to be morally more mature, energetic personalities from liberal families. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 195 publications since 1968.]

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"In the fall of 1964, students who had worked on civil rights in the South returned to the Berkeley campus of the University of California to find new regulations banning campus political activity. They had intended to recruit others to augment their efforts so the now famous Free Speech Movement was born. Some four months of debate, anger, new agreements, and broken agreements ensued before definitive civil disobedience and a massive arrest occurred. I and my colleagues, Jeanne H. Block and M. Brewster Smith, recognized a target of research opportunity, not only in the Berkeley students' protest but also in the spreading activism of San Francisco State University students and the more social service-oriented commitments of young people who were becoming Peace Corps volunteers. Our foci were the differences—personal, social, and moral—among activists of various commitments and between activists and nonactivists. What kind of people act with respect to societies' others merely deplore? Nonetheless,

the social thrust of the 1960s also provided these young people with hope and impetus. For instance, some Berkeley students who were not arrested argued with us about the research plan. They declared their failure to be arrested was no fault of their own! The police wouldn't let them in the building.

"The paper described here probably became famous (or infamous) because it addressed the activists' central claims of their morality, assertions that were doubted and countered by conservatives of the older generation and various media personnel.¹

"Nevertheless, in a sample of 517 and with the measures we used (Kohlberg's definition of morality²), principled students were more often activists than were morally conventional students. Principled activists were also distinctive in their demographic status, organizational activity, self and ideal views, family background, and so forth. They seemed more independent, vigorous, radical, and aggressive. In other words, the activists were not simply morally benighted nor could they be facilely understood as neurotically rebellious or misled.

"As the study proceeded, activists became less willing to comply with our depersonalized methods of collecting data. One night we found ourselves in a crowded, sweaty living room explaining to some 50 San Francisco State University students that the 'reality' we sought was still valid although different than the reality of their individual lives, which they thought was a much better target for our research.

"The findings were subsequently replicated³ but also disputed.¹ In 1974, interest in this report became so sufficient that it was reproduced in the Bobbs-Merrill Report Series in Psychology."

1. Lipset S M. The activists: a profile. *Public Interest* (13):39-51, 1968.

2. Kohlberg L. A cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. (Goslin D, ed.) *Handbook of socialization*. New York: Rand McNally, 1969, p. 347-480.

3. Fihkin J, Keniston K & MacKinnon C. Moral reasoning and political ideology. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 27:109-19, 1973.