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Paper Text

Moral Development, Gendered

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During the last twenty years or so, Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan have heavily influenced the research of moral psychology. These two authors have marked the most important conceptualizations in the psychology of moral development. The dilemmas themselves were often interesting in their own right, since judgments about what to do differ between Kohlberg and Gilligan. The announcement of Kohlberg and Gilligan's moral development theories, their association with discrimination, and concern with their theory will be addressed.

Kohlberg can be considered the most important theoretician of the development of the moral judgment based on the theories of Piaget and Kant. Done exclusively with males, Kohlberg's research distinguished six distinct stages of moral reasoning, arranged in a hierarchy. Each level represented a fundamental shift in the social-moral perspective of the individual. At the first level, the pre-conventional level, a concrete, individual perspective characterizes a person's moral judgments (Kohlberg 177). Within this level, a Stage 1 orientation focuses on avoiding breaking rules that are backed by punishment and avoiding the consequences of an action to persons and property. The reasoning of Stage 1 is characterized by ego-centrism and the inability to consider the perspectives of others. At Stage 2 there is the early emergence of moral reciprocity. The Stage 2 orientation focuses on the instrumental, utilitarian value of an action. At Stage 2 one follows the rules only when it is to one's immediate interests. What is right is what is fair in the sense of an equal exchange, deal, or agreement.

Individuals at the conventional level of reasoning have a basic understanding of conventional morality and reason with an understanding that norms and conventions are necessary to uphold society. They tend to be self-identified with these rules and uphold them consistently viewing morality as acting in accordance with what society defines as right. Within this level, individuals at Stage 3 are aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations that take primacy over individual interests. Persons at Stage 3 define what is right in terms of what is expected by people close to oneself and in terms of the stereotypic roles that define being good. There has yet to be a consideration of the generalized social system. Stage 4 marks the shift from defining what is right in terms of local norms and role expectations to defining right in terms of the laws and norms established by the larger social system. This is the "member of society" perspective in which one is moral by fulfilling the actual duties defining one's social responsibilities (Kohlberg 177). One must obey the law except in extreme cases in which the law comes into conflict with other prescribed social duties. Obeying the law is seen as necessary in order to maintain the system of laws that protect everyone.

Finally, the post-conventional level is characterized by reasoning based on principles, using a "prior to society" perspective (Kohlberg 177). These individuals reason based on the principles that underlie rules and norms, but reject a uniform application of a rule or norm. Stage 6 remains as a theoretical endpoint which rationally follows from the preceding 5 stages. In essence, this last level of moral judgment entails reasoning rooted in the ethical fairness principles from which moral laws would be devised. Laws are evaluated in terms of their coherence with basic principles of fairness rather than upheld simply based on their place within an existing social order. There is an understanding that elements of morality such as regard for life and human welfare transcend particular cultures and societies and are to be upheld irrespective of other conventions or normative obligations.

Carol Gilligan, a professor of education at Harvard who had closely worked with Kohlberg, discerned the permanent delay of the women in the scheme of development proposed by Kohlberg. The women remained in more infantile and primitive previous stages as far as the moral reasoning (Gilligan 481). Gilligan focused her research on her subjects' responses to the question, "How would you describe yourself to yourself?" The responses of men to that question are generally individualistic, with an emphasis on personal accomplishments and a notion of being "self-made." In Gilligan's research, women usually defined themselves not as solitary, but according to their roles in relationship to others.

Gilligan emphasized the gender differences thought to be associated with these 'two orientations, care and justice. The morality of care emphasizes interconnectedness and presumably emerges to a greater degree in girls owing to their early connection in identity formation with their mothers (Gilligan 46). The morality of justice, on the other hand, is said to emerge within the context of coordinating the interactions of autonomous individuals. A moral orientation based on justice was proposed as more prevalent among boys because their attachment relations with the mother, and subsequent masculine identity formation entailed that boys separate from that relationship and individuate from the mother. For boys, this separation also heightens their awareness of the difference in power relations between themselves and the adult, and hence engenders an intense set of concerns over inequalities. Girls, however, because of their continued attachment to their mothers, are not as keenly aware of such inequalities, and are, hence, less concerned with fairness as an issue.

White claims that "Because all Kohlberg's subjects were male, Kohlberg could not have taken into account the different socialization of little girls and little boys in our culture. Males are traditionally socialized to be autonomous and independent, while females are supposed to be passive but loving caretakers for the members of their group. Gilligan argues that these differences lead to different values." (2). Lower stages, according to Kohlberg, are concerned primarily with concrete features of particular cases, while higher stages involve an appeal to universal notions like love and justice, often considered in the abstract (Kohlberg 171).

Gilligan challenged Kohlberg's conclusion that abstract appeals reflect greater moral maturity. In Gilligan's judgment, Kohlberg's assessment diminishes or downgrades the moral sensitivity of care and concern, relegating it to inferior status. Aside from its importance in the psychological field, her theory has had an impact outside the borders of psychology. The feminist philosophy movements, the racial movements, and other political movements, have taken part, in one way or another, in this one controversy initiated by Gilligan.

It is not believable that we can isolate our research from our own biases. In our drive for scientifically valid research, we imagine that we can study moral development and moral reasoning without looking at ourselves in relation to the theory and the process. It may be impossible to escape the racialism and sexism of our own experience. Accordingly, it is important to examine and acknowledge the limits of our narrow perspectives. In studying behavior, be it leadership skills, ethical decision-making, or patterns of games on playgrounds, who we are affects how we approach our topic. Just as a historian's life and beliefs affect the history they writes, so too in our research, the issues selected, the population deemed worthy of study, the methodology applied, all reflect our attitudes about who and what matters. To the extent that research systematically ignores significant categories of our population, and fails to acknowledge that limitation of the population sample, one would argue that the research is inherently racist or sexist.

Care should be taken in presenting one's own research and in interpreting the research of others. one should limit one's generalizations appropriately. Contributing to the wars between the sexes or between races with misinterpreted and overblown research "facts" is counterproductive. It lays the groundwork for stereotyping and the inability to distinguish individuals from the group. As elaboration furthers, it has held that individual identity is not wholly comprised by particular or collective group membership.

As stated in Kohlberg's research, 'there are stages of development.' I do not believe in stages of development. According to mechanical engineering energy is not continuous. It is quantized. that is, energy comes in small discrete packets. Moral development feeds on energy. The body cycles through this energy as it grows and develops. Yet in psychological respect, the use of energy is completely reversed as seen in dynamic mechanics. As a physical body is subjected to pulses of energy, not a continuous flow, the psyche works on the principle of successive energy, a continuous flow. The brain evolves through a continual growth, building on itself by consuming a continual source of energy.

The development of any person, whether a child, a boy, a girl, white or black, is gradual, continuous. Moral development is based on mental capacity and sound judgement. This development is not quantized. It does not come in stages or packets. It is continual and ever progressing. Conforming human moral development into stages is not the correct method of analysis.

Everyone has different encounters that influence their development. This fact makes it impossible to construct a hierarchy of moral development. Kohlberg also states that as one develops, that persons leave behind their previous stage to graduate into a new one (Kohlberg 195). I feel that it is more a network or webbing of development. A person's development is established on previous developments, in turn forming a construct of moral reasoning. Kohlberg labels stage 1 as having moral reasoning due to fear of punishment and stage 4 as having moral reasoning as part of duty. Mankind does hold onto their past stages of development. The populace can feel obligated to preform their duty to be morally sound and still fear the punishment of their consequences. Therefore, holding two stages and contradicting Kohlberg.

The Kohlberg/Gilligan debate is still up for dispute and continues to inspire research. This feud calls in many different issues and criticisms. It does not seem to be near an end of discussion, but one overall view appears to be present on the entire spectrum, that caring and justice are both necessary and correct in any good moral development.

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