Moral Development in Girls Compared to Kohlberg’s Moral Stages

Introduction

Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan propose two views of moral development. Kohlberg claims to present a stage theory that is universal, follows an invariant sequence, and is hierarchically organized, that is based on Piaget’s theory of cognitive development. Gilligan claims that women develop a different moral code than men. She thinks that women use care orientation in their moral reasoning. She says that Kohlberg’s theory uses justice based reasoning as the guiding principle for moral development. From Gilligan’s distinction between justice and care orientation she concludes Kohlberg’s stage theory does not adequately measure the moral development of girls.

The problem that arises then is that Kohlberg’s stages cannot be considered universal if there are groups that are excluded from progressing along them. The study which is discussed in this paper asked whether or not girls differed from boys in moral orientation. The hypothesis was that Gilligan’s theory of female moral development is correct. If this is correct then girls would show less progress in moral development compared to the boys Kohlberg studied as their age increased. The hypothesis is based on Gilligan’s model of care orientation and her belief that it is tied into Kohlberg’s stage three morality (good interpersonal...
relationships). Gilligan thought that what Kohlberg believed to be one aspect of moral development was a whole other moral orientation.

Review of the Literature

Lawrence Kohlberg’s Theory

Lawrence Kohlberg’s 1958 dissertation *The Development of Modes of Moral Thinking and Choice in the ages 10-16* introduces his stage theory of moral development. Kohlberg noted that traditionally morality was viewed as conformity to the norms of a culture\(^1\). His beliefs ran contrary to this idea. He thought that moral development was tied to cognitive development. Kohlberg agreed with traditional views of morality in so far as they saw the child as deficient in morality\(^2\). The place were Kohlberg differs in his theorizing is that he believes the child has to develop cognitively to achieve morality where as traditionally it was thought that the child simply has to be brought into the culture. In his dissertation, Kohlberg writes:

> Such a conception of individual morality necessarily eliminates any special theoretical significance which could be assigned to the question of how moral attitudes develop. Morality can no longer be viewed as a higher stage of development to be accounted for, as something which differentiates social man from social animal and the social adult from the social infant. For the dog and infant may “conform” to many rules of the culture, yet we do not view them as moral beings.\(^3\)

Based on his belief that morality is dependent on cognitive development, Kohlberg outlined a 6 stage theory of moral development. He set up three levels of morality—Preconventional, Conventional and Postconventional. Each level is made up of two stages. In

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\(^3\) Kohlberg, 1958. 2-3.
his dissertation, Kohlberg labeled the stages from 0 to 5, however, now they are commonly referred to as stages 1-6. In this paper, the stages will be addressed as 1-6.

Preconventional judgment is egocentric and derives moral constructs from individual needs; conventional judgment is based on the shared norms and values that sustain relationships, groups, communities, and societies; and postconventional judgment adopts a reflective perspective on societal values and constructs moral principles that are universal in application.4

Preconventional stage 1 morality is based on avoidance of punishments and seeking rewards. Judgments are formed according to external authorities.5 Since children in stage one do not yet operate as members of society, they view respect as overt obedience. Morality is external, outside of them, it is for appearances only and not because they really believe that what they are doing is right.

Preconventional Stage 2 morality is reciprocal. Children in stage two seek what is in their best interest, and only help others if it benefits them6. “Where Stage 1 respects a power figure protectively or regardless of what need he is a means toward, Stage 2 respects a person only as an irreplaceable means to serving some need7.” Stage 2 children are not yet operating as members of society, but as individuals seeking their own self interest.

Once a child has achieved understanding of the rules of society they move into conventional morality. Conventional Stage 3 then is defined by good interpersonal relationships and can be called good boy nice girl morality. The child who is at this level of

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7 Kohlberg, 1958. 162.
development seeks to conform to the expectations of their family and friends. Good intentions are valued above consideration of consequences of one’s actions.

Conventional Stage 4 morality is concerned with the well-being of all and maintaining the social order. This stage is known as the law and order orientation. “Right behavior consists of doing one’s duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.” Stage 4 responses can be similar to Stage 1 because they emphasize the importance of respecting authority. They are different because at Stage 1 the child simply displays obedience in action where the Stage 4 child obeys because they have internalized the rules of society.

Postconventional morality is morality that goes beyond compliance with societal norms, and extends to what is right in human nature. Postconventional Stage 5 morality looks at individual and moral rights within the social contract. At this stage the individual can reason between the authority of the law and the intrinsic rights of the individual. They believe that it is okay to disobey the law if the law imposes upon individual rights. Stage 5 individuals rationalize breaking a law by whether it can be socially agreed upon rather than by how the law views their action. They don’t follow the explicit rules of their society but rather the implicit guidelines of the social contract.

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Postconventional Stage 6 morality is defined by universal principles of justice. One comes to moral decisions by taking on the perspectives of those involved. The principles are abstract and ethical; they are not concrete moral rules.\textsuperscript{11} Stage 6 then is defined as “A synthesis between the rationalistic tolerance of Stage 5, the moral conviction of Stage 4 and the aspiration to personal goodness of Stage 3.”\textsuperscript{12} For Kohlberg morality develops progressively; it is a building process from one stage to the next.

Kohlberg thought that moral development can be traced through analyzing the reasoning processes used to respond to hypothetical dilemmas. He formulated his stages through the initial interviews with 72 boys, ages 10, 13 and 16. The stages therefore represent real modes of moral reasoning rather than hypothetical ones applied to responses. Kohlberg thought that morality was more of a conscious process than traditional theorists believed. Since morality is a conscious reasoning process, it is cognitive in nature. The stages were developed from responses that were based on cognitive-ness (cognition). He uses this conclusion to disprove earlier moral theorists. Morality is defined by innate understandings of right and wrong rather than conformity to social norms.

\textit{Carol Gilligan’s Theory}

Gilligan, as a student of Kohlberg, was also interested in moral development. She broke with Kohlberg arguing that his theory was biased towards the male perspective. Gilligan thought that girls and boys reason differently. Boys, she said, use logic and justice in their

\textsuperscript{12} Kohlberg, 1958. 285.
reasoning. Girls, on the other hand, use relational terms to define their reasoning processes. “The moral judgments of women differ from that of men in the greater extent to which women’s judgments are tied to feelings of empathy and compassion and are concerned with the resolution of real as opposed to hypothetical dilemmas.”

According to the differences that she noted, Gilligan believed that girls would generally score lower on Kohlberg’s scale of moral development than boys of the same age. She said that girls’ distinct care orientation is misrepresented on Kohlberg’s scales as Stage 3 reasoning. She thought that what Kohlberg classified as one stage of moral development was really an independent moral orientation.

Gilligan then proposed a three level theory of moral development. She based it on Kohlberg’s theory. She defined the levels as: “A preconventional level which is primarily egocentric; a conventional level which is primarily concerned with caring for others; and finally, a postconventional level which balances care for self and care for others.” For Gilligan morality at its highest is more than a consideration of what is just; it is a compromise between the needs of the self and the needs of others.

Context of the Study

For this study two different contexts were used. Four girls, ages 8 and 9, were interviewed in a CCD classroom at St. Luke’s. It was necessary to interact with these girls face

13 Gilligan, 1984. 69.
15 Kohlberg, 1984. 344.
to face in order to ensure that they comprehended the dilemmas and the questions. By conducting the interviews face to face it was also possible to control the amount of peer influence in the girls’ responses. The dilemmas were read to the girls and then they were asked to respond to a series of questions on the paper provided for them. The girls needed a good amount of assistance in interpreting and understanding the questions. Several of them did not speak or write English well. Spanish was their native language.

The older participants in our study were interviewed via a digital interface. The dilemmas and subsequent questions were put online and girls at Elliot Elementary and Seton High School were asked to fill out the surveys. It was thought that the aspect of anonymity would allow the girls to be more candid in their responses, however administering the dilemmas in this manner did not allow for control of peer influence.

Procedure

The original intention of this study was to replicate Kohlberg’s study as presented in his doctoral dissertation using 72 girls ages 10, 13 and 16 in place of the 72 boys he used. Two of the nine dilemmas from Kohlberg’s studies were used in the interviews with the girls, the Heinz Dilemma and the Bridge Dilemma. The girls were asked to read the dilemmas and then respond to the questions which followed. The questions which followed each dilemma were selected from Kohlberg’s interviews.

This was done to measure what stage of moral development the girls were in according to Kohlberg’s six stage theory. In order to assess the individual girls’ developmental stages,
the responses to the dilemmas were scored according to Kohlberg’s coding forms found in his dissertation. The coding forms use six guiding terms for stage assessment. They are defined as follows:

Value: Modes of attributing moral value to acts and persons. Differentiating and relating means and ends, intentions and consequences, one person’s evaluation and others, etc. Modes of assessing value-consequences in the situation.

Choice: The kind of identification with the actor in conflict and methods of resolving the conflict. The social process of moral argumentation and the capacity for making and maintaining an independent choice. The outcome chosen in a particular situation.

Rule: The type of concept against which an act is assessed, on which guides conformity, e.g. taboo, rule, law. The concept of duty or moral compulsion.

Role: Modes of defining concepts of good person and good role.

Authority: The kind of respect accorded to authority and status and the reasons for which such respect is accorded.

Justice: Concern for and concepts of rights and the legitimate relation of one act, as deserved, to another. Standards of exchange, reciprocity, contract, punishment and reward.
Research Findings and Questions

Table 1: Scoring Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Justice</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Choice</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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This chart shows the treatment of the data from each of the ten girls that were interviewed in this study. The numerical values listed under each scoring term represent the stage of reasoning that the girls displayed with respect to each moral issue.
This chart compares the data of the girls of the present research study to the sample boys presented in Kohlberg’s dissertation. The data is organized by age.

The data showed that the girls interviewed in this study did not differ in stage from the boys interviewed by Kohlberg. In fact no significant stage differences were seen between genders at each age group. In terms of theoretical findings, these results show that Kohlberg’s stages are universal as he claimed. Gilligan’s theory of care orientation as a distinct other type of moral reasoning did not seem to hold true. Therefore the hypothesis of this study was incorrect. Several of the girls studied here exceeded Gilligan’s expectations for females scored

<table>
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<th>Kohlberg’s Sample Boys</th>
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<td>#76*</td>
<td>16</td>
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</table>
on Kohlberg’s stages. Three of the girls studied were assessed as having Stage 4 reasoning, which is evidence against Gilligan’s hypothesis as proposed by this study. The amount of data collected was not enough to support or refute this hypothesis verifiably; however, it does suggest that Gilligan’s theory is incorrect.

After completing this study there are several questions which arise. Firstly, why does Gilligan’s theory appear to be wrong? Is there a flaw in her reasoning or something she overlooked in Kohlberg’s theory? Secondly, how would the results vary from the results presented here if an older age group was used? Would Gilligan’s theory prove to be legitimate when tested in a wider group?

Implications

The analysis of the results found that Kohlberg’s stages seem to be universal. Gilligan says the same thing as Kohlberg. She just does not realize it. Kohlberg says: “Stage 6 is intended to represent such a synthesis of public norms and personal feelings, of what can reasonably be expected of others and what the self believes.”16 The focus for Kohlberg then was: “looking at individual differences in morality as representing a sequence of stages in conceptualizing the social order and the self’s relation to it.”17 Gilligan overlooked Kohlberg’s emphasis on the self as related to the world and assumed that his justice-ness left no place for an ethic of care. But in fact Gilligan agrees with Kohlberg when she says:

17 Kohlberg, 1958. 358.
Moral understanding is based not on the primacy and universality of individual rights, but rather on . . . a ‘very strong sense of being responsible to the world.’ Within this construction the moral dilemma changes from how to exercise one’s rights without interfering with the rights of others to how to ‘lead a moral life which includes obligations to myself and my family and people in general.’

Both Kohlberg and Gilligan, then, see the highest goal of morality as seeking the balance between the needs of the self and others. What is prized then for each theorist is the individual’s ability to place themselves in the role of another and seek the good for society. Kohlberg saw Gilligan’s criticism not as an opposing theory but as an underemphasized element of his own theory. He writes:

The work of Gilligan and her colleagues has added depth to the description of moral judgment focused on responsibility and caring, but we do not believe that it defines an alternative morality confronted in adulthood. More than justice is required for resolving many complex moral dilemmas, but justice is a necessary element of any morally adequate resolution of these conflicts.

In the interviews conducted with the girls in this study there was no special attention devoted to an ethic of care within their responses to the hypothetical dilemmas that was not already included in Kohlberg’s scale. In the responses given in this study one girl, Andrea, age 9 said in response to the question of the importance of human life: “Because if you do you are caring about other people instead of just you.” Another girl, Christa, age 14 said in response to the same question: “We must recognize all humans as human. Human life is human life.” The girls were scored as Stages 3 and 4 respectively. This evidence concludes that Gilligan’s ethic

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18 Gilligan, 1982.
of care extends beyond the limitations of Stage 3 in Kohlberg’s theory and proves that Kohlberg’s scale accounts for care orientation as part of his cognitive moral reasoning theory.

Evaluation of the Study

Cassie

As we stated before, our hypothesis was incorrect. Although it could not be accurately tested, the data that we did collect supported Kohlberg to the extent that there were no differences found between the moral reasoning of girls and boys of the same ages. The girls we interviewed were comparable to the sample boys of Kohlberg’s study. Of course, there was the issue that we only collected data from 10 girls, when we set out to collect data from 72 girls. Also, all the girls we gathered data from were age 14 and younger. There were no older girls to compare to the sample boys in Kohlberg’s original study. Those were definite limitations to our study. Our hypothesis was not truly testable.

One definite strength of our study is that we went back to Kohlberg’s dissertation to understand his view of morality and to test whether Gilligan has a legitimate criticism in saying that Kohlberg ignores the care orientation inherent in girls. We disproved Gilligan both in practice and in theory. The girls we surveyed went past the limitations Gilligan proposed they would be bound by, and by examining the sources we were able to discover that Gilligan’s criticism is illegitimate; what she claims Kohlberg is missing in his theory is clearly evident. Kohlberg and Gilligan, then, believe the same thing. They both say that the highest aim of morality is the merge between the good for the self and the good for the world.
If I were to construct this study again, I would first of all change my hypothesis to say that Gilligan’s has no rightful criticism of Kohlberg, and my data would set out to prove that. I would interview 72 girls, ages 10, 13 and 16. Hopefully that study would prove in practice what Debra and I have already discovered to be true in theory.

Debra

The results of our study did not support the hypothesis. We hypothesized that Carol Gilligan’s theory of care reasoning as an alternative method of moral decision making. They seemed instead to support Kohlberg’s theory of moral development and his claim that the theory was universal. We found that there were no significant gender differences in moral development.

There were several problems which arose in our study. First we had intended to interview 72 girls to correspond with Kohlberg’s dissertation study. But we had time only to interview 10. We were very limited in time on this study. We didn’t realize that the dilemmas would take so long to respond to. When we were interviewing the girls at the CCD class we were unable to finish 4 complete interviews. Another weakness in our study was that we didn’t have time to develop a relationship with the girls which would allow for a fuller understanding of their responses. Another weakness was that not all of the girls had a good understanding of what we were asking. Given more time we would have been able to work through the dilemmas with the girls to get more complete answers. Yet another weakness of our study was that we did not have enough
variation in age to see different stages represented in our sample. It is possible that with a wider range of ages we could see some support for Gilligan’s theory.

Our weaknesses seemed to become our strengths. In testing Gilligan’s hypothesis we came to believe in the universality of Kohlberg’s hypothesis. We found evidence that Kohlberg’s theory is universal enough to encompass Gilligan’s care ethic.
Bibliography


