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MORAL DEVELOPMENT THEORIES:  
CONTROVERSY, BIAS, AND  
A NEW PERSPECTIVE

by

Julie Ann Robinson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the designation

of

HONORS

on

The Bachelor of Science Degree

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

1989

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ABSTRACT

Moral Development Theories:  
Controversy, Bias, and  
a New Perspective

by

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Utah State University, 1989

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This thesis examines the well-established Kohlberg hierarchical model of moral development and allegations of bias within the model. The Cognitive-Development approach to moral development, the Kohlberg model, and a counter-model proposed by Carol Gilligan are presented. The interview methodology commonly used by moral development researchers as well as the applicability of interview data to actual moral decision-making is questioned. A web model that includes the interactions of culture and education in moral modifications is presented as an original alternative to the step-wise models currently in use

## INTRODUCTION

To researchers in developmental psychology, abstract ethics take on a more pragmatic perspective. Since ethics are directly related to thinking in general, the development of morality within the individual is of great interest to developmental psychologists. Almost everyone recognizes the existence of moral sense. However, the concept is subjective, and hence very difficult to define, interpret or measure.

In two decades of research, Lawrence Kohlberg of Harvard has developed a complex system for quantifying progress in moral development. Kohlberg's model views moral development as an increasing ability to use abstract justice principles to weigh values in solving hypothetical moral dilemmas. He measures the moral development of a given subject by how well the subject expresses a comparison of rights when discussing hypothetical moral dilemmas.

One prominent critic of Kohlberg's theory is his former collaborator, Carol Gilligan. Gilligan claims sex-bias in Kohlberg's work and suggests an entirely separate criterion for gauging moral "progress." She claims that some persons (especially the women she has studied) use the criteria of relationship and caring instead of justice in solving moral dilemmas and that this different orientation is not evidence of inferiority as indicated by the Kohlberg model. The widespread use of the Kohlberg model in education and rehabilitation

research gives a special importance to Gilligan's critique--the unwitting propagation of a sex-bias is not only unscientific but also could have negative effects on society. For example, the Kohlberg model has been used in attempts to instill justice-oriented moral values in students at a reform school (Higgins et al., 1984). Bias within the model could invalidate rather than build upon the previous moral perspectives of students at the school leading to moral confusion or reduced self-esteem. Thus, the question of sex-bias in Kohlberg's model is one of great importance.

Kohlberg's and Gilligan's theories are a part of a broader psychological school of thought with its own set of philosophical overtones. Because their work comes from a single "cognitive-developmental structural" perspective, it is important to examine the effect of these assumptions on their theories. It is equally important to critique the methodologies utilized in order to ascertain that the theories are empirically valid.

Behind the particular psychological perspective of Kohlberg and Gilligan lies an even deeper cultural tradition. Their methods are based in the language usage of the subjects and so the theories constructed from this data reflect their own understanding of the words used by the subjects. This language is a function of culture. If a moral development theory is to be applied universally, it is desirable to make it as objective as possible. To have a truly objective developmental theory that

applies to all persons this cultural bias must also be taken into account and eliminated.

The purposes of this paper are to (1) present the basis and content of Kohlberg's theory and the arguments presented by Gilligan against it, (2) to examine Gilligan's counter-hypothesis, (3) to examine methodological problems in both theories, (4) to evaluate some of the philosophical implications of the theories, (5) to discuss the effect of cultural bias, and (6) to suggest a different approach to constructing a uniform moral development theory.



## MORAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

### Approaches to Moral Development Theory

Moral development theory can be approached from several different viewpoints, and is commonly subdivided into four categories based on the viewpoint:

(1) The cognitive-developmental structural approach--in which the development of reasoning capabilities parallels moral development and the emphasis is on the structure of the moral judgment rather than on its content.

(2) The stage-structural constructivist approach--in which a sense of self-identity and a moral identity develop (are "constructed") together.

(3) The learning-behavioral development approach--in which moral behavior is learned directly from the words and deeds of others.

(4) The social-personality theory approach--in which the interaction of feelings and learning within a culture give rise to moral development.

In reality, moral development probably includes elements of all these viewpoints, however, models tend to be built from a single perspective. Kohlberg's model, which began its development in his 1958 doctoral dissertation, falls clearly into the cognitive-developmental structural approach (Kurtines and Gewirtz, 1984). Because the Kohlberg model is so widely applied as a measure of the "level" of moral development in psychological test subjects, it is this approach which will be studied in depth. Criticisms come from all four viewpoints and will be discussed as they apply to Kohlberg's model and cognitive-developmental approaches in general.

## The Cognitive-Development Approach

According to Kohlberg (1984b), cognitive-development theories make the assumptions shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Cognitive-Development Assumptions

In general:	As applied to moral development:
(1) Basic development involves changes in cognitive structure which cannot be explained as associationistic learning.	(1) Affective and cognitive development are parallel in time.
(2) Development of cognitive structure is due to environmental interaction, not maturation or learning.	(2) There is a fundamental unit of personality organization termed the ego, and social development is the restructuring of (a) the concept of self (b) relationship to concepts of other people (c) conception of being in a common social world with social standards.
(3) Cognitive activities are organized as actions upon objects.	(3) The processes that change cognition are basic to social development.
(4) Cognitive development is toward balanced interactions between the individual and an "other"--object, person, or idea.	(4) The direction of social or ego development is toward balanced, reciprocal interactions between the individual and other individuals.

In other words, cognitive-developmental moral theorists assume that cognitive development (and therefore moral development) is:

- (1) a physical reality--measurable and quantifiable
- (2) environmentally stimulated--not taught or intrinsically developed

- (3) based on reciprocity of interaction, and
- (4) the smallest functional unit of socialization.

### The Kohlberg Model

The Kohlberg model had its genesis with a longitudinal study of 84 white middle class males at age 10, 13, and 16 (Kohlberg, 1958). The boys were presented with hypothetical dilemmas and responded to questions based on the dilemmas in a one-on-one interview format. This method is still used today in what has become known as the "Kohlberg test." The dilemmas are designed to include issues of life, law, morality and conscience, punishment, contract, and authority (e.g. the organization of Colby and Kohlberg, 1987b). The content of the dilemmas are in Appendix A, and an example of the interview format are in Appendix B.

Based on this interview data, Kohlberg developed a model claiming

- (1) Moral development (and therefore moral reasoning) progresses through stages.
- (2) The stages are universal.
- (3) The order of the stages is invariant--each stage builds logically upon the other so stage-skipping and stage-regression are impossible.
- (4) The rate of moral development is a function of (a) the level of cognitive development, and (b) exposure to appropriate socializing experiences.
- (5) Each stage is more "moral" than its predecessor.

The claims of the model have remained the same even though the definitions of the stages have changed. The current stage definition was established in 1976 and has been most recently described by Colby and Kohlberg (1987a:17-19) and evaluated by

Walker (1984). The hierarchical structure of the stages is as follows:

- LEVEL 1: Preconventional--individualistic perspective
  - STAGE 1: Heteronomous morality--right is determined by punishment and obedience.
  - STAGE 2: Individualism, instrumental purpose and exchange--right is determined by those things which preserve the individual interests of all.
- LEVEL 2: Conventional--member-of-the-society perspective
  - STAGE 3: Mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships and conformity--right is defined by the shared interests of others.
  - STAGE 4: Social system and conscience--right is determined by those things which maintain social order and the welfare of society.
- LEVEL 3: Postconventional or principled--thought out in terms of self-chosen principles
  - STAGE 5: Social contract or utility and individual rights--right is determined rights and values in a sort of utilitarian perspective.
  - STAGE 6: Universal ethical principles--right is defined in accord with self-chosen, logically consistent principles that are abstract, ethical, universal and comprehensive.

These stages of development strongly reflect Kohlberg's own definition of morality as "one involving issues of justice, that is a conflict of rights and claims," (Kohlberg and Candee, 1984). Although Kohlberg defines morality somewhat more broadly (he follows Rawls, 1971), he measures a moral decision as one where a subject weighs the rights (e.g. right to life, right to property, right to honesty) of all persons involved in the situation and selects his or her action based on a hierarchical system of precedence. This rights-orientation (often labeled "justice-orientation" in the literature) is a major source of dispute over Kohlberg's theory.

As it is used today, the Kohlberg test is done in interview format, then the content of the subject's responses are analyzed using a standardized scoring manual (see Appendix C, also Colby and Kohlberg, 1987b). Subjects are assigned to a certain stage based on how well their responses fit with the types published in the scoring manual. Stage six has not been observed to develop in the longitudinal studies and is now considered to be purely theoretical (Kohlberg, 1982). It remains an important stage in theoretical considerations, however, because it is the logical extension of Kohlberg's entire theory.

### Gilligan's Critique

Carol Gilligan, who began her moral development research working with Kohlberg, maintains the cognitive-developmental perspective. However, she was disturbed by the fact that women tended to score lower than men on the Kohlberg test.

Influenced by Nancy Chodorow's studies of gender identity (Chodorow, 1974 cited in Gilligan, 1979) which tied masculine identity to separation and individualization, and feminine identity to position within interpersonal relationships, Gilligan became critical of the increase in separation required for development in the Kohlberg model and Kohlberg's relegation of concern for others to Stage 3 moral decision-making. She noted (Gilligan 1982:9) that feminine identity becomes

not only a descriptive difference but also a developmental liability when the milestones of childhood and adolescent development in the psychological literature are markers of increasing separation. Women's failure to separate then becomes by definition a failure to develop.

Critical of the devaluation of connectedness to Kohlberg's Stage 3, Gilligan has presented 3 cross-sectional studies in her book In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (1982). Based on an open-ended interview format, she studied

- (1) 25 students chosen at random from a sophomore ethics course at Radcliffe
- (2) 29 women considering abortions, and
- (3) 144 males and females matched for age, intelligence, education, occupation and social class.

Data from these interviews led her to define moral decisions as "the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice" (Gilligan, 1982:67). Gilligan claimed she heard a "different voice" from people (mostly women) who looked at moral dilemmas from a more contextual, less rights-oriented perspective. She noted the possibility that this voice falls through the cracks in the Kohlberg test and had gone mostly unnoticed. She hypothesized that since the formulation of Kohlberg's original model had been based only on studies of middle-class males, an entirely separate model might be necessary to understand the development of other groups. To rectify this situation she used her own interview data to construct a 3-level "Ethic of Caring" to contrast with Kohlberg's 6-level "Ethic of Justice."

The ethic of caring is envisioned as a 3-step process with transition states precipitated by some sort of moral crisis (Gilligan, 1977) as follows:

- (1) Orientation to individual survival  
TRANSITION: From selfishness to responsibility

- (2) Goodness as self-sacrifice  
TRANSITION: From goodness to truth
- (3) The morality of non-violence

Following these three steps, Gilligan (1982:167) suggests a final gender-independent transition to "adulthood" where "starting from very different points, from the different ideologies of justice and care, the men and the women . . . come, in the course of becoming an adult, to a greater understanding of both points of view and thus to a greater convergence in judgment." Gilligan suggests that men and women begin from unique perspectives as a result of gender identity but are able at maturity to form a synthesis of contextual aspects of caring and objective aspects of justice in their moral lives.

To summarize, Gilligan has proposed

- (1) A contextual relativistic viewpoint is as equally valid as a objective universalist viewpoint.
- (2) Sex-bias and possibly class or ethnic bias exists within the Kohlberg model.
- (3) Women proceed through different stages of moral development than do men.
- (4) Moral development in women is strongly influenced by a contextual relativistic viewpoint which is a result of genderization in the first years of life.
- (5) The Kohlberg model and the "Gilligan model" are simply different paths to the same destination, and that destination is actually a synthesis of the male and female perspectives in adulthood.

Gilligan's data was obtained mostly from interviews from the women considering abortion, however, she has suggested a broader gender difference in actual moral development in addition to sex-bias within the Kohlberg model.

The issues of bias and separatism must be considered separately. A broader issue raised is the distinction of

relativistic and universalistic viewpoints and their role in morality.

Gilligan (1986:330) does not claim that her limited research and hypotheses extend beyond the actual groups "in the advantaged populations that have been studied." However, other workers have begun to build on preliminaries and have agreed that modes of moral judgment might be due to terms of self-definition (Lyons, 1983), and that a redefinition of Kohlberg's higher stages reverses at least some sex-bias (Murphy and Gilligan, 1980). Kohlberg himself has begun to include a certain level of caring in the definitions for his model, as is revealed by the switch from aspect scoring to issue scoring (See Appendix C).

### Scientific Methodology

Response Bias. The research methods of both Kohlberg and Gilligan have been criticized as being "result-oriented"--developed to get a specific result rather than empirical information. Such a bias can come when the interviewer asks questions in hopes of hearing an expected response or chooses only certain classes of subjects for study and will be termed "response bias."

Weinrich-Haste (1984) has noted that interviews are unreliable means of getting information on a subject's moral thinking because

- (1) an interview response can be situationally determined by
  - (a) what the subject thinks the interviewer wants to hear, or



- (b) what the subject thinks he or she should say based on a perceived role in society, and
- (2) the interview questions are biased toward those who's means of moral expression matches the scoring system.

Gilligan (1982:29,31) considers these criticisms in referring to the inability of the Kohlberg test to elicit responses from one of her subjects.

As the interviewer conveys through the repetition of questions that the answers she gave were not heard or not right, Amy's confidence begins to diminish, and her replies become more constrained and unsure, . . . the interviewer's problem in understanding Amy's response stems from the fact that Amy is answering a different question from the one the interviewer thought had been posed.

Gilligan's solution to the response bias she observes in Kohlberg's question format is to use a more open-ended interview format where no specific questioning sequence is prescribed. However, an open interview format, while presenting more opportunities for the subject's self-expression, also presents more opportunity for the interviewer to (consciously or unconsciously) force the discussion in a desired direction. As Nails (1983:653) writes, "What would keep the interviewer from exploring one type, designating a stage to that type, and going on, satisfied, to other points without uncovering important evidence of other types of reasoning?" Clearly, Gilligan's solution only decreases the reliability of information obtained from interview responses.

It is interesting that Kohlberg recommends his test be given in interview format because of the unreliability of scoring written questionnaires. Perhaps in the absence of interaction with an interviewer the subject feels more free to utilize

justice and non-justice oriented arguments jointly in making his or her decision. Such reasoning "compromises" results on the Kohlberg test, but may be more indicative of real-life moral reasoning.

Not only are Kohlberg and Gilligan both using an unreliable method for obtaining their data, but they are also guilty of poor sample selection practices. Kohlberg based his early theory construction on interviews with young middle class white males. The rest of his theory development has been "bootstrapping" (Flanagan, 1982a)--trying to modify the scoring manual so that responses by subjects of alternate race, social class, or sex would fit into his hierarchy. Such a sampling plus bootstrapping makes it impossible to search for the effects that bias within the original subjects or within Kohlberg himself might have had on his hierarchy because it effectively masks their presence without scientific justification.

Gilligan, while critical of Kohlberg's all-male sample, bases much of her work on a small sample of women considering abortions. In her sample it is impossible to compare the reasoning of women and men in order to confirm or deny charges of sex-difference or sex-bias. Since men never get pregnant, they will have limited abilities to solve an abortion dilemma hypothetically. Even non-pregnant women or women with wanted pregnancies would look at the dilemma differently than the women in Gilligan's study. Gilligan errs in taking a very specific sample population (women with unwanted pregnancies) and expanding

her findings to encompass women in general. Furthermore, the abortion decision itself is one involving issues of relationships to fetus, father, family and self and would be expected to be discussed in terms of relationships rather than in terms of rights. Gilligan's abortion sample set is likely to indicate differences between women and men and moral issues of caring whether or not these are actually important for measuring moral development.

Not only does the abortion dilemma make a "poor paradigm for the assessment of moral maturity" (Code, 1983:553) but Gilligan's other samples of college students and matched age groups also fail to be adequate samples from which to draw generalizable conclusions. College students at an expensive private university who take an elementary ethics course are not characteristic representatives of college students or their age group and as Luria (1986:317) points out, "eight males and eight females at different ages do not make up a number significant to characterize all males and females."

Much of Gilligan's claim of a separate morality rely on interviews from these limited samples, or even worse, juxtapositions of the content of interviews from the various sample sets without including age, class, education or other factors. Gilligan follows too closely in the footsteps of her former collaborator in that neither researcher's work shows evidence of adequate objective methods that would enable them to make any general claim at all. Unfortunately, Kohlberg has made

strong claims of the universality of his theory and Gilligan has spread her work thoroughly through popular psychology channels.

Reporting methods. It must be mentioned that reporting methods (particularly those of Gilligan) have been questioned by numerous authors. It is possible that in reporting her findings she has distorted the degree to which they support her hypothesis. Some of these criticisms include:

- (1) mixing literary examples with empirical research (Luria, 1986)
- (2) omitting ellipses when abbreviating quotations from interviews (Nails, 1983)
- (3) not using an objective scoring system (Luria, 1986 countered by Lyons, 1983), and
- (4) claiming an "adult" synthesis of justice and caring perspectives without any real evidence (Flanagan and Alder, 1983).

Bias within the theories. The most extensive arguments catalyzed by the work of Kohlberg and Gilligan are arguments of bias. Charges have been raised regarding sex-, class-, education-, and philosophical bias. Nicholson (1983:515) summarizes the breadth of these arguments:

Insofar as we talk about a feminine or masculine moral point of view, we run the risk of not seeing how what we are describing reflects the gender viewpoint of a certain race or class at a certain time. We thus tend to commit the same kind of error of false generalization that motivated the initial rebellion.

Although Gilligan first charged sex-bias in Kohlberg's model in over ten years ago (Gilligan, 1977), the issue is currently far from being resolved. Many studies using Kohlberg's rating system have found that women tended to remain at level 3 while men "more consistently mature to level 4" (Greeno and Macoby,

1986). Is it true that women do not make the transition from the more personal Stage 3 to the societal Stage 4?

A comprehensive review of studies using the Kohlberg test on men and women suggests the answer to this question may be "no" (Walker, 1984). In this review, Walker states that a charge of sex-bias can only be warranted for two reasons:

- (1) If a theorist is popularizing a poorly founded claim of sex-difference in moral development, and
- (2) If a theorist defines and measures moral maturity in such a way that a difference in moral development is artificially created.

Sex-bias of the first type is possible in Gilligan's work because of how widely popularized it has been in its preliminary stages, and sex-bias of the second type is possible in the work of either Gilligan or Kohlberg.

Gilligan's work has already been shown to have an incomplete foundation but has been extremely popular among workers in many disciplines. Her work confirms a "feeling" shared by many in our culture. Greeno and Macoby (1986:313) note that "women have a greater reputation for altruism and empathy than do men, and women accept its validity." This reputation, however, is at least to some degree, a product of the history of our culture and has no business validating a psychological theory. Whether Gilligan intended it or not, her work is guilty of sex-bias of the first type because its preliminary nature has been overlooked as it is used as evidence of an inarguable difference in moral development between the sexes.

Kohlberg's work, on the other hand, must stand up to the accusations of sex-bias of the second type. To respond to this charge, Kohlberg must show that

- (1) Women do not score lower than men on the Kohlberg test when other factors are matched or that women who do score lower on the test do so as a result of faulty development, and
- (2) No sex-bias has been introduced into his theory due to the fact that
  - (a) Kohlberg is a man
  - (b) his theory was constructed using men
  - (c) male protagonists dominate his hypothetical dilemmas

Walker (1984:688) claims in his review that very few sex differences in moral development have been found." However, some of the exceptions to this conclusion are of note:

- (1) In early adolescence a few studies found that men and women with non-traditional sex role identities scored higher on the Kohlberg test (Arbuthnot, 1975 cited in Walker, 1984).
- (2) One study found that "women used more Stage 3 reasoning than men did on the standard dilemmas involving fictitious characters, whereas there were no sex differences on modified dilemmas" involving relatives or friends (Levine, 1976 cited in Walker, 1984:681).
- (3) In studies of adults showing a sex difference in moral development "sex was often confounded with educational and/or occupational differences" (Walker, 1984:683).

These exceptions suggest the abstract thinking necessary to do well on the Kohlberg test might be more common in persons with higher levels of education. An educational bias of this sort could masquerade as a sex-bias in a sample that included less-educated "traditional" women and more-educated career-oriented men.

Some studies could produce sex-bias in using the Kohlberg test simply by improperly correlating variables. Luria

(1986:319) has noted that in her work "when social class is truly controlled, that is by determining a married woman's class by her own education and work history rather than by her spouse's, sex differences do not appear." Thus, many reports of sex-bias could be due to improper use of the Kohlberg test rather than to flaws in the model itself.

Because the Kohlberg test relies on vocal expression to determine a stage of development, another possible source of sex-bias arises: perhaps women express themselves differently in articulating their reasoning about moral dilemmas. It is conceivable that the moral reasoning process could be similar in women and in men but that women do not use the appropriate "buzz words" in describing their reasoning and thereby score lower on the Kohlberg test.

Kekes (1984) describes a list of terms denoting moral values\* as "moral idioms." Moral idioms are provided by language, tradition and culture and different idioms are assigned different moral values in a given culture at a given time. In a culture acknowledging gender roles and class levels, it is logical that moral idioms would have different values for members of different genders or classes. A difference in moral idiom could easily lead to a difference in moral expression and a subsequent difference in scoring on the Kohlberg test. However,

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\*for example "forthright, unassuming, generous, faithful, honourable, considerate, trustworthy, modest, courageous, honest, pure, conscientious, corrupt, cruel, treacherous, envious, petty, hypocritical, selfish, greedy, cowardly, overbearing, obsequious, arrogant" (Kekes, 1984:7).

a difference in idiom is primarily a function of culture, not of gender or class per se.

Tronto (1987:649) suggests that

Women's different moral expression might be a function of their subordinate or tentative social position . . . if moral difference is a function of social position rather than gender, then the morality Gilligan has identified with women might better be identified with subordinate or minority status.

Formal education could be viewed as a process of introducing a more confident intellectual moral idiom into a person's expression. The more extensive the education of the subject, the better he or she would perform on the Kohlberg test. Because formal education includes on-going cognitive processes, "moral development" as measured on the Kohlberg scale would appear to be a parallel cognitive process. Such an educational bias would show the Kohlberg test to be merely an elaborate measure of the subject's ability to use moral idioms in describing responses to abstract dilemmas, and would say little about the state of the subject's "moral development." Supporting the possibility of educational bias in the Kohlberg model is the fact that subjects with degrees in philosophy score as a Kohlberg Stage 5 or 6 regardless of their sex or other variables (Flanagan, 1982a).

It appears that the Kohlberg test is not a direct measure of moral development but rather a attempt to arbitrarily quantify moral development without considering such variables as race, class, culture, or sex. In some research it may perform adequately for certain needs as long as its limitations are carefully considered and it is not the only measure used.



However, even if the Kohlberg test were shown to have no sex-, class-, education-, or culture-bias (which is almost impossible), proof that there are no biases in the Kohlberg model does not preclude differences in moral development between the groups. Kohlberg is caught in a Catch 22: if his theory shows a difference in development between the groups, he cannot prove its validity because of its questionable origins; if it does not show a difference between groups it has told us very little about moral development.

## THE APPLICATION OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Thus far, the issues of moral development discussed have been primarily research-oriented--considering such topics as interview methods, sample set, reporting methods and bias. These methodological subjects are only a part of the concerns that must be addressed when considering the work of Kohlberg and Gilligan. Since both researchers come from the cognitive-developmental school of thought, they share a series of assumptions about the underlying nature of moral development and these assumptions must be examined.

Cognitive-developmental theories make a claim to universality--a claim that because morality is tied to cognitive development, moral development is definable independent of culture. Therefore, it is also important to discuss the effects of Western culture on the development of these theories, and the limitations that this tradition places on claims of universality.

### The Cognitive Developmental Perspective

A review of the definitions and assumptions of the cognitive-developmental perspective, listed in section II-A suggests a series of basic questions that must be answered before adopting this theoretical perspective. Words such as cognitive, development, structure, and content carry with them implicit assumptions to be addressed.

Is morality a cognitive process? The cognitive-developmental approach assumes that moral development parallels cognitive development because in the process of thinking about moral dilemmas an individual expands and builds toward an objective ideal.

A possible flaw in founding any moral development theory on cognitive development is indicated by the fact that adolescents and adults are known to have "mature cognition," but the morality of adolescents and adults is distinctly different (Murphy and Gilligan, 1980). Kohlberg argues that cognitive development and experience play a role in moral development and that adolescents might show inferior development due to lack of appropriate experiences. However, Kohlberg has not generally defined the experiences that are lacking and it is easy to think of examples of adolescents who have had a wide range of "adult" experiences and do not show the moral discernment characteristic of Kohlberg's higher stages. A specific hypothetical example is the case of a middle-class drug-addicted teenage runaway who has a "don't hurt me and I won't hurt you" morality (Kohlberg Stage 2). This individual may have had a wide range of caring, educational, and leadership experienced but may be choosing a separate morality due to the necessities of life on the street. Kohlberg's model fails to account for the individual's choice to do something considered to be wrong, or to "regress" by free choice.

Kohlberg first described regressions among adults in 1969 (Kohlberg and Cramer) and argued that it was a "functional regression resulting from an adolescent identity crisis" (Murphy and Gilligan, 1980). He later reconsidered and asserted that adult experiences of commitment and responsibility triggered development to higher stages. Such an assertion (which has remained unsubstantiated in longitudinal studies) does not preclude the possibility that religious belief, societal position, or peer pressure could have larger roles in moral development than cognition or experiences in independence do.

Cognitive-developmental theories do not take into account the possibility of a person rejecting a "stage" of development that is understood. For example, although Gilligan maintains a cognitive-developmental approach, her data could just as easily imply that women perceive an ethic of rights but choose an ethic of responsibility. Kohlberg (1984a:193) maintains that each of his stages builds upon and supercedes the other and that each stage is more "morally right" than the last. This, when coupled with his statement that individuals "prefer the highest stage they comprehend" (Kohlberg, 1973:633) is clearly a romanticized view of human nature as a whole.

The assumption that cognitive development is due to environmental stimulus only--not to more formal learning processes-- may be acceptable in description of mental faculty, however, it becomes a major flaw when cognitive development is coupled to moral development. The previous discussion of

cultural bias in Kohlberg's theory illustrates this point because "culture" is a combination of environment and formalized learning.

Morality is a cognitive process in the general sense that a person thinks about moral issues in making moral choices. However, morality is not a cognitive process in the limited sense used by cognitive-developmental theorists. It cannot be directly and irrevocably coupled to environmental stimulation exclusive of associationistic learning.

How should we measure morality? In evaluating individual morality by the currently used methods it is important to remember that **cognitive** skills (such as self-expression, imagination, and abstract thinking) are directly measured whereas moral thinking is intuitively extrapolated from this measure. As Nails (1983:660) points out, "A distortion in the present conception of moral maturity is that it is measured by examining a persons words without attention to his or her moral deeds."

The fact that cognition, not moral thinking, is directly measured explains the educational bias present in Kohlberg's theory. The extrapolation process explains why the researcher's cultural, gender, and philosophical biases are difficult to eliminate from the analysis of data.

Morality can be measured in several ways:

- (1) indirectly by form--the way a subject expresses himself about moral issues
- (2) indirectly by content--the issues the subject considers to be important

- (3) directly by action--the actual moral choices made by the subject
- (4) by a combination of 1,2, and 3

Kohlberg's scoring method has gradually shifted from evaluating form to evaluating content (Appendix C). Gilligan's open-interview format primarily evaluates content. Neither researcher incorporates the subject's moral actions into a description of their moral status--Kohlberg because his hypothetical format prevents such incorporation, and Gilligan because she does not consider it to be necessary.

Gilligan (1982) notes that in her abortion study a majority of participants stated at some point in the interview that abortion was morally wrong. However, of the 27 women interviewed after 1 year, only 4 continued their pregnancy. This discrepancy between **thinking** and **doing** does not concern Gilligan because she wants to illustrate the contextual nature of the women's thought. The women choose something "wrong" because other factors outweigh its "wrongness."

For the same contextual reasons, Gilligan claims that two individuals facing similar moral dilemmas may make different choices based on the context in which they make the choices. This subjectivistic perspective had been previously labeled "postconventional contextual" as opposed to "postconventional formal" which uses concepts of rights and contracts (Murphy and Gilligan 1980:83). The label "postconventional contextual," however, conceals the philosophical underpinnings of contextual relativism.

In adopting a contextual relativistic viewpoint, Gilligan dismisses actions which may be paradoxical or contradictory as justifiable. She suggests that this is a sort of Rossian projection from a rule to an exception: "that rules are valid only *prima facie* if there are no other moral considerations" (Ross, 1930 cited in Nunner-Winkler, 1984:352). However, in this case the rule is "do what you think is right" and the exception is "do what you want by contextual justification" which is hardly the fulfillment of a duty envisioned by Ross. Relativistic arguments cannot be used to justify the actions of a subject who does not adopt relativism as a moral system (and Gilligan's subjects are clearly not relativists if they state that something--abortion--is "wrong").

Because people do not always do what they believe is the "right" thing, and because the weighing of other subjective factors plays a role in moral choice, cognitive-developmental theories fail to describe morality--they are limited by their failure to incorporate action. If two individuals consider the same issues in the same way but make entirely different choices, not only is the **morality** of these two individuals different in general, but their **moral development** is also different. The subject's choice to maintain or abandon his or her determination of "right" is a crucial indication of moral development.

### The Definition of Morality

Indirect measurement methods are compromised by the necessity of extrapolation. The way that cognitive data is

translated into a stage or level reflects the researcher's choice of philosophical perspective.

Kohlberg labels his higher stages as follows (Kohlberg 1982:525):

- 4½: ethical egoism
- 5: rule utilitarianism
- 6: deontological contractualism.

He suggests that "classical normative-ethical theories have some degree of correspondence to a 'natural' stage sequence" of development in the individual. Although his argument is elaborate (see Kohlberg, 1984a:97-226) he fails to recognize that the "classical normative-ethical theories" have evolved within the historical context of the Western world and are not necessarily evidence of the universality of his model for individual development.

That Kohlberg would seek a "historical" development of thought in the individual and label it "natural" illustrates that his theory is confined within the tradition in which it was developed. Kohlberg measures moral development by indirectly by recording culturally-based moral idioms so it is no surprise that Kohlberg's model produces culturally biased data. The fact that the model mimics the development of thought in a single culture becomes an illustration of this cultural bias.

Gilligan's description of a morality of rights versus a morality of relationships is actually a contention of objectivity versus subjectivity in morality. This parallels the current



controversy in western thought. As Kurtines and Gewirtz (1984:21) note, "the question of the existence of an objective foundation for ethics or morality is one of the central issues in the history of ideas in the modern age."

The debate over an objective ethical foundation spills over into the definition of moral development. For example, the rights versus responsibility issue reflects the broader philosophical issue of objective versus subjective good. Whether to count "the good life" among moral considerations reflects the confusion caused by a surge in scientific relativism. Major philosophical arguments as applied to moral development theory with references are listed in Appendix D.

Since an objective moral standard has not yet been determined, it is dangerous for a researcher to arbitrarily select a standard on which to build a theory. It is misleading for that researcher to then apply that theory as if it were objective and universal, yet this is exactly what Kohlberg and Gilligan have both done. Instead, a theory should be developed that attempts to account for culture and education as additional variables.

Any moral theory embedded in Western culture and current

controversy is questionable. It is possible, however, to step away from these cultural biases and develop an objective moral development theory. The next section of this paper suggests a way to remove the philosophical bias from research in moral development by adopting a different type of "developmental" model.

## AN ALTERNATIVE: DEVELOPMENT VERSUS MODIFICATION

Kohlberg's theory can be schematically represented as a linear process in time:

1 → 2 → 3 → 4 → 5 (→ 6).

Gilligan claims a parallel but separate development for some persons and can similarly be represented:

1 → 2 → 3 → 4 → 5 \  
1 → 2 → 3 / adult,

also as a process in time. She criticizes Kohlberg's assumption that "there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation" (Gilligan, 1982:173) and proposes a second mode.

Kohlberg's claim to a single mode of development has been clearly called into question by the cultural bias of his theory. On the other hand, no evidence has ever indicated that there should be a finite number of developmental modes. As Nicholson (1983:533) queries, "Why do we need to limit our understanding to the recognition of only two modes?"

Kohlberg's theory describes middle-class white American males, Gilligan's hypothesis (questionably) describes middle-class white American women. There is no empirical reason that these developmental processes should or could be applied to other cultures, economic classes, or time periods. With the limited nature of current research (data from past generations and other

cultures is unfortunately scarce), a more appropriate conception of moral "development" is as a web of interactions.

Such a web would replace "stages" with "junctions" where morality had been described. "Transitions"--movements from one junction to another could proceed in several directions based on the interactions of the individual with his environment and other individuals, associationistic learning, choice, and cognitive development. The identity of the junctions must be defined by a combination of thought and action. The nature of the transitions must be described independent of the moral judgment of the researchers--a transition must not be labeled as an improvement or regression.

The concept that morality "develops" can only be accurately applied to the individual. For a single person, moral development could be represented as a linear progression or a series of loops. However, if a universal picture of moral development is desired, it must take into account many different influences. This universal picture is poorly described by the use of the word "development" because of its connotation of a linear progression. As long as the variables of culture, education, and choice have a role in morality and cannot be separated from it, changes in moral perspective are better described as moral "modifications". Moral modifications may or may not proceed in the direction approved by a given philosophical theory so their definition and measuring is independent of philosophical bias.

Although the concept of a web of moral modifications is not the neat linear model that would be preferred by developmental psychologists, it is realistic and objective given the data currently available. The web model described avoids interpretive bias and does not ignore factors such as culture and education. It is only from such an unbiased perspective that a universal theory can be described.

Psychomoral theory today is at a stage analogous to biology at the time of Linnaeus. It is still a time of description and determining binary relationships. Just as early biological taxonomists observed organisms around them and noted basic differences between individuals and groups, so "moral taxonomists" should try and describe the many modes of thinking and the factors initiating particular transitions. Given a large quantity of observational data, moral taxonomists could then determine differences between groups. The major differences between groups would indicate the cultural and educational factors that are currently so difficult to discern.

Finally, these factors could be stripped away from individual histories of moral modification to reveal a truly empirical picture of development--be it web-like, circular or linear.

## SUMMARY

This paper began with the current controversy over sex-bias in moral development theories. In examining arguments of scientific methodology, it was found that cultural and educational bias prevented the theories from being truly objective. In examining arguments of moral philosophy, it was found that this cultural bias was a product of the theorists' reliance on moral idioms common to our cultural tradition. Finally, a more realistic and objective perspective for the modeling of moral development/modification was suggested as a possible solution to the problem of bias.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Kohlberg's Nine Dilemmas in Brief

Statements of each dilemma as it is currently used (Kohlberg, 1984b:640-651) are listed. In interview use each statement is followed by a series of questions designed to determine the subject's reasoning and moral type. Some of the dilemmas are then extended with further questions. Appendix B lists the Heinz dilemma with the set questions. The 1984 revision rearranged the sequence of the dilemmas to III, I, IV, II, V, VIII, and VII. For a complete listing of questions and extensions of all of the dilemmas see Kohlberg (1984b).

### Dilemma I:

Joe is a fourteen-year-old boy who wanted to go to camp very much. His father promised him he could go if he saved up the money for himself. So Joe worked hard at his paper route and saved up the forty dollars it cost to go to camp, and a little more besides. But just before camp was going to start, his father changed his mind. Some of his friends decided to go on a special fishing trip, and Joe's father was short of the money it cost. So he told Joe to give him the money he had saved from the paper route. Joe didn't want to give up going to camp, so he thinks of refusing to give his father the money.

### Dilemma II:

Judy was a twelve-year-old girl. Her mother promised her that she could go to a special rock concert coming to her town if she saved up from babysitting and lunch money to buy a ticket to the concert. She managed to save up the fifteen dollars the ticket cost plus another five dollars. But then her mother changed her mind and told Judy that she had to spend the money on new clothes for school. Judy was disappointed and decided to go to the concert anyway. She bought a ticket and told her mother she had only been able to save five dollars. That Saturday she went to the performance and told her mother that she was spending the day with a friend. A week passed without her mother finding out. Judy then told her older sister, Louise, that she had gone to the performance and had lied to her mother about it. Louise wonders whether to tell her mother what Judy did.

### Dilemma III: The Heinz Dilemma

In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$400 for the radium

and charged \$4,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money and tried every legal means, but he could only get together about \$2,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So, having tried every legal means, Heinz gets desperate and considers breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Dilemma IV:

There was a woman who had very bad cancer, and there was no treatment known to medicine that would save her. Her doctor, Dr. Jefferson, knew that she had only about six months to live. She was in terrible pain, but she was so weak that a good dose of a painkiller like morphine would make her die sooner. She was delirious and almost crazy with pain, but in her calm periods she would ask Dr. Jefferson to give her enough morphine to kill her. She said she couldn't stand the pain and she was going to die in a few months anyway. Although he knows that mercy-killing is against the law, the doctor thinks about granting her request.

Dilemma V:

In Korea, a company of Marines was way outnumbered and was retreating before the enemy. The company had crossed a bridge over a river, but the enemy were mostly still on the other side. If someone went back to the bridge and blew it up, with the head start the rest of the men in the company would have, they would probably escape. But the man who stayed back to blow up the bridge would not be able to escape alive. The captain himself is the man who knows best how to lead the retreat. He asks for volunteers, but no one will volunteer. If he goes himself, the men will probably not get back safely and he is the only one who knows how to lead the retreat.

Dilemma VII:

Two young men, brothers, had got into serious trouble. They were secretly leaving town in a hurry and needed money. Karl, the older one, broke into a store and stole a thousand dollars. Bob, the younger one, went to a retired old man who was known to help people in town. He told the man that he was very sick and that he needed a thousand dollars to pay for an operation. Bob asked the old man to lend him the money and promised that he would pay him back when he recovered. Really Bob wasn't sick at all, and he had no

intention of paying the man back. Although the old man didn't know Bob very well, he lent him the money. So Bob and Karl skipped town, each with a thousand dollars.

Dilemma VIII:

In a country in Europe, a poor man named Valjean could find no work, nor could his sister and brother. Without money, he stole food and medicine that they needed. He was captured and sentenced to prison for six years. After a couple of years, he escaped from the prison and went to live in another part of the country under a new name. He saved money and slowly built up a big factory. He gave his workers the highest wages and used most of the profits to build a hospital for people who couldn't afford good medical care. Twenty years had passed when a tailor recognized the factory owner as being Valjean, the escaped convict whom the police had been looking for back in his home town.

## Appendix B: The Heinz Dilemma

The dilemma with associated questions and extensions (Kohlberg, 1984b:640-642) are listed here as an example of the format of the Kohlberg test and also as a means of directly evaluating the content of the Heinz dilemma. Only those questions which are scorable are listed. Those questions with an asterisk are considered by Kohlberg to be optional. For the 1984 scoring method as it applies to the Heinz dilemma, see Appendix C.

### Dilemma III:

In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$400 for the radium and charged \$4,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money and tried every legal means, but he could only get together about \$2,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So, having tried every legal means, Heinz gets desperate and considers breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

1. Should Heinz steal the drug?
  - 1a. Why or why not?
  - \*2. Is it actually right or wrong for him to steal the drug?
    - \*2a. Why is it right or wrong?
  3. Does Heinz have a duty or obligation to steal the drug?
  - 3a. Why or why not?"
  4. If Heinz doesn't love his wife, should he steal the drug for her? (If subject favors stealing ask: Does it make a difference in what Heinz should do whether or not he loves his wife?)
    - 4a. Why or why not?
  5. Suppose the person dying is not his wife but a stranger. Should Heinz steal the drug for the stranger?
    - 5a. Why or why not?
  - \*6. (If subject favors stealing the drug for a stranger) Suppose it's a pet animal he loves. Should Heinz steal to save the pet animal?
    - \*6a. Why or why not?
  7. Is it important for people to do everything they can to save another's life?

- 7a. Why or why not?
- \*8. It is against the law for Heinz to steal. Does that make it morally wrong?
- \*8a. Why or why not?
- 9. In general, should people try to do everything they can to obey the law?
- 9a. Why or why not?
- 9b. How does this apply to what Heinz should do?
- \*10. In thinking back over the dilemma, what would you say is the most responsible thing for Heinz to do?
- \*10a. Why?

#### Dilemma III':

Heinz did break into the store. He stole the drug and gave it to his wife. In the newspapers the next day there was an account of the robbery. Mr. Brown, a police officer who knew Heinz, read the account. He remembered seeing Heinz running away from the store and realized that it was Heinz who stole the drug. Mr. Brown wonders whether he should report that it was Heinz who stole the drug.

- \*1. Should Officer Brown report Heinz for stealing?
- \*1a. Why or why not?
- \*2. Suppose Officer Brown were a close friend of Heinz, should he then report him?
- \*2a. Why or why not?

Officer Brown did report Heinz. Heinz was arrested and brought to court. A jury was selected. The jury's job is to find whether a person is innocent or guilty of committing a crime. The jury finds Heinz guilty. It is up to the judge to determine the sentence.

- 3. Should the judge give Heinz some sentence, or should he suspend the sentence and let Heinz go free?
- 3a. Why is that best?
- 4. Thinking in terms of society, should people who break the law be punished?
- 4a. Why or why not?
- 4b. How does this apply to how the judge should decide?
- 5. Heinz was doing what his conscience told him when he stole the drug. Should a lawbreaker be punished if he is acting out of conscience?
- 5a. Why or why not?
- \*6. Thinking back over the dilemma, what would you say is the most responsible thing for the judge to do?
- \*6a. Why?



## Appendix C: Scoring the Heinz Dilemma

The former scoring method, "aspect scoring", has been abandoned in favor of "intuitive issue scoring." Aspect scoring is based upon the subject's mode of reasoning about the issue while intuitive issue scoring is based upon what the individual is valuing. Kohlberg (1984b) claims intuitive issue scoring is the most valid method of scoring since it can be used to analyze any moral dilemma. Kohlberg's (1984b:192) own scorers have achieved 90% interrater agreement, however, intuitive scoring is difficult to apply on a wide basis because personal teaching and hands-on experience are required to produce replicable results. The new scoring manual (Colby and Kohlberg, 1987b), based on the issue scoring method, has attempted to standardize issue scoring into a format where sentences obtained in an interview are matched to prototypical sentences of each stage.

Intuitive issue scoring is based upon eleven issues or values listed by Kohlberg (1984b:189-190):

- (1) Laws and rules
- (2) Conscience
- (3) Personal roles of affection
- (4) Authority
- (5) Civil rights
- (6) Contract, trust, and justice in exchange
- (7) Punishment and justice
- (8) The value of life
- (9) Property rights and values
- (10) Truth
- (11) Sex and sexual love

Stage thinking is then defined for each issue and dilemmas categorized by the issues involved. The Heinz dilemma involves issue (8). The intuitive scoring of the Heinz dilemma is summarized below and can be found in Kohlberg (1984b:190-191).

STAGE 1: Does not indicate an understanding that life is worth more than property.

STAGE 2: Life is valuable because you cannot replace it; you can replace property.

STAGE 3: Life is valuable because people care for others in their lives.

STAGE 4: Life is valuable because God created it; or life is valuable because it is a basic right of people in a society.

STAGE 5: The Right to Life takes precedence over the Right to Property.

#### Appendix D: Philosophical Criticisms of Moral Development Theory

Some major topics of philosophical dispute are listed here. Almost every paper in the References section contains some type of philosophical argument. Additional sources listed here are those which were consulted and have not been cited above.

The definition of morality:

Keller, 1984

Wolf, 1982

The function of reason in morality:

Elshtain, 1981

Stack, 1986

Flanagan, 1982b

The function of tradition in morality:

Gilligan, 1979

Kerber, 1986

Lloyd, 1983

Rights vs. relationships:

Hardwing, 1984