Are Women More Ethical?
Recent Findings on the Effects of Gender Upon Moral Development

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of gender upon moral development. Prior moral development research on the gender difference is substantial but ambiguous, but little research has examined public-sector employees. This study compares the moral development of 299 male and female members of the U.S. Coast Guard. The study uses Kohlberg's moral development framework to operationalize levels of moral judgment, and it employs Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT) as a measurement instrument. The study found that Coast Guard women scored 4.5 points higher than males scored on the DIT, a statistically significant difference. The essay discusses criticisms of Kohlberg, including Gilligan's argument that Kohlberg ignores the female perspective. Implications for public-sector ethics are discussed and a path for future research is offered.

Are women more ethical than men? Over the last twenty years, this controversial and flagrant question has been asked more and more by social scientists and ethicists. Since the advent of modern moral development theory, researchers have developed and fine tuned empirical methods for examining individual levels of moral judgment and ethical behavior. With such tools in hand, they identify variables that may affect moral development. For example, researchers determine that age, education, and life experience are primary determinants of moral development and ultimately ethical behavior (Rest 1986 and 1993). Gender as a determinant of moral development has been studied extensively, but with arguable and less conclusive results.

This research examines the effect gender may have on moral development and reports the findings of recent studies, with particular emphasis on public ethics. The research is significant in that it studies the moral development of adult public servants,
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not the student populations that dominate previous study. More importantly, this research investigates whether gender plays a role in a person’s moral development. If such a gender effect exists, then a profound impact on administrative behavior can be hypothesized.

The article discusses moral development theory as conceived by Kohlberg and also methods that are used to operationalize moral judgment and ethical behavior. Criticisms of Kohlberg are discussed, including Carol Gilligan’s (1982) argument that the Kohlbergian model ignores the female perspective. Finally, the article reports the results of a recent study that compares the moral development levels of men and women members of the U.S. Coast Guard. Implications for public-sector ethics are discussed and a path for future research is offered.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Lawrence Kohlberg, the architect of the modern moral development paradigm, argues that people progress in moral reasoning through a hierarchy of stages; that values and ethics are developed from the interaction between the person and the environment; and that moral judgment is characterized according to how a person reasons—structure—rather than according to what the person thinks—content (Kohlberg 1976; Lickona 1980). While Kohlberg relies heavily on previous moral development theories of Piaget (1932), McDougall (1908), Baldwin (1906), Mead (1934), and Dewey (1895), he nevertheless builds a unique empirical framework that allows the observation of normative ethics, research hypotheses, and interpretation of results.

Kohlberg proposes that all people in all cultures pass from lower to higher stages of moral reasoning. He offers a model of three moral development levels, each level containing two stages and each representing a progressive shift in moral development. At the lowest preconventional level, egocentric individuals see the value of human life only as a means to their own needs and they exhibit an obedience and punishment orientation, an egocentric deference to superior power or prestige, and a trouble-avoiding attitude. At the conventional stage, individuals see the value of human life through the empathy and affection of family members. They conform to stereotypical images of the majority and avoid disapproval and dislike by others. Individuals maintain an orientation toward doing one’s duty, respecting authority, and maintaining the social order. At the highest postconventional level, human life is sacred and a universal right. An individual develops moral autonomy and avoids violating the rights of others. There is an orientation to conscience, not only to social
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Exhibit 1
Kohlberg's Levels and Stages of Moral Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Self-Perception</th>
<th>Stage Orientation</th>
<th>Value of Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-conventional</td>
<td>Outside Group</td>
<td>1. Obey or pay, punishment orientation</td>
<td>1. Confused with physical objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Self (and sometimes others') satisfaction</td>
<td>2. Instrumental to needs of possessor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>Inside Group</td>
<td>3. Win others' approval by helping them.</td>
<td>3. Based on empathy of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Law-and-order mentality: doing one's duty</td>
<td>4. Based on legal rights and duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-conventional</td>
<td>Above Group</td>
<td>5. Respect individual rights and abide by critically examined values</td>
<td>5. Life is universal human right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. Act with logically developed and universally accepted principles</td>
<td>6. Life is sacred</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

rules but to principles of logical universality and consistency (Kohlberg 1993; Stewart and Sprinthall 1993). Exhibit 1 summarizes Kohlberg's levels of moral development.

The instrument most often used to operationalize moral development and place individuals within a Kohlberg level is Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT). The DIT assesses recognition, comprehension, and preference. It is a multiple-choice instrument that yields a continuous number, the P score, representing the relative importance each subject places on Kohlberg's postconventional level of moral development. The DIT presents a subject with six moral dilemmas. The following example is the first of the DIT dilemmas:

In Europe, a woman was near death from a very unusual kind of cancer. The doctors thought that one drug—a form of radium discovered by a druggist in the same town—might save her life. The druggist paid $400 for the radium and charged $4,000 for a small dose of the drug. Heinz, the sick woman's husband, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money and tried every legal means, but he could only raise $2000, half of the drug's selling price. Heinz pleaded with the druggist, explaining to him that his wife was dying. He presented several options to the druggist: sell the drug to Heinz at a cheaper price, let Heinz pay for the drug in installments, or let Heinz pay for it at a later date. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz is now considering breaking into the drug store and stealing for his wife. Dilemma: Should Heinz steal the drug?

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Exhibit 2
Average DIT Score for Selected Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Average P Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral philosophers and theologians</td>
<td>65.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminarians in Protestant seminary</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced law students</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing medical doctors</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff nurses</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate business students</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After reading each dilemma the subject then rank orders a list of twelve questions that describes what ought to be done in the dilemma. Each of the twelve statements represents considerations at different stages of Kohlberg moral development. A subject who gives a higher ranking to postconventional-oriented questions receives a higher P score (Rest 1986; Elm and Weber 1994).

Researchers have administered the DIT in hundreds of studies to thousands of subjects and have documented the instrument in terms of reliability, validity, and stability. Cross-sectional and longitudinal DIT studies provide empirical evidence that people change over time from less to more advanced levels of moral development. In a review of twelve thousand subjects, Rest (1993) finds that the most important determinants of moral development are education and age, and longitudinal studies report significant changes in DIT scores from high school into adulthood (White, Bushnell, and Regnemer 1978). Exhibit 2 presents the average DIT scores of several distinct groups.

CRITICISM OF KOHLBERG

When it was first introduced, Kohlberg’s theory received intense criticism. For example, Gibbs (1979) questions the existence of stages 5 and 6 altogether, Power (1994) suggests that stage 6 may not be a psychological stage but a philosophical position (as did Kohlberg’s later work), while Habermas (1979) argues for the addition of a seventh stage. Simpson (1974), Sullivan (1977), and Snell (1996) argue that Kohlberg’s theory is based on Western ideology and is culturally biased, with higher moral development levels observed for Western cultures. Guertin (1986) attacks Kohlberg for his preoccupation with the cognitive aspects of moral reasoning and omission of emotional, affective dimensions. Snell (1996) argues that the model does not represent...
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how people make actual decisions when they are faced with real-life ethical dilemmas. Like Argyris (1982), she suggests that people typically hold one set of beliefs and values but these beliefs are different in character from the actual rules they adopt in practice, especially in situations where there is a prospect of losing control and the risks are high. Separate studies by Milgram (1974), Zimbardo (1975), and Latane (Brown and Herrstein 1975) also suggest that individuals, when they are placed under suitable pressures, act immorally despite their demonstrated capacity for at least conventional moral thought. Brown and Herrstein (1975) suggest moral judgment develops according to Kohlberg theory, while moral action develops independently along another track, possibly according to the laws of situational learning and reinforcement.

Kohlberg devotes considerable effort to counter criticism and defend moral stage development. In 1983, after almost a decade of preparation, Kohlberg published a detailed defense of his theory; this defense includes the results of three empirical studies (McNamee 1978; Milgram 1974; Kohlberg and Candee 1984) that conclude a monotonic relationship between stage of moral reasoning and performance of moral action. Blasi's (1980) metareview shows that fifty-seven of seventy-five studies report a significant correlation between moral development levels and behavior, and Thoma's (1985) metareview of another thirty studies produces similar correlation. Studies that show a correlation between moral development level and actual behavior cover a wide range of observations, including juvenile delinquency rates (Bzuneck 1979), drug and alcohol abuse (Berkowitz, Guerra, and Nucci 1991; Barker 1995), spouse abuse (Willens-Davis 1990), conscientious objection (Hay 1982), and opinions on abortion (Perez, 1994). In recent years, as researchers have compiled a large data base of DIT studies confirming stage development, criticism has lessened and Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development has endured to become an established psychological and philosophical paradigm.

CAROL GILLIGAN AND A DIFFERENT VOICE

Despite his recent acceptance, a persistent criticism of Kohlberg is that his methodology for placing individuals in one of the six stages has an inherent sex bias toward the male perspective. The most noteworthy criticism came in 1982 with the publication of In a Different Voice by Carol Gilligan. Providing a powerful account of gender differences, Gilligan argues that Freud's idea that men have a better developed sense of morality than women have is nonsense. To Gilligan, women have a different conception of morality, a morality of responsibility, whereby men have a

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morality of rights. Very early in life, men’s individualism and separation from the feminine gives them an ethics of justice, while women’s affiliation with mothers and others teaches them an ethics of care. Gilligan criticizes Kohlberg for erroneously suggesting that women are morally deficient because of their tendency to understand moral issues in emotional ways, and she claims Kohlberg’s stages assume the impersonal male justice perspective. While she agrees with the general cognitive moral development paradigm, Gilligan calls for a perspective that is sensitive to the feminist ideal of responsibility and caring (Gilligan 1982; Humm 1992).


Other studies find a difference attributed to gender, but in these studies women consistently score significantly higher than men and there is no bias in favor of men as Gilligan suggests. Thoma’s (1986) meta-analysis of fifty-six DIT studies administered to over six thousand male and female subjects reports that at every age and education level, females score significantly higher than males. More recent examples include Morris’s (1997) study of 345 school psychologists, which found females to score significantly higher on a measure of ethical beliefs; Bernardi’s (1997) finding that female accounting managers score significantly higher on the DIT; and Wark and Krebs’s (1996) finding that males report more stage 2 justice orientation than females, while females report more stage 3 care orientation than males do. Ironically, Kohlberg himself found only one person among the hundreds interviewed to have reached his highest stage 6—a female social worker named “Joan” who was remarkable for her willingness to care for a young female delinquent and to advocate on her behalf against an unjust system (Kohlberg 1981).

MORAL DEVELOPMENT, GENDER, AND THE COAST GUARD

One of the goals of this research is to investigate the effect of gender upon moral development in a public organization. Most DIT research either studies samples of students or studies private
organizations; only limited research is completed in the public sector (Stewart and Sprinthall 1991; 1993; 1994). The organization that was selected for this study is the U.S. Coast Guard, a public agency that combines many qualities of both civilian and military bureaus. The Coast Guard’s role as a military service with many civilian duties makes it a suitable model upon which to make generalized conclusions about the military at large, as well as other hierarchical organizations such as law enforcement agencies.

The researchers for this study administered the DIT to a sample of 480 Coast Guard personnel from twenty-four separate units, including thirteen shore commands and eleven large vessels. The study design called for each of the twenty-four units to select randomly twenty individuals from a cross section of the unit’s rank structure. Therefore, a total of 480 individuals (24 units x 20 personnel each) comprise the sample. Of the 480 questionnaires submitted, 401 (84 percent) were returned. Of those returned, 84 tests were discarded because they were incomplete or had failed to pass a reliability and consistency check. Consequently, the 480 tests yielded a usable sample of 317, or 66 percent.

The random sample used in this study is composed of 252 men and 47 women. The smaller sample of women was expected, as the overall Coast Guard population is about 9.7 percent women.

RESULTS OF THE COAST GUARD SAMPLE

On average, Coast Guard women scored 4.5 points higher on the DIT than did their male counterparts. The study finds that the overall mean DIT score of the Coast Guard sample is 33.5, with a mean of 37.22 for women and 32.76 for men. At an alpha level of .05, a t test finds that the difference in the means is statistically significant, \( t(311) = 2.34, p < .05 \).

A comparison of genders in both officer and enlisted ranks further demonstrates the effect of gender upon moral development. The DIT scores in exhibit 3 were subjected to a two-way analysis of variance having two levels of rank (officers and enlisted) and two levels of gender (male and female). For an alpha level of .05, the study finds all effects statistically significant. The main effect of rank yields an F ratio of \( F(1, 295) = 14.68, p < .0001 \), and the main effect of gender yields an F ratio of \( F(1, 295) = 5.70, p < .05 \). The interaction effect is not significant.
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Exhibit 3
Mean P Scores by Gender of Officers and Enlisteds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Officers</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>11.38</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Officers</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>10.14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Enlisteds</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>11.16</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Enlisteds</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consistent with the t test results, the ANOVA findings suggest that gender does make a difference in moral development. Exhibit 3 shows that women officers average 5.8 points higher than male officers, and women enlistees average 3.8 points higher than male enlistees.

The overall Coast Guard sample mean of 33.5 is significantly lower than the 40.0 average for adults (Rest 1986). In related research using the same data, White (1997) suggests that the primary reason for the lower Coast Guard score is the effect of the rigid hierarchical organization design employed by the military. Because a rigid hierarchy restricts autonomy and autonomy is sine qua non for Kohlberg postconventional moral development, then military members will exhibit restricted moral development and lower average DIT scores.

Rest (1986) reports that the two dominant determinants of moral development are age and education. In order to determine the relative effect of demographics on moral development in the Coast Guard sample, the study employs regression analysis and compares the relative effects of gender, age, education, race, and rank on DIT scores. Exhibit 4 shows that gender is the only statistically significant variable, $p < .05$. Although it is statistically significant, the overall model is weak and accounts for less than 10 percent of the total variance ($r^2$) in DIT scores.
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Exhibit 4
Regression Coefficients (Dep Variable = DIT Score)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ind Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>17.313</td>
<td>6.412</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.700</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>1.803</td>
<td>.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.824</td>
<td>.521</td>
<td>.139</td>
<td>1.581</td>
<td>.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-4.708</td>
<td>1.860</td>
<td>-.140</td>
<td>-2.531</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-.518</td>
<td>.710</td>
<td>-.040</td>
<td>-.731</td>
<td>.466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>.203</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>1.511</td>
<td>.132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ r^2 = .099 \]

The nonsignificant effect of both age and education is surprising. While the sample contained a range of ages (eighteen to fifty-one years old) and education (ten to twenty years of formal education), the Coast Guard sample may have been too homogeneous to distinguish the more significant age/education differences found by Rest (1986) in wider samples of society at large.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Why do female Coast Guard personnel score significantly higher on the DIT than Coast Guard men? Several general explanations appear to be reasonable. First, Coast Guard women may be a valid reflection of women in general and may confirm the argument that women score higher on the DIT, as several previously cited studies suggest (Thoma 1986; Morris 1997; Bernardi 1997; Wark and Krebs 1996). Second, Coast Guard women may not be a reflection of women in general but an isolated segment of the population. Coast Guard women may join the Coast Guard for more altruistic reasons than do their male counterparts and this might indicate a higher level of moral development in the women. Third, the men could be the "problem," showing a lower level of moral development due to their self-selection for less altruistic reasons. Finally, the higher moral development scores of Coast Guard females could be a combination of these factors.

Despite these conflicting possible explanations for the effects of gender on moral development, the findings offer several conclusions. Coast Guard women do score higher than men on the DIT. This finding is additional evidence that Gilligan’s criticism of Kohlberg’s model for sexual bias is unfounded, at least when
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viewed through the results of DIT studies. Can it be concluded, therefore, that women are more ethical than men? Such a conclusion cannot be reached from Kohlberg’s study and related DIT research. It can be argued however, that women score as high or higher on moral development tests than do men.

What are the implications of a difference in gender upon moral development, especially if females exhibit a higher level than males exhibit? If a difference indeed exists, then broad social and moral ramifications result. If there is a gender difference, then ultimately there will be a difference in actual ethical behavior. For example, could the increased diversification of government with more women in leadership roles result in more ethical government? One might hope so. At the least, a gender difference offers opportunities for men and women administrators to learn from each other and to focus on their individual strengths. The first and probably most difficult step is to identify and acknowledge such a difference. Explaining the source of such a gender difference—far beyond the scope of this research—would be a next step.

Research is needed to better define the nature of moral development. The DIT, by far the most widely used instrument for measuring moral development, needs refinement so that an expanded and more incisive examination of moral development, and eventually ethical behavior, can be conducted. For example, an instrument similar to the DIT is needed that differentiates between Gilligans’s female care perspective and Kohlberg’s male justice perspective.

Substantial future research is required to better understand the relationship between gender, moral development, and ultimately ethical behavior, especially in the public sector. Other types of public organizations need to be studied in detail. In studies similar to the Coast Guard study, follow up research could add the dimension of actual ethical behavior to the variable of gender and the moral development score. Ethical behavior could be operationalized through fitness report ratings, rates of courts martial and nonjudicial punishment, and other observations of behavior. Similar measures, such as promotion rates and personnel evaluations, could be used for civilian government agencies. Finally, additional research is needed that explores the moral development of public officials, especially at the higher levels of government. Current DIT moral development research on high-level officials, both in the public and the private sectors, is practically nonexistent. It is at the higher levels that the consequences of ethical/unethical behavior are far reaching and crucial.

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and that the full potential of moral development research can be achieved.

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McDougall, W.

McNamee, S.

Mead, G.H.

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