

## Gender Differences in Moral Reasoning: A Systematic Review between Kohlberg's and Gilligan's Theories of Moral Development

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper investigates the intricate interaction between justice and care orientation in moral reasoning, particularly within educational contexts. The study draws from Kohlberg's and Gilligan's theories, examining how individuals develop their moral reasoning and make ethical judgment. While Kohlberg's model emphasizes justice-based moral reasoning, Gilligan posits a care-based moral reasoning. A systematic review was conducted to uncover the integration of care and justice orientations. The review revealed that recent meta-analyses indicate shared tendencies towards prosocial behaviors among genders, suggesting a common foundation for moral cognition. Disparities observed between genders tend to diminish with age, highlighting nuanced influences. This insight informs educational practices by encouraging tailored approaches that encompass care and justice perspectives, nurturing ethical awareness and moral identity among students. The paper underscores the need for inclusive theories and dynamic teaching strategies to foster morally responsible individuals.*

*Keywords: Kohlberg's moral development theory, Gilligan's ethics of care, moral reasoning, moral development, systematic review*

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## **1. Introduction**

### ***Moral Reasoning***

Moral reasoning often involves considering various factors such as consequences, intentions, rights, duties, and social norms. It can be influenced by cultural, religious, and societal norms, as well as by an individual's personal experiences and upbringing.

In development psychology, moral reasoning as depicted by Kohlberg is an "essentially analytical and rational enterprise," which develops as an individual's reasoning ability develops (Ditto,

Pizarro&Tannenbaum, 2009).While this is primarily due to Kohlberg being influenced by Piaget's cognitive development theory, Piaget himself developed two phases of moral development, based on whose authority the rule comes from, or the heteronomous phase, and based on intentions behind actions instead of their consequences, Autonomous Phase (Piaget, 1932). These theories see moral development as reflected by how an individual grows and matures.

Walker and Taylor (1991) examined parents' role in the child's moral reasoning development. They studied how children's moral development was best predicted by the interaction style the parent uses when discussing moral issues with their child.Dukerich, Nichols, Elm and Vollrath (1990) reviewed a program of research on how groups reason about moral dilemmas - howthe reasoning level of an assigned leader impacted the group performance. While initial reasoning level affected both studies, the moral reasoning of an individual was impacted by proximal social group.

Moral reasoning, depending on its conceptualizing, reflects the structure and content of an individual's reasoning about hypothetical or real-life moral dilemmas – that is, how an individual justifies his or her moral decisions.

Moral reasoning affects behaviors and actions of an individual in each circumstance in general.In an educational context, however, moral reasoning is often focuses on promoting ethical awareness, critical thinking, and responsible decision-making among students.Moral reasoning is one measurable outcome of ethics curricula – it affects ethical behavior of a student. (Cummings, Dyas, Maddux and Kochman, 2001; Mcleod-Sordjan, 2014; Trevino, 1992).

Moral reasoning is depicted as a cognitive process through which individuals evaluate and make judgments about ethical and moral dilemmas. It involves thinking critically about situations that involve right and wrong, good, and bad, and making decision based on one's personal beliefs values, and principles of what is morally acceptable.

### ***Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory***

Since its publication, Kohlberg'smoral development theory has been influential on numerous studies on moral judgment (Eisenberg& Morris, 2004). Kohlberg's moral development theory (1958, 1984) presents that an individual develops in three levels, namely, pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, where each contains two stages. The first stage in the pre-conventional level is obedience and punishment, where the individual avoids certain behavior because of fear of punishment. The second stage, individualism and exchange, considers what best serves the individual's needs to make their moral decision. The third stage, now in conventional level, is interpersonal relationships, in which, as the name implies, the individual is concerned about living up to expectations and reciprocity, primarily, by peers. The fourth stage is maintaining social order. Still on conventional level, the individual believes moral decisions are based on fairness, not rules. In the post-conventional level, the fifth stage, social contract and individual rights, the individual believe morality is relative to system of laws. And finally, in the universal principles level, the individual begins to develop their ideas of universal moral principles and will consider them the right thing to do.

Gibbs (2019) has pointed out however, that Kohlberg's theory of moral development overemphasizes the concept of justice when making moral choices. Regarding education, justice and their "fairness" are primarily on access to education, allocation of learning places, allocation of teaching methods and pedagogy, grading and teacher-student relations (Resh& Sabbagh, 2016).

This overemphasis on justice was believed to be gender-biased as Kohlberg's respondents were male (Gilligan, 2016).Studies on moral reasoning indicate differences between male and women, where

women were more likely to employ predominantly care considerations. (Bussey & Maughan, 1982; Clopton&Sorell, 1993; Ford & Lowery, 1986; Rothbart, Hanley, & Albert, 1986)

### ***Carol Gilligan's Ethics of Care***

In contrast to Kohlberg's model, Gilligan held that measuring moral development by Kohlberg finds males to more morally mature than females and further argued that the model was founded on principles of justice and abstract duties or obligations. Gilligan posited that men and women have tendencies to view morality in different terms – empathy and compassion is emphasized by women. (Gilligan, 1982; Walker, 1991).

Gilligan outlined her own stages with the same stages as Kohlberg, but using women as respondents, her theory contrasted Kohlberg's pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional with real-life dilemmas, not hypothetical ones (Gilligan, 1982). At the pre-conventional stage, women are focused on the self and emphasize their own self-interest over other considerations. At the conventional stage, women have come to focus on their responsibilities towards others. And at the highest stage, the post-conventional stage, a woman has learned to see herself and others as interdependent.

Despite the results of Gilligan's study, studies posit that Gilligan's observations are result of societal expectations of gender rather than differences that naturally arise from gender. Traditional gender differences in moral reasoning were found only when gender was made salient (Ryan, David & Reynolds, 2004).

While the ethics of care was developed based on research with women, Gilligan has insisted that the ethics of care and the ethics of justice aren't mutually exclusive. Instead of focusing on gender, Gilligan preferred to focus on the different themes brought up by these two perspectives on morality. Although this meant that men could develop an ethics of care, Gilligan indicated it was likely more common in women (Sander-Staudt, n.d.)

### ***Systematic Review***

The research aims to investigate the intricate relationship between care and justice perspective in moral reasoning, specifically exploring within an educational context. The understanding holds the potential to enhance educational practices, fostering the development of students' ethical awareness, critical thinking, and responsible decision-making.

Given the intricate nature of the research objective, a systematic review unveils the extent to which care and justice dimensions are integrated in educational settings, uncovering successful models and strategies that have been implemented. The systematic review serves as a foundation for informed decision-making in educational practices, contributing to the cultivation of morally responsible individuals.

## **2. Methods**

To identify relevant meta-analyses, the conducted systematic search was across databases including PsycINFO, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The search included keywords related to Gilligan's and Kohlberg's theories, meta-analyses, and moral development. A predefined inclusion criteria was applied to select studies that met the scope of this review.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### *Gender Differences in Moral Development*

Margoni, Block Hamlin &Schmader (2023) found strong evidence that males and females do not differ in their tendency to prefer prosocial agents over antisocial agents, which is believed to be a building block of adult moral cognition. The ability to recognize and appreciate prosocial behaviors reflects an individual's moral growth, empathy, and understanding of the impact. In connection to moral development theories, it provides insights into how individuals progress through the difference levels of moral reasoning (Malti&Krettenauer, 2013)

On the other hand, Jafee and Hyde (2000) may have found a small differences in the care orientation favoring females and justice orientation favoring males which seems to support the prevailing theories. However, along with their findings the variance in the effect sizes do not offer strong support for the claim.

Similarly, Black and Cohen (1984) found differences between the sexes around the third stage of moral development. However, males between 10 and 48 of age gave less moral judgements than expected if gender does not influence scoring which suggests that Kohlberg's theory confound a care moral orientation with his conceptualization on the justice orientation.

While differences may have occurred during developmental ages of the individual, it seems to lessen or mix with age. Cohn (1991) examined the stability in personality growth through adolescence and adulthood. Together with findings from review of sex differences in moral judgment, aggression, and empathy, suggest that adolescent girls achieve developmental milestones earlier than boys, but declines with age. The respondents of Kohlberg's study were males of ages 10 – 16, initially (Crain, 1985).As moral reasoning emerges in the course of development, children, adolescents and adults are assumed to have a moral identity goal. Its goal characteristics are expected to systematically change with development – from concrete to abstract; from externally to internally motivated and from prevention- to promotion-oriented. (Krettenauer, 2022).

Along with age, moral reasoning is differentiated with moral action or moral behavior. Van et al. (2011) found an inverse relation between more mature moral development and recidivism. Anent to this, the difference between male and female juvenile delinquents have a small effect size variance.

Further differences were not found along development per se. But the conditions, interventions or situations presented. The principal findings from Schlaefli's, Rest's and Thoma's (1985) meta-analysis indicate that the dilemma discussion and psychological development programs produce modest overall effect sizes, that treatments of about 3 to 12 weeks are optimal, and that programs with adults (24 years and older) produce larger effect sizes than with younger subjects; however, significant effect sizes are obtained with all groups. Else-Quest et al. (2012) on the other hand found gender gap in shame and in guilt, their findings demonstrate that blanket stereotypes about women's greater emotionality are inaccurate. Consistent with social domain theory definitions of morality, Yoo and Smetana (2022) concluded that "children evaluated moral transgressions as more wrong independent of authorities' commands or rules than conventional transgressions and moral rules as more generalizable and inalterable than conventional rules. Moral transgressions also were seen as more unacceptable and more deserving of punishment than conventional transgressions." And finallyThe aggregated effects were also significant for each type of judgment. However, effects were stronger for criteria considered definitional of the domains than for acceptability or punishment judgments, which are not considered criteria. Finally,

Cohn and Westenberg (2004) differentiated the development with intelligence and maturity than gender or sex.

### ***Implication for Educational Settings***

The foundational understanding of prosocial behaviors, which are crucial in moral development, is similar across genders. Teachers and educators can promote a sense of moral growth, empathy, and understanding of the impact of prosocial behaviors regardless of gender. Also, avoiding generalizing gender differences in moral orientations. Instead, individualized approaches that consider both care and justice perspectives are encouraged (Wilgenbush&Merrel, 1999).

The importance of critically examining and adapting theories to account for nuances and diverse perspectives in moral development is also highlighted. Educators should be aware of the developmental trajectory of moral reasoning. This awareness can guide teaching strategies that align with the evolving moral identities of students. Educators can create environments that encourage students to reflect on their values and ethical principles, fostering a sense of moral identity. (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009)

### **4. Conclusion**

In the review of gender differences in moral development, recent meta-analyses unveiled shared preference in what may influence moral cognition and differences that tend to wane with age and maturity. This hints at the intricate nature of gender-related influences rather than the gender itself.

The implication for educational settings emphasizes steering clear of broad gender generalization and instead promote tailored approaches that incorporate both care and justice perspective.

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