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MORAL DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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According to Bergling (1981) there have been three major phases in the empirical study of moral development. He noted that in 1894 Barnes and Schallenburger studied five thousand children from ages six to sixteen regarding why they judged certain behaviors to be right or wrong. Many of their answers bore striking similarity to those discovered by Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1958), the theorists representing the other two phases in this field.

Piaget's book *The Moral Judgment of the Child* took cognizance of the Barnes and Schallenburger research and provided a theoretical base for the cognitive-developmental approach which was elaborated by Kohlberg some years later. Piaget's theory proposed that children moved through two stages of moral development: moral realism to moral autonomy. His theory further suggested that these stages were qualitatively different from each other, were based on certain psychobiological mental structures, developed through active interaction with others and existed in the same sequence for all persons across all cultures. Piaget provided Kohlberg a method of assessment as well as a theoretical base. He utilized clinical interviews in an attempt to validate the existence of these mental structures, which he presumed underlay moral judgments.

In his doctoral dissertation, "Development of Modes of Moral Thinking in the Years 10-16," Kohlberg (1958) initiated the third major phase in the study of moral development. His thinking has dominated the field since that time. Like Piaget, he espoused a theory of stages. He expanded Piaget's schema into six stages which were presumed to be "structured wholes" building on each other in invariant sequence. The three levels, within which each of these stages was embedded, included times when moral judgment depended on external force or on the performance of correct social roles or on conformity with agreed-upon standards,

rights, and duties. Further, he changed Piaget's clinical interviews by reducing the number of hypothetical stories which posed ethical dilemmas from two to one.

Without question, Kohlberg's theorizing has been the focus around which most thinking has revolved during the past two decades. Although he readily acknowledged his dependency on earlier theorists such as Dewey, MacDougall, Baldwin, Hobhouse, Peck, Havighurst, and Piaget (cf. Kohlberg, 1969), and, although there have been several significant theorists whose work either paralleled or evolved from Kohlberg (e.g., Hogan, Turiel, and Rest), he has been the dominant figure in the field. For the purposes of this review essay, it is his work, and reactions to it, that will be surveyed. Since a companion essay to this one will consider the ethical concepts underlying Kohlberg's thinking, this review will concern itself primarily with empirical studies related to the theory.

There are two aspects of Kohlberg's work which have been evaluated empirically. The first is his "theory of moral development" and the second is his "test of moral judgment" which has been developed to validate the theory.

1. KOHLBERG'S TEST OF MORAL JUDGMENT

Taking them in reverse order, Kohlberg's test of moral judgment typically involves the presentation of a story in which an actor is faced with a moral dilemma and in which there are two possible courses of action based on different ethical considerations. The best known of these stories is that of Heinz whose wife is dying of cancer and to whom the druggist will sell a potentially life-saving drug only at an exorbitant price. The interviewee is asked to decide whether Heinz should steal the drug or not and why. The response is then assessed by judges as to whether it is oriented "toward avoidance of punishment and deference to authority (Stage 1), toward prudent and purely self-centered concerns (Stage 2), toward a husband's natural love and affection for his wife (Stage 3), toward the necessity of unwavering adherence to society's system of rules in order to prevent social chaos (Stage 4), and so on" (Rest, 1976, 199).

The scoring system of this test of moral judgment has changed through the years. Initially (Kohlberg and Kramer, 1969), both individual sentences and overall story responses were judged on the basis of twenty-five aspects along a developmental schema reflecting increasing concern for others, for fairness, and for moral rules. Although interjudge agreement was high, this procedure failed to support the theory's postulate of an invariant developmental sequence. Subsequently, a method whereby the "intuitive issue" underlying the mode of reasoning could be assessed was developed. Eleven issues or values were identified: laws and rules, conscience, personal roles of affection, authority, civil rights, contract-trust and justice in exchange, punishment and justice, the value of life, property rights and values, truth, sex and sexual love. Stage thinking about each issue was developed logically. The manual for standardized issue scoring (cf. Kohlberg, Colby, Speicher-Dubin, and Lieberman, 1975) has been used reliably and provides, via two parallel forms, a means for assessing two issues on each of three stories. For example, Form A judges the issues of life and punishment on the story of Heinz stealing the drug

for his wife, contract and personal relationships on a story of a father who breaks a promise to his son, and property and conscience on a story of one man who cons while another man steals. Form B covers the same issues using different stories.

The validity of the test is understood to mean agreement with logical criterion concepts which fit longitudinal invariant stage sequences. These logical criteria are more crucial than comparing responses to chronological age, although these correlations might be more important in assessing youth than adults who may have stagnated or regressed in their moral development. Kohlberg (1971) claims that the criteria against which responses are judged reflect at each higher stage a more adequate manner of dealing with moral problems than the stage below according to the thinking of moral philosophers. Furthermore, validity was not understood to mean high correlation with certain types of moral behavior. Kohlberg (1976) asserts that his is a test of moral "judgment" and that the relation of judgment to behavior, while interesting, is not a legitimate validation of his test. Although the relationship of assessments of moral judgment to behavior will be reported later in this essay, these data will not be used to reach conclusions about the validity of the test itself.

Thus, the scoring, and to some degree the format, of the test has changed over the years. The number of stories used has changed from one to three and the method of assessment has changed from the scoring of "aspects" to the scoring of "issues." Therefore, it should be noted that while the theory has remained fairly stable, measurement has not; thus empirical research is not exactly comparable from time to time. Furthermore, while Kohlberg and his associates have reported respectable reliability coefficients of inter-judge agreement (r between .71 and .89), users of the test have routinely confessed to difficulty in attaining reliability apart from prolonged training under Kohlberg's tutelage. In addition there do not seem to be any published studies of test-retest reliability—an important measure of stability apart from which changes over time cannot be judged as valid.

Rest (1976) gave one of the more perceptive critiques of the format of Kohlberg's test. He suggested that the open-ended format of the test, in comparison to Piaget's forced choice model, made scoring more difficult while, at the same time, it provided much more information and in fact allowed Kohlberg to postulate many new dimensions of moral judgment and to extend the upper levels of moral judgment to late adolescence. However, he noted that such a procedure tapped only one level of cognition. In fact, according to Rest, spontaneous responses to stories, as in Kohlberg's test, may underestimate a person's level of moral thinking. People can "comprehend" statements at stages that are above those which they evidence spontaneously. In addition Rest (1973) found that persons "prefer" statements of stages above those they use or comprehend. In an effort to maximize moral thinking assessment, Rest et al. (1974) developed an alternative to Kohlberg's test entitled "The Defining Issues Test" (DIT) wherein persons are asked to identify the important issues in a given moral dilemma (e.g., Heinz) and then to rate how important each one is in resolving the problem. The DIT represents an attempt to increase validity by the use of prototypic statements from each stage of

moral development which are clearly distinct from one another and which are balanced in terms of word length, syntax, and the use of technical terms. In addition, more than one statement is given for each stage so that a person who does not comprehend a given statement will have another chance to consider moral reasoning from that point of view. Since much of the research to be reported here used the original Kohlberg format, it should be interpreted with some caution. It probably has some artifactual and confounding judgments within it as well as underestimates the level of moral thinking to some degree. Alozie (1976) found scores on Rest's DIT to be two stages above those on Kohlberg's test.

One final issue of validity is that of denoting the exact stage at which a given individual scores on the test. Two ways have been used by Kohlberg researchers: classifying a person by his/her dominant stage and by use of the "Moral Maturity Quotient" whereby Stage 1 responses are multiplied by one, Stage 2 responses by two, etc. Rest (1976) suggested that neither of these was adequate because they did not reflect the fact that subjects always showed mixtures and that these mixtures were not step-wise progressions but often included responses at stages one or more removed from the dominant one. Instead of weighted averages, he proposed a profile index which would reflect the percentage of usage of all stages. Once again, this issue of score validity should be kept in mind as the empirical studies are interpreted. There is the obvious possibility that the use of the aforementioned scoring systems probably results in the loss of some precision in actual stage classification and most of the studies do not include corrections for this oversimplification. Research using both Kohlberg's and Rest's scales will be reported in this essay.

2. KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Turning to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, several aspects will be considered. First, there is the presumption underlying the theory that the six (now seven) stages of moral development compose a sequence that does not vary from person to person. In support of this contention, Kohlberg and Elfenbein (1975) conducted a twenty-year follow-up study of thirty males tested at three-year intervals. Significant increases in median stage of moral judgment were found for each testing period until the early twenties. After that time (through the late twenties) no increase was noted. No case of regression was reported. Although Kuhn (1976) observed some regression in a one-year follow-up study of kindergarten through second-grade children, he found a predominance of progression in stage development. Adolescents in a study by Holstein (1976) supported progression while a similar study by Kramer (1968) did not. No support for progression among adults has been found—as Kohlberg and Elfenbein (1975) also concluded. These same studies report evidence for step-wise progression at the lower stages but suggest a more complex model for the later stages (i.e., 5-7).

This complexity in the later stages prompted Gibbs (1977) to suggest that they did not meet the criteria for Piagetian stage sequentiality—criteria on which Kohlberg designed the scale. Most puzzlingly, these "principled" stages have been rarely observed. Even Kohlberg (1978)

concluded that, because of this, little data existed on the movement of persons from one stage to another. Gibbs (1977) suggested that the first four stages (labeled "conventional") should be considered "naturalistic" stages in that their development reflected a "spontaneous constructive process characteristic of life in general" (43), while the later stages should be considered "existential" in that they did not occur automatically but presumed self-awareness and reflective consideration of the meaning of life-processes characteristic of very few persons.

The second assumption underlying Kohlberg's theory is that moral development's invariant sequence is true of all cultures and for both sexes. Since 1967 there have been seventeen cross-cultural studies in such widely diverse cultures as Nigeria, Japan, Israel, Turkey, China, the Bahamas, western Europe, and Canada (see Bergling, 1981, for a review of these studies). In interpreting these results another of Kohlberg's assumptions needs to be noted, namely, that while cultural enrichment and the opportunity for practice in moral judgment through such experiences as role-taking should provoke a more rapid development through the stages, they should not alter the sequence or change the total theoretical schema. Although there were certain age differences among the various samples, in only three of the studies was Kohlberg's theory not validated cross-culturally (cf. Gorsuch and Barnes, 1973; Cortese, 1982; and Dien, 1982). These results lend strong support to Kohlberg's "naturalistic" contention that moral judgment is based on cognitive structures which universally develop in all persons as a function of the interaction of biological temperament and the environment.

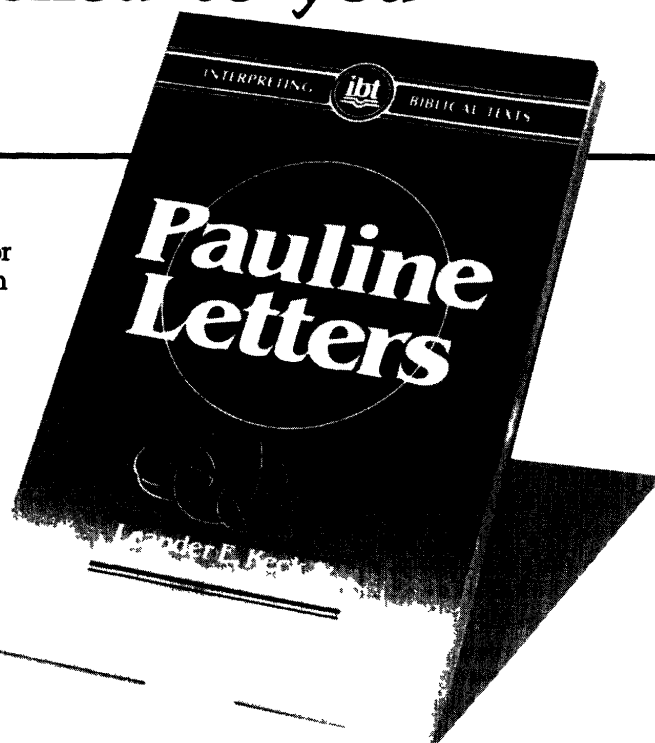
However, the comment of Dien (1982) that the Confucian view of human beings which places harmony and collaboration as prime values is counter to the Western view of humans as autonomous beings who make free choices. It is reasonable to expect that he would find reconciliation and collective decision-making a preferred standard in China—a finding that suggests Kohlberg's theory may be more culturally biased than he has acknowledged.

A similar point of view has been expressed by Gilligan (1977, 1982) in regard to sex differences which have been reported (Holstein, 1976; Kramer, 1968; Freud, 1925; Piaget, 1932; Kohlberg, 1971). In commenting on the fact that females have been observed to consistently function at lower levels than males (Kohlberg and Kramer, 1969; Turiel, 1974; Gilligan et al., 1971), Gilligan suggested that Kohlberg's theory reflected a cultural-sexist bias toward a view of adulthood "favoring the separateness of the individual self over its connection to others and leaning more toward an autonomous life of work than toward the interdependence of love and care" (1977, 482). On the basis of her research she concluded that females went through an alternative, rather than a deficient, developmental sequence. As several authors have noted, "Kohlberg offers no empirical support for his theory of moral development among females" (Bergling, 1981, 81). He, in fact, extends his conclusions based on a twenty-year longitudinal study of males to females with no thought that the sexes might differ.

The next assumptions to be considered are those of disequilibrium and cultural enrichment. Kohlberg's assumption has been that stage advancement in moral judgment is provoked by disequilibrium defined as "an internal

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state of apparent contradiction and cognitive disorganization which leads to active attempts at reorganizing" (Turiel, 1969, 129). Assuming that those who evidence 50 percent or more of their responses at a given moral stage and 25 percent or more at an adjacent stage could be defined as within a transitional moral stage, Wonderly and Kupfersmid (1978) assessed a sample of college students on indices of disequilibrium (e.g., anxiety, alienation, etc.) and found that there was no difference among those in moral transition and those who were not. Thus, no evidence was found to support this cardinal assumption of cognitive-developmental theorists. They have assumed that cognitive structures, such as underlie moral judgment at a given stage, result from interaction with the environment during a time when an existing style of thinking comes into conflict with reality (Kohlberg, 1971). However, earlier studies in which cognitive conflict was generated by argument on the basis of one stage below and one above the level of a person's moral judgment found that while Stage 3 thinkers were not influenced to move, Stage 4 thinkers were (cf. Turiel and Rothman, 1972; Rothman, 1976). In commenting on this lack of validation for disequilibrium, Rest (1979) states, "cognitive conflict is an inner, subjective condition of a subject, not something that can be manipulated by external treatment conditions" (220).

Of similar import has been the assumption that stage progression could be induced by such cultural enrichment experiences as role-playing and educational training. There have been several reviews of these attempts. Rest (1974, 1979) concluded that many of the studies he surveyed show no change and where there was change it was only slight. Lockwood (1978) reported change in only half of the studies which utilized hypothetical dilemmas as a training format. While Higgins (1980) noted change of one-half stage or more in studies of fifth- and sixth-graders, she reported no change in high-schoolers. Higgins (1980) concluded by stating that the "enhancement of students' moral judgment development through discussion of moral dilemmas... seems particularly difficult" (107). Lockwood (1978) cryptically suggested, "the moral development approach may be characterized as a relatively coherent, measurable outcome in search of a clear treatment that will promote it" (345). Even Kohlberg admitted, "Although the moral stage concept is valuable for research purposes, ... it is not a sufficient guide to moral education" (1978, 84).

Two final areas of interest will be reviewed in this essay. The first is the relationship between moral development and intelligence and the second is a relationship between moral judgment and behavior—both hypothesized by Piaget and Kohlberg.

3. MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND INTELLIGENCE

Although Kohlberg (1958) in his own doctoral dissertation found no positive correlation between intelligence and moral development, the cognitive-structural approach which he espouses includes such a supposition and, in fact, in a later article (1969) he reported correlations of .30 to .50 between the two. Langford and George (1975) concluded that while there was no relationship between intelligence and moral development in the earlier stages there was such a relationship at Stages 5 and 6. This study of twelve-

fifteen-year-olds confirmed the findings of Tomlinson-Keasey and Keasey (1975), who compared sixth-graders with college coeds. Thus, the weight of the evidence suggests that advancement to the level of post-conventional moral thinking is dependent on being able to think at the operational level and thus is intricately related to intelligence. It would seem that ability to function at the conventional level is independent of intellectual ability.

4. MORAL JUDGMENT AND BEHAVIOR

Blasi (1980) wrote an extensive review of the relationship between moral reasoning and moral action. He noted that Kohlberg's cognitive-structural approach was in contrast to the social-learning approach. The latter would predict that action would depend on the strength of moral behavior tendencies while the former would predict that such behavior would be a function of level of moral judgment. In validating these differing hypotheses, Blasi reviewed studies relating moral reasoning to delinquency, real life behaviors, honesty, altruism, and resistance to conformity. Among eleven studies using Kohlberg measures, nine found that delinquents used lower stages of moral reasoning than did nondelinquents. In twelve studies of real life behavior, six evidence positive relationships with moral reasoning while the others found negative or mixed results. A survey of seventeen studies of honesty, defined as resistance to temptation, found that seven supported the cognitive-structural hypothesis while seven did not; three gave mixed results. Nineteen studies of altruism, defined as taking the role of the other person, reported eleven instances in which moral judgment and helping behavior were related, with the remaining studies evidencing negative or mixed conclusions. Finally, in regard to resistance to conformity, there was a clear relationship with stage of moral thinking when the issue was one of conforming to others' judgments but an ambiguous relationship when the issue was conformity to pressures to act in certain manners. Overall, there is considerable evidence for the cognitive-structural position that moral judgment and moral action are positively related, but the degree of that support varies from area to area.

5. CONCLUSION

In reviewing empirical studies related to the theory of moral development and the test of moral judgment proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues, in general it may be said that while his thinking has provided contemporary scholarship with the most systematic formulation of moral judgment and development available, the present state of investigation of this theory and this method of measurement is problematic. While the theory has construct validity, there is serious question as to its universality and the pragmatic validity of such presumptions as its developmental sequence. Furthermore, although its method of measurement has become more reliable and valid, there is still room to question the nature of the required task and the meaning of its scores.

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