

## **Gender Differences in Moral Reasoning<sup>1</sup>**

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*This research tests Gilligan's hypothesis that men are more likely to consider moral dilemmas chiefly in terms of justice and individual rights, whereas women are more likely to be chiefly concerned with questions of care and relationships with others. In addition, we have investigated the effects of dilemma content upon orientation of moral judgment. Protocols from interviews with 50 college students, half women and half men, to three moral dilemmas were coded according to moral orientation. Results indicated that both moral orientations were widely used by both men and women, but that women were more likely to employ predominantly care considerations. In a test of mean differences in proportion of justice responses, content of the specific moral dilemma showed a strong influence upon moral reasoning. Results suggest that both gender and situational factors need to be considered in our understanding of moral reasoning.*

The attempt to understand human morality is a task that cuts across the fields of biology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. One theoretical framework of morality currently guiding research in a number of these fields is Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral judgment. Kohlberg's (1976) elaborations on Piaget's theory of moral judgment (Piaget, 1932/1965) describe a developmental hierarchy in which moral judgment follows a series of naturally

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occurring stages. In analyzing subjects' responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas, Kohlberg has produced evidence for a five-stage model based on three levels. At the preconventional level, people are seen as observing the rules of parents and of society out of fear of consequences or in order to gain reward. At the conventional level, they are concerned with the approval of others, including authority figures. At the postconventional level, which few attain, they identify universal ethical principles transcending rules and convention in favor of a humanistic and ultimately self-respecting orientation. Lyons (1983) argues that these three levels of moral judgment constitute moral judgment in terms of principles, rules, and rights, and sees them as representing a male-oriented "justice" orientation.

Kohlberg's theory has not escaped serious questioning, with some authors favoring a more situational and affectively based approach to moral judgment. Thus, Simpson (1983) argues that attitudes and emotions need to be more carefully defined in Kohlberg's scheme. Milgram (1974) has pointed to the difference between moral belief and moral behavior, citing incidents of irrational and inhumane actions. Others, reviewed by Furby (1986) have raised the possibility of cultural, historical, and ideological biases in the approach. Still others — Carol Gilligan, in particular — have maintained that Kohlberg has neglected the extent to which moral development may differ with gender (Gilligan, 1977).

It has thus been argued that females do not fit well into Kohlberg's theory (Bussey & Maughan, 1982; Gilligan, 1982), which initially used as its research base only male children and adolescents. Gilligan also proposes that the theory does not take into account the distinctive moral reasoning of women. She argues that women's moral reasoning about care and responsibility may be misinterpreted with Kohlberg's framework, since Kohlberg defines principled judgment as involving principles of justice. Thus considerations of care may be construed as evidence of conventional moral reasoning, and the possibility that care reasoning may be principled or postconventional overlooked.

Gilligan suggests that the reason for gender differences, with females scoring lower on measures of moral judgment (Haan, Block, & Smith, 1968; Holstein, 1976; and more recently, Baumrind, 1986), is a gender-related difference in moral orientation. Through her interviews and discussions with male and female college students and women, she found a distinctively social perspective in women's moral judgments. These findings, and an analysis of the socialization literature, led her to suggest that women's self-concept is centered on interdependence and connection with others, so that their moral outlook involves a concern with maintaining relationships and a sensitivity to not hurting others. Men, alternatively, are seen to exhibit a separate autonomy with regard to others, defining the domain of morality in terms

of justice, fairness, rules, and rights, and objectively viewing others as they themselves would like to be viewed. With these differences in mind, Gilligan offers a normative model of female development in which women are seen to evolve from a position of selfishness, to one of giving undue consideration to others, and finally to a position integrating both needs (Gilligan, 1982). Since care orientation requires evaluating the personal consequences of moral choice, it often requires the individual to consider the specific context of the dilemma presented, rather than, e.g., the instantiation of a concept from a more formal system as might follow from a justice orientation (Murphy & Gilligan, 1980).

Gilligan's theory also has been criticized (e.g., Broughton, 1983; Nails, 1983). Broughton (1983) points out that her original transcripts show female subjects to be often fluent in "male" moral language, and he argues that other research (e.g., Keniston, 1968) has demonstrated a male capacity for care. In addition, a review and meta-analysis of 108 studies using Kohlberg's measures has concluded that "very few major sex differences in moral development have been found" (Walker, 1984, p. 688). Significantly, this last review does not include studies using measures other than Kohlberg's (cf. Nucci & Nucci, 1982; O'Malley & Greenberg, 1983). Since Kohlberg's theory and research techniques neither isolate nor distinguish variables of care and justice, they cannot offer a direct approach to testing Gilligan's hypothesis (Furby, 1986). Making the care-justice distinction in an attempt to systematically test Gilligan's hypothesis about self-concept and morality in men and women, Lyons (1983) conducted open-ended interviews with 32 individuals of various ages from 8 to 60. By categorizing each statement with respect to self-definition and morality, Lyons found that females used predominantly considerations of care, while males used predominantly considerations of justice.

The purpose of our study was to further explore the moral-judgment aspect of Lyons study on the grounds that her research investigated reasoning of males and females from an extremely broad age group and only sampled subjects meeting "criteria of high levels of intelligence, education, and social class" (Lyons, 1983, p. 138). If Lyons' results are correct, they carry important implications for the inclusion of concepts such as love and moral necessity stemming from relations to others in theories of moral development. They also suggest that males may be lacking in these moral considerations.

The present research thus tests the hypothesis that men will be predominantly justice oriented and women predominantly care oriented in their moral reasoning. In addition, we investigate the effects of varying the content of the moral dilemma on care vs justice orientation. Although Kohlberg argues that form and content may be separated in the assessment of moral judgment (Kohlberg, 1971), we have noted above that considera-

tions of care may limit the likelihood of being categorized at postconventional levels. It is also possible that the content of a given *dilemma* will steer subjects toward and away from considerations of justice vs care. This is an important consideration, since no universal moral theory can stand if its findings are peculiar to details of a particular methodology. To date, this question has not been explored beyond changing the sex of the protagonist in Kohlberg dilemmas.

We have therefore included a Kohlberg dilemma involving a situation expected to elicit chiefly justice-oriented reasoning, and a second dilemma concerned with maintaining a relationship, which is expected to elicit more care-oriented responses. We have also included an open-ended situation free of experimenter-specified context, allowing the subject to relate how she or he reasoned through a personal moral dilemma. Lyons also used three types of dilemma, but her report only included the results of her open-ended question.

## METHOD

Fifty subjects, 25 men and 25 women, varying in age from 18 to 25, were interviewed. All were full-time students at the University of Oregon and represented various majors of study, students living on and off campus, and students with a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Each subject agreed to an open-ended interview, which was then tape recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted in quiet places in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. Subjects were assured that the interview would be confidential, anonymous, and free of judgment or evaluation. Subjects first filled out a short questionnaire and were then asked some introductory questions about academic plans. The average length of the moral reasoning interview was 30 minutes, with subjects encouraged to elaborate upon their arguments with the use of preselected probe questions.

Subjects were asked to discuss three moral dilemmas. The first was Kohlberg's classic Heinz dilemma, which offered a clear justice situation, dealing with laws and principles. We predicted that the abstract principled thinking characteristic of a justice response would be most likely to result as subjects confronted the legalistic issue of breaking into a drugstore. This dilemma also provided ample opportunity for a justice response to the duty and commitment implicit in the marriage contract. The second question dealt with the issue of how a person makes decisions in matters of physical intimacy. This question naturally lent itself to a potentially care-oriented response, since the situation dealt explicitly with matters of interpersonal relationships. Contrary to the Kohlberg dilemma where the protagonist is left with relatively few alternatives, intimacy is quite situational, thus raising a

key aspect of a care-based morality. The last question asked subjects to relate a moral dilemma from their own life and to discuss it. By asking this type of question, we could take into account what the subject considered to be a moral dilemma. When subjects are allowed to describe their own situations, the context may allow more freedom for them to follow their own orientation.

Protocols were transcribed verbatim and later coded for moral reasoning. Coders were blind to sex of the subject in order to eliminate bias, and Lyons' (1983) coding scheme was generally followed. Each individual statement relating to a moral decision was coded as either a justice or care response. Some frequent phrases were precoded. For example, "I had no other choice" was coded consistently as an obligation, or more generally, as a justice response. Reference to abiding by wants and feelings was coded as a consideration for care of self, and therefore a care response. We coded every statement, labeling each with reference to one of the five basic categories of care or justice utilized by Lyons (1983). Statements coded as care responses included statements referring to concern about others, the maintenance of relationships, situational or contextual influences on moral judgments, and the self as an object of care. Statements coded as justice responses included statements referring to rules, standards, obligations and commitments, judgments of fairness and principle, and concern with the self in role relations with others.<sup>3</sup>

Our departure from Lyons' coding procedure was the use of double coding in cases where we found in one statement both a care and justice response, or the statement of a principle of care. These were coded for both their justice and care contents. Some examples include: "You shouldn't get involved if you don't care about the person," "It's a decision that they would have to make in accordance with how they were raised and what they were brought up to believe and then also how they felt," and "It's a strange thing to me that people should make money more important than other people . . . money is a tool, and people are more important than tools." Since such statements implied an aspect of both care and justice, they were double coded to maintain consistency. Five interviews were coded independently by two coders, including both identification of statements and their assignment to justice and care categories. Intercoder reliability was 83%.

## RESULTS

The results of the study can be divided into three areas: the overall use of care and justice orientations, the relationship of dilemma content to care

<sup>3</sup>Coding rules, including precoded phrases, are available from the authors.

and justice responses, and the evidence for Lyons' conclusions about strong gender differences in care vs justice orientations.

In a predominance analysis similar to that used by Lyons (1983), we calculated the predominant response, care or justice, for each dilemma, and then an overall predominance score based on individual dilemma scoring. For males and females, these predominance scores are reported in Table I. In all cases where *N*s are less than 25/25, one or more subjects did not show a predominance of either care or justice responses.

A chi-square test on the overall predominance scores described in Table I yields a  $\chi^2$  value of 7.89, significant at  $p < .01$  for  $df = 1$ . In addition, as predicted, Kohlberg's Heinz dilemma, offering a fairness and rights situation, elicited predominantly justice responses from over 76% of the 50 subjects. The care-oriented question, on the other hand, produced the opposite effect, with 78% of the 50 subjects referring to predominantly care considerations. For the open-ended dilemma, 40% of the 50 subjects produced predominantly justice responses and 56% produced predominantly care responses.

The nonparametric predominance analysis, however, does not allow us to test for effects of specific dilemma and possible Gender  $\times$  Dilemma interaction. To do this, we calculated proportions of justice responses for each subject for each dilemma, with mean values reported in Table II.

As Table II demonstrates, both care and justice responses were found in both men and women. Our results do not support Lyons' (1983) finding of a complete absence of care responses in 36% of the males she interviewed, and an absence of any justice considerations in 37% of her female subjects. Only 4% of our subjects used exclusively one orientation on any particular question, and never did a subject fail to use both means of reasoning in the course of the interview. This may be attributable to differences in our coding scheme, since specific data on Lyons' coding procedure were not made available to us. For example, our double coding for justice and care may have contributed to this difference.

Dilemmas described by subjects in response to the third question ranged from questions about leaving home, betraying or lying for a friend, cheating in a relationship, peer pressure to take drugs, breaking rules, ad-

**Table I.** Percentage of Males and Females Demonstrating Preponderant Justice Responses<sup>a</sup>

	Dilemma 1 ( <i>N</i> )	Dilemma 2 ( <i>N</i> )	Dilemma 3 ( <i>N</i> )	Overall ( <i>N</i> )
Female	73 (16/22)	16 (4/25)	28 (7/25)	22 (5/23)
Male	91 (22/24)	25 (6/24)	57 (13/23)	61 (14/23)
Combined	83 (38/46)	20 (10/49)	49 (20/48)	41 (19/46)

<sup>a</sup>Subjects showing equal care and justice responses were deleted from this analysis.

**Table II.** Means and Standard Deviations for Proportion of Statements with a Justice Orientation

	Dilemma 1		Dilemma 2		Dilemma 3	
	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )
Female	.65	(.22)	.35	(.17)	.41	(.17)
Male	.70	(.16)	.38	(.23)	.54	(.20)

mission of guilt, and religion. The variety of issues raised indicates that subjects approached the open-ended dilemma carefully and thoughtfully.

In a two-way repeated-measures analysis of variance performed upon this data, with gender and dilemma as factors, we found significant effects only for dilemma ( $F = 51.73$ ,  $df = 2/96$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). The gender difference accounted for much less of the variance than did the content of the particular moral dilemma and demonstrated only marginal significance ( $F = 2.81$ ,  $df = 1/48$ ,  $p < .10$ ), and the Dilemma  $\times$  Gender interaction was nonsignificant.

## DISCUSSION

Reconciling the broad ideas of Kohlberg's justice and Gilligan's care theories represents an important step forward in morality research, and Lyons' approach to operationalizing care vs justice is a helpful one. Our results indicate, and historical studies suggest (Broughton, 1983; Keniston, 1968), that both care and justice responses are prevalent for *both* women and men; however, the balance of women's arguments tends to be more care oriented than men's. Thus, failing to take both care and justice into account could be considered a shortcoming of any framework for moral reasoning. Failure to represent care in the framework, in addition, may lead to greater distortion in the characterization of women's moral reasoning than men's, although both will be affected.

In opposition to the argument that both care and justice orientations should be considered, however, indications of difficulty in distinguishing between care and justice orientations might justify using only one or the other. Thus, Broughton has suggested the possibility that supposed care responses can be reduced to principles (1983), and indeed, our own double coding included "principles of care" when the subject made this explicit. Justice and care are thus neither dichotomous nor mutually exclusive concepts. Nevertheless, they can and do occur separately in individuals' moral reasoning.

In support of their separation, our results draw attention to strong situational effects upon justice and caring responses. Differences in responses to questions one and two demonstrate how subjects differentially refer to care and justice orientations depending upon the situation. That the justice ques-

tion elicited as high a justice response as did the care question a care response, demonstrates that care and justice concerns are *not* entirely interchangeable for our subjects. The viability of either the Gilligan (care/justice, according to gender) or Kohlberg (justice regardless of gender) schemes over a wide range of moral dilemmas remains to be determined, although the coding methodology to do so would appear to be at hand. Since the results of this study suggest that, at least within the college-aged group, neither framework dominates exclusively, both may be theoretical products of special moral conditions.

Our work suggests that future considerations of morality need to consider both gender differences in orientation and the influence of situational factors on moral judgment. As shown in this research, each of these aspects significantly affect how people make moral decisions. Knowing the moral concerns of each sex and how the situation affects the process of moral judgment may lead to some new approaches in cognitive morality research. By isolating variables in the situation, perhaps we can begin to identify additional influences on our morality and move forward in developing a comprehensive moral theory.

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