

## **Moral Judgment: A Re-examination of the Construct Using the Defining Issues Test**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Seventy-eight participants completed a survey, consisting of a Demographic Data Collection Sheet and an abbreviated version of Rest's (1990) Defining Issues Test (DIT), an established measure of moral judgment development. Classification variables not traditionally examined by empirical research were included for analysis in this study. Results revealed that students with higher GPAs scored higher on the measure of moral judgment development. Moral judgment scores were also different among participants with different majors, with Psychology students scoring the highest. Also, participants involved in campus organizations received higher scores than participants not involved in campus organizations. Lastly, married participants' moral judgment scores were higher than the scores of single and separated participants.

Moral judgment is a topic that has received a tremendous amount of scientific interest. As stated by Rest (1993), there have been several thousand studies published on topic. Scientists have been concerned with moral judgment development (e.g., Silberman & Snarey, 1993), moral judgment measurement (e.g., Barnett, Evens, & Rest, 1995; Fisher & Sweeney, 1998; Rest 1993, etc.), the relation between moral judgment and behavior (e.g., Rothman, 1980), and the relation between moral judgment and education, age, sex, religious affiliation, and culture (e.g., Good & Cartwright, 1998; Gump, Baker, & Roll, 2000; Knotts, Burnthorne, & Mesak, 2000), to mention just a few.

*Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Judgment Development*

Kohlberg's ideas on how moral judgment develops have become so influential that there is hardly an article about moral judgment that does not in some way or another refer to his theory. Kohlberg's theory is a stage theory, describing how individuals acquire a sense of morality throughout their lifespan. The first level, Preconventional Morality, consists of stages 1 and 2, and describes people who consider the rewards and/or punishments of an action before taking that action. Therefore, in Level I, people rely very little on their own, internal, sense of morality. The second level, Conventional Morality, consists of stages 3 and 4, and describes people whose actions are aimed at pleasing others, because they want to act as good members of society. Therefore, again, in Level II people still do not rely on their internal moral principles. The third level, Postconventional Morality, consists of stages 5 and 6, and describes people who base their actions on principles broader than what society expects from them, or what will be rewarded and/or punished. Therefore, people in Level III have an established set of internal moral principles, and are able to disobey laws if they consider those laws to be against their ethics and conscience (Feldman, 2000).

Kohlberg developed a test, to be administered in the form of a verbal interview, that presented the participants with moral dilemmas and asked them what they would do in a similar situation. The interviewees' stage of moral reasoning was subsequently established through a series of questions and answers. However, that procedure was quite cumbersome, and Rest developed a pencil-and-paper version of the original Kohlberg Moral Judgment Interview, which he called the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (Rest, 1990). The bulk of studies on moral judgment development have utilized that instrument, which has sometimes produced conflicting findings. The most controversial score produced by the DIT is the Principled-score (P-score), which is a measure of attainment of moral judgment characteristic of stages 5 and 6. Further, the

P-score is the one most often analyzed and reported in research studies.

*Moral Judgment and Demographics*

*Sex.* A considerable amount of controversy exists as to whether women score differently on measures of moral judgment than men, and specifically as to whether women score lower than men. This controversy has received much research attention and thus it is no surprise that studies of the relation between moral judgment and sex abound. Interestingly, though, results of these studies are far from consistent.

For example, Jones (1990) studied value systems of men versus women, and found that men tended to emphasize more individual rights, whereas women tended to emphasize more salvation and national security. Therefore, Jones (1990) concluded that the DIT P-score discriminates against women because the P-score is a measure of principled justice, a concept associated with masculinity.

Gump et al. (2000) also found that women scored higher than men on a measure of the Care orientation, but there were no differences between the sexes on the Justice dimension. Despite this finding, Gump et al. (2000) criticized traditional Kohlbergian measures of moral development on the grounds that they evaluate only the justice dimension, whereas care concerns essentially lower a participant's score. Based on the conclusions of these two studies, it might be expected that women will score lower on the DIT.

However, other researchers have refuted the proposition that the DIT discriminates against women. For example, Galotti et al. (1991) found that sex differences did not exist on the masculine measures that they used in their research, one of which was indeed the DIT.

To make things even more complicated, a study of adolescent girls and boys by Silberman and Snarey (1993) found that girls scored higher than boys in stage of moral development on the Moral Judgment Interview initially developed by Kohlberg. The authors

concluded that their findings did not provide support for the sex-bias thesis, because boys did not score higher than girls.

*Age.* By no means has age been such a controversial issue in the moral judgment literature as sex has. Gump et al. (2000) have asserted that an individual's age is only partially responsible for moral development. That is, one's age can only elevate a person to a certain stage of moral development, but age alone cannot bring about the highest level of moral reasoning. Similarly, Armon (1998) found that attainment of Stage Four reasoning was not significantly related to age, but rather was related to level of education. Yet, no participant in Armon's study attained Stage Four reasoning before the age of 24, and no participant attained Stage Five reasoning before the age of 35. Thus, Armon concluded that the high moral stages are exclusive adulthood stages.

Galotti et al. (1991) also found that participants become more justice-oriented with age. Coming back to the idea that justice is what is actually measured by the DIT P-score, it should not be surprising that one's moral judgment score improves with age. Further, in his summary of literature findings, Rest (1993) states that one of the six noteworthy literature conclusions about moral judgment is that "dramatic and extensive changes occur in young adulthood (the 20s and 30s) in the basic problem-solving strategies used to deal with ethical issues" (p. 201).

*Culture.* The study of the relationship of moral judgment to culture is yet another issue that has received research attention. Gump et al. (2000) summarize a meta-analysis conducted by Snarey in 1985 that reviewed 45 cross-cultural studies that tested Kohlberg's theory. The results of the meta-analysis showed that the further the samples were from middle-class urban society, the lower the level of moral development was. Thus, Snarey (1985) (as cited in Gump et al., 2000) concluded that Kohlberg's theory and method were culturally biased. Gump et al. (2000) further refer to Miller and Berstoff's (1992) study of

Americans and Asian Indians, which showed that whereas Americans emphasized an individualistic rights-oriented approach and tended to be more concerned with justice than with interpersonal violations, Asian Indians prioritized interpersonal concerns. Further, Gump et al. (2000) conducted a study on the differences between Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans, and showed that Mexican Americans gave higher ratings to the importance of care-oriented items that did the Anglo-Americans, but there were no differences on the Justice scale.

*Religion.* Religion has been also frequently studied in terms of its relation to moral judgment. Findings of this particular branch of the moral judgment literature tend to determine that people who are very religious tend to have lower scores on traditional moral judgment measures, such as the DIT. For instance, Hickerson and Lamaree (1976) (as cited in Good and Cartwright, 1998) found that the traditional curriculum in many church-related universities was limited to the imparting of a set of external values to the learner. Students were exposed to policies, officials, and faculty who were moralizing and used reward and punishment modes for imparting moral values to students. Thus, the students might have adopted the content (what is valued) without adapting the structure (how and why values are acquired), which may be dysfunctional to students' moral development.

Good and Cartwright (1998) investigated these findings further. They studied students (ranging from freshmen to seniors) in three universities – a state university, a Christian liberal arts university, and a Bible university. Good and Cartwright (1998) used the DIT as their measure of moral judgment. They found that the freshmen in the three institutions did not differ in terms of their stage of moral judgment development. In other words, the three institutions attracted student populations that did not exhibit initial difference on that particular measure. However, when comparing freshmen's to seniors' gains in moral judgment development, Good and Cartwright (1998) found

significant differences in principled thinking (i.e., P-scores) from the freshmen to senior students attending the state and the Christian liberal arts university, whereas there were no significant gains in principled thinking among the students attending the Bible university.

*Education.* Lastly, the literature on moral judgment abounds with studies on the relationship between level of education and moral judgment development. Study after study show that the moral judgment—education relation is consistently positive. That is, the more educated an individual is, the higher the score of that individual on the traditional measures of moral judgment (and therefore, the higher the stage that the individual is classified in). Good and Cartwright (1998), Armon (1998), and Rest (1993), among others, have also supported these results.

Rest's (1993) article on the moral judgment-education relation is probably best suited for our purposes here, because it provides a comprehensive review of what is known about that relationship from research findings. In a nutshell, formal education (years in college or professional school) has been found to be a powerful and consistent correlate with changes in moral judgment development. Further, development continues as long as a person is in a formal education setting, but plateaus when the person leaves school. However, Good and Cartwright (1998) found in their study that the biggest gains in moral judgment development occur during the freshman and sophomore years in college rather than during the remaining two years of college.

*Other variables.* Interestingly enough, all of the research identified for the purposes of this study concentrated on examining the relation between moral judgment and conventional variables such as sex, age, religion, education, political orientation, and culture. Thus, there remain a multitude of variables that scientists could look at in order for them to be able to draw a better picture of the "morally mature" person. Ultimately, knowing which people tend to score lower

or higher on moral judgment development stages is important because moral judgment has been consistently shown to be related to behaviors such as delinquency/undelinquency, school problems, promise keeping, compliance and conformity, cheating on school tests, voting, public policy issues (Rest, 1993), engaging in civil disobedience, helping a "victim," resistance to temptation, and altruism (Rothman, 1980), to mention just a few.

Therefore, this study aims at contributing to the level of knowledge about moral judgment by examining the relation of moral judgment to new variables that have not received much research attention (e.g., GPA, chosen major, athletic involvement, extracurricular activities involvement, living on or off campus, etc.). Based on examination of the literature, as well as based on what the studies have failed to consider, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of students with GPA of 3.00-4.00, 2.00-2.99, and 0-1.99 will be found.

Hypothesis 2: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of students will be found according to their chosen majors.

Hypothesis 3: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of Greeks and Non Greeks will be found.

Hypothesis 4: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of athletes and non-athletes will be found.

Hypothesis 5: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of students involved with campus organizations and students not involved with campus organizations will be found.

Hypothesis 6: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of students involved with community organizations and students not involved with community organizations will be found.

Hypothesis 7: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of married students and single or separated students will be found.

Hypothesis 8: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of students living on campus, students living in a rented/owned apartment/house, and students living at home will be found.

Hypothesis 9: If the DIT is used to measure moral judgment, then differences in the scores of students who grew up in rural areas, students who grew up in suburban areas, and students who grew up in urban areas will be found.

### Method

#### *Participants*

A total of 89 participants filled out the Demographic Data Collection Sheet and the DIT moral dilemmas. Three of the returned surveys were discarded because of missing demographic data. Upon scoring of the moral dilemmas, 8 more surveys were discarded because the internal consistency checks indicated that those surveys should not be used. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 78 participants.

Of the 78 participants, 29 were men and 49 were women. There were 30 participants in the 18 to 20 age group, 18 in the 21 to 24 age group, 17 in the 25 to 19 age groups, and 13 were above the age of 30. Further, 53 participants were US citizens, 10 were Europeans, 14 were Asian, and 1 was African. Sixty-eight participants identified with a certain religion (i.e., Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc.), whereas 8 identified as Agnostic or Atheist. Lastly, there were 45 undergraduate students and 33 graduate students and faculty members. For further description of group sizes, please refer to tables 1 and 2.

#### *Survey Instrument*

The survey instrument completed by all participants consisted of two main parts. Part I was the Demographic Data Collection Sheet, which asked a total of 28 demographic questions, such as the participant's age, nationality, religion, etc. Part II represented an abbreviated version of the DIT. The DIT makes use of six hypothetical moral dilemmas that the participants have to read and then indicate what they think the main character should do. Next, the participants are presented with a list of 12 issues about the story, and asked to indicate the extent to which each issue was important in making their decision. Last, the participants must choose which 4 of the 12 issues were the 4 most important ones in reaching their decision.

For purposes of this study, four of the original six moral dilemmas included in the DIT were used. Although the DIT Manual states that reliability is decreased when the full version is not used, it also states that the decrease is not dramatic (Rest, 1990). Therefore, for the sake of time, the abbreviated DIT instrument was used. The only score calculated after the data was gathered was the P-score because, as stated previously, this is the score examined by previous researchers as well.

#### *Procedure*

Thirty-nine participants signed up for research and came to one of five research sessions. All of these participants were undergraduate students. Participants read and signed an informed consent document that explicitly stated that participants could withdraw from the study at any time and with no penalty. Then the authors and their research aides provided instructions, as outlined in the DIT Manual (Rest, 1990), as to how the students should complete the moral dilemmas. The researchers used an overhead of a sample completed moral dilemma to illustrate the correct way to complete the DIT. After the instructions, the participants completed both parts of the survey in approximately 20

to 30 min. They then received one research point slip to present to their Introductory Psychology or Developmental Psychology instructor for course credit.

The remaining 54 participants were individually approached and asked to participate by the author and one of the research aides. The majority of these participants were international undergraduate students, as well as American and international graduate students and faculty members. Every participant received verbal instructions as to how to complete the moral dilemmas, and all were assured that they could choose not to complete the survey at all. Out of the 54 participants approached this way, 4 chose not to cooperate.

### Results

Hypothesis 1 was tested with an independent samples *t*-test instead of with a one-way ANOVA, because the third group consisted of only 1 individual and was excluded from the analysis. The *t*-test was significant,  $t(63) = -3.139, p = .002$ , with the students reporting GPA between 3.00 and 4.00 obtaining higher P-scores ( $M = 35.47, SD = 13.65$ ) than the students reporting GPA between 2.00 and 2.99 ( $M = 23.58, SD = 12.19$ ). Effect size, estimated by Cohen's *d*, was 0.91.

Hypothesis 2 was tested with a one-way ANOVA which analyzed the differences between the 6 different groups of majors. The analysis yielded significance,  $F(5, 65) = 5.392, p < .001$ .  $\eta^2$  indicated that major accounted for 29% of the variance. Turkey's tests revealed that the Psychology majors obtained significantly higher P-scores ( $M = 46.14, SD = 15.67$ ) than the Education majors ( $M = 29.52, SD = 13.52$ ), the Nursing majors ( $M = 19.17, SD = 11.79$ ), and majors classified as other ( $M = 25.79, SD = 10.34$ ).

Hypothesis 5 was also supported. Here, an independent samples *t*-test,  $t(74) = 2.120, p = .037$  showed that participants who are involved with campus organizations obtained significantly higher P-

scores ( $M = 36.14, SD = 15.93$ ) than participants not involved with campus organizations, ( $M = 29.23, SD = 12.14$ ). Effects size, as estimated by Cohen's *d*, was 0.52.

Hypothesis 7 received support as well. Here again an independent samples *t*-test,  $t(75) = -3.493, p = .001$ , revealed that married participants obtained significantly higher P-scores ( $M = 40.83, SD = 13.56$ ) than separated and single participants ( $M = 28.53, SD = 12.94$ ). Effect size, as estimated by Cohen's *d*, was 0.29. Table 1 presents a summary of the means and standard deviations for all groups examined in these hypotheses.

Hypotheses 3, 4, 6, 8, 9 were not supported by the analyses. However, some of the results were in the expected direction. These results will be discussed in the discussion section. Table 2 presents a summary of the means and standard deviations for all groups examined in these hypotheses.

### Discussion

Results from this analysis indicate that moral judgment development, as specifically measured by the Principled score on the Defining Issues Test, can be accounted for by at least four other factors besides the ones traditionally examined by researchers (i.e., gender, culture, age, education, religion, and political orientation). Specifically, the moral judgment construct seems to be partially explained by participants' GPA, chosen major, involvement in campus organizations, and marital status.

Students with GPA between 3.00 and 4.00 had significantly higher P-scores than students with GPA between 2.00 and 2.99. There are two plausible reasons for this significant result. First, because understanding the DIT moral dilemmas requires high intellectual ability (Rest, 1990), it might be that students with lower GPA are not truly able to understand the dilemmas. Therefore, the difference here might stem from different intelligence levels rather than simply

from different GPA brackets. The second plausible explanation is that students with higher GPA are more serious about their education, and education is "by far the most powerfully associated [variable] with DIT scores" (Rest, 1990, p. 6.1).

Besides differing on the GPA variable, the participants also differed according to their chosen major. Our sample consisted of 6 majors - Education, Business, English, Nursing, Psychology and Other. The Psychology students had the highest P-scores, significantly different from the P-scores of the Nursing, the Education and the Other majors, and higher, but not significantly higher, P-scores than those of the Business and English majors. Unfortunately, only less than 20 students reported being Business, English or Nursing majors. However, if the mean scores for those 3 groups are added to the mean score of the Other group, the thus-acquired mean score is still far lower than the mean score of the Psychology majors. Of course, statistical analyses need to confirm that observation. Overall, this particular result is hard to interpret, and Rest (1990) even notes in the DIT Manual that the "pattern of this variable [major] with DIT scores is not clear" (p. 6.6).

One very intriguing finding was that individuals involved in campus organizations obtained significantly higher P-scores than individuals not involved in such organizations. A possible explanation for this finding is that students who are dedicated to an activity, outside of their usual academic involvements, better develop their abilities to analyze social problems, and to decide on proper courses of action. Clubs and other campus organizations do have to make decisions such as what community activities they should get involved with and how to raise funds. Further, clubs and other organizations provide a way for increased social interaction among individuals, and responsibility is expected of every member. Thus, "getting involved" may be good not only for one's resume.

Lastly, our findings revealed that married individuals scored significantly higher than separated and single individuals on the DIT. It could be that married people have more responsibilities, which may somehow foster moral judgment development. These individuals are in a situation where they make mutual decisions with their spouse, they may be more involved with social activities, etc. This is another finding that deserves more investigation in order to better understand the relation between marital status and moral judgment development.

The 5 hypotheses that were not confirmed also deserve some attention. A visual inspection of the means reveals that: (a) Non Greeks have a higher mean score than Greeks, (b) Non Athletes have a higher mean score than Athletes, (c) people not involved in community organizations have a higher mean score than people involved in community organizations, (d) participants who rent or own an apartment/house have higher mean scores than participants who live in the dorms and than participants who live with parents, and (e) participants who grew up in rural areas have the highest mean score, followed by participants who grew up in an urban area, followed by participants who grew up in suburban area.

These nonsignificant results need to be further investigated. Our feeling is that part of the reasons why these results did not turn out significant was because of the inadequate sample sizes in some of the groups. Specifically, more Greek and Athlete students, and more students who rent or own apartments/houses, should be identified and surveyed. As for the remaining 2 hypotheses, more sophisticated studies need to be conducted to determine the lack of significance. It could be that there simply is no relation between place of origin, community organization involvement, and moral judgment scores. However, it is counterintuitive that involvement in campus organizations is significant, whereas involvement in community organizations is not. Further, Rest (1990) states that there seems to be a connection between

place of origin and moral judgment development, although it has remained unclear.

Besides taking a closer look at the above-mentioned variables, future studies should use a shorter Demographic Data Collection Sheet. In the current study, participants might have become tired of answering a variety of different questions about themselves. Needless to say, they might have misreported data, which often happens in survey research. Also, in this study, 50 of the 89 original participants completed the survey at their leisure, not in a supervised environment. Although there are no time limits for completing the DIT, it is unknown whether these participants completed the instrument at one sitting or not. Rest (1990) warns in the Manual that unsupervised test-taking might lower the scores reliability. Thus, future research should administer the DIT in a supervised environment, if possible.

The major implication of this study is that there is much more to moral judgment development than education, age, culture, and religion. Finding other variables that explain variance in the moral judgment construct is important because this is the way to identify how moral judgment can be nurtured. Further, some of the variables identified by this study could be under the control of parents and educators, such as involvement in campus organizations, and GPAs. Thus, parents and educators alike need to be aware of ways to foster moral judgment development in college students and younger adults.

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Although this paper is the product of individual scholarship, three other students helped shape the study and were involved in administering the DIT to students. Those students, in alphabetical order, are Mark Donoho, Neal Murphy, and Noriko Watanabe, all at the Department of Psychology and Special Education, Emporia State University. The four colleagues wish to thank Dr. Stephen Davis for his direction of this research.

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Table 1

*N's, Means and Standard Deviations for the Groups in the Research Hypotheses that were Supported*

Hypotheses and Groups	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Hypothesis 1		
GPA of 3.00 to 4.00 (n = 48)	35.47	13.65
GPA of 2.00 to 2.99 (n = 17)	23.57	12.19
Hypothesis Two		
Education majors (n = 21)	29.53	13.52
Business majors (n = 8)	33.13	11.78
English majors (n = 7)	37.14	6.19
Nursing majors (n = 6)	19.17	11.79
Psychology majors (n = 10)	46.14	15.57
Other (n = 19)	25.79	10.34
Hypothesis Five		
Involved in campus organizations (n = 27)	36.14	15.93
Not involved in campus organizations (n = 49)	29.23	12.14
Hypothesis Seven		
Married (n = 18)	40.83	13.56
Single or separated (n = 59)	28.53	12.94

Table 2

*N's, Means and Standard Deviations for the Groups in the Research Hypotheses That Were Not Supported*

Hypotheses and Groups	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Hypothesis Three		
Greeks (n = 6)	27.92	10.18
Non Greeks (n = 72)	31.57	14.25
Hypothesis Four		
Athletes (n = 7)	26.07	9.23
Non athletes (n = 71)	31.81	14.28
Hypothesis Six		
Involved in community organizations (n = 15)	27.89	12.12
Not involved in community organizations (n = 62)	32.42	14.22
Hypothesis Eight		
Living in dorms (n = 3)	27.29	12.48
Living in rented/owned apartment/ house (n = 55)	32.95	14.46
Living with parents (n = 20)	27.50	10.89
Hypothesis Nine		
Growing up in rural area (n = 27)	34.07	15.15
Growing up in urban area (n = 28)	32.63	14.68
Growing up in suburban area (n = 20)	28.96	12.21