

The Interrelationship Between Residence Life Leadership Experiences and Moral Development

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ABSTRACT

Using the Sociomoral Reflection Measure, this study investigated the moral development of students participating in residence life student leadership positions in one upper-Midwestern university and sought to determine the degree to which residence life leadership experiences influenced the moral reasoning of participants. The results of this study do not suggest an interrelationship exists between residence life leadership experiences and moral development as defined by Kohlberg, but do suggest that it is appropriate that the moral development theory of Carol Gilligan be used more frequently as theoretical framework for the study of the interrelationship between co-curricular leadership positions and moral development.

INTRODUCTION

A dilemma exists for student affairs professions seeking to develop co-curricular experiences that enhance moral development of undergraduates. Existing studies on the relationship between co-curricular activities and college student moral development are often contradicted by equally credible studies. For example, Sanders (1990) conducted a longitudinal study suggesting membership in a Greek letter social organization stunts the moral development of first-year college students, a review of research by Tripp (1997) suggests membership in a fraternity or sorority has no conclusive effect on moral development, yet Mathiasen (2005) suggests such membership by college students promotes moral development. Another contradiction in the research regards the influence of community service experiences on moral development. Gorman, Duffy, and Heffernan (1994) suggest there is a positive correlation between community service and moral development, while research by Cram (1998) suggests no such relationship exists.

One possible explanation for these contradictions is that almost all studies that have explored how co-curricular activities affect moral development have used pre- and post-tests to assess moral development, but have not attempted to determine what elements of those activities enhanced or stunted moral development. To gain greater insight into which co-curricular activities may best promote moral development in undergraduates, it may be necessary to begin asking what elements of a particular program did or did not promote moral development. While the effectiveness of an entire activity or program may not transfer from one campus to the next, the rudiments of co-curricular programs that do foster moral development can be recreated by higher education professionals in a way that best meets the needs of the students on their campuses.

This study used Gibbs and Widaman's (1982) Sociomoral Reflection Measure (SRM) to assess the moral development of undergraduate students who held positions of leadership in residence life and attempted to determine what, if any, elements of those positions influenced their moral development by asking selected participants to articulate what events in their past they believe contributed to their answers on the SRM. This study focused on undergraduate leadership positions in residence life as they are closely supervised by student affairs professionals, therefore creating ample opportunities for the application of a framework for fostering moral development, such as the one suggested by Evans (1987). Additionally, students serving in these positions are confronted and must accommodate a wide range of view points, an activity that theoretically leads to advances in moral reasoning (Smith, 1978). This is particularly true at the campus where this study was conducted as all live in positions in residence life, including that of hall manager, are held by undergraduates. This increased level of responsibility enhances the need for the students in these positions to reconcile viewpoints that may differ from their own.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What is the interrelationship of residence life leadership experiences and moral development?
2. How useful is Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development in explaining the answers to the above question?
3. What realities are not explained through Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development?

As nearly all previous research of moral development in curricular and co-curricular settings is based upon Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development (centered upon concepts of justice), it was chosen to serve as the theoretical starting point for this study.

The most widely cited alternative to Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development is that proposed by Carol Gilligan (1982), who criticized Kohlberg, in addition to other researchers, for using only male participants in his research. Gilligan contends that females are more likely to view moral action decisions from an orientation of care and relationships, rather than the justice orientation as identified by Kohlberg.

There is a disconnect between the degree to which Kohlberg's (1984) theory is accepted as a universal theory of moral development and the degree to which it is used almost universally as the theoretical framework for studies on the relationship between college based experiences and moral development. With the notable exception of the research conducted by Mathiasen (2005), a predominance of the studies available on the interrelationship between co-curricular activities and moral development utilize Rest's (1979) Defining Issues Test (DIT) to assign stages of moral development and therefore adopt Kohlberg's theory of moral development. This disconnect as well as the theoretical origins of the DIT will be addressed later.

METHODOLOGY

The data collection method used by Kohlberg (1984) to establish his theory of moral development was a series of interviews, also known as the Moral Judgment Interview (MJI), with adolescents, during which he would ask them to respond to “hypothetical dilemmas of ancient vintage discussed by philosophers” (p. xxvii). Over the course of the following 26 years, Kohlberg and a number of associates continued to develop valid instruments for stage assessment of moral development, ultimately resulting in the Standard Issue Manual (Gibbs & Widaman, 1982).

Rest (1979) and Gibbs (1982) both recognized that an alternative to the Standard Issue Manual was needed, even as they were assisting Kohlberg (1984) with its design. Gibbs and Widaman (1982) state, “The Standard Issue Manual is a brilliant systematization of the content and structure of moral thought, but its intricacies limit the readiness and ease with which it can be used as a research tool. A ‘handy instrument’ it is not” (p. xii). This recognition of the need for an alternative instrument led Rest to develop the Defining Issues Test (DIT) and Gibbs to develop the Sociomoral Reflection Measure (SRM).

According to Narvaez and Bock (2002), both the DIT and SRM rely on the same basic structure of inquiry as the Standard Issue Manual. The participant is presented with a dilemma “for which a respondent is expected to make an action decision and convey the reasoning behind the decision” (p. 306). The difference among the three models is in how the participant is asked to convey their action decision and the reasoning behind the decision. In the Standard Issue Manual, participants are asked to verbally respond to a series of open-ended questions regarding each dilemma (Kohlberg, 1984). Participants completing the SRM are asked to respond to the same open-ended questions, only this time in writing (Gibbs & Widaman, 1982). Finally, those

taking the DIT are asked to choose preferred action decisions and accompanying reasoning from a prepared list (Rest, 1979).

The SRM was chosen as the instrument for this study as asking open ended questions stimulates participants' engagement with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 2003). As this research was conducted from a constructivist theoretical perspective, the goal was to identify the meanings participants created from their residence life leadership experiences. Further support for the use of the SRM in research of this nature comes from Kohlberg (1982), who states that for those wishing to study the correlation of moral development with other variables; the SRM receives his endorsement as a research method of choice.

The SRM was administered to participants using a paper and pen format, and was presented to 74 students serving in the position of resident assistant or hall manager at a comprehensive public four-year university in the upper Midwest. The university is classified as a medium-sized Master's level institution by the Carnegie Foundation, is divided into four colleges (agriculture, education, arts and sciences, and business), and has a moderately selective admissions policy.

The university is located in a small suburb on the eastern edge of a major metropolitan area. Approximately one-half of the study body is from the metropolitan area, while the other half comes from more rural areas. Very little ethnic diversity is evident among the student body (95% of the student body self-identifies as Caucasian). Over half of the student body is composed of first generation college students, approximately 60% of the study body is female, and approximately 50% of undergraduate students reside on campus.

Answers provided to the SRM by participants were matched with sample answers written by Gibbs and Widaman (1982) that reflect each stage of moral reasoning in eight norms;

affiliation (marriage and friendships), life, law and property, legal justice, conscience, family affiliation, contract, and property. Stages of moral development assigned in each of the eight norms were then weighted to assign an overall stage of development to the participants.

Results from the SRM were then used to identify participants for follow-up interviews. The participants whose SRM scored at stage 4 or major stage 4 (a transitional stage between stages 3 and 4 with stage 4 serving as the more dominant) were selected as interview participants as they would have almost assuredly provided at least one answer, and more likely multiple responses, that scored at the fourth stage of moral development (the highest assignable score on the SRM). During the interviews, participants were asked to speculate as to why they provided answers on the SRM that were identified as indicating stage 4 moral reasoning. More specifically, they were prompted to contemplate which past experiences, including those associated with their residence life leadership role, influenced their responses. By exploring a pool of life experiences that participants believe led to their achieving the highest level of moral development in at least one of the eight norms, the potential for replication of life experiences that enhance moral development, including that of participating in residence life leadership positions, was increased.

Three questions were asked of each interviewee. The first question was “are there any life experiences you have had that you believe influenced the answer you provided to this question?” Again, in an effort to achieve further replication and as the participants in the case study were chosen for their high levels of moral development, this question was asked in relation to responses that matched sample answers representing the highest stage (4) of moral development identified by the SRM.

The second interview question was “Please describe in your own words what you did as a (insert title of residence life leadership position)?” This second question had two purposes. The first purpose was that it allowed the participants an additional opportunity to connect their answers on the SRM with their residence life leadership experiences. In the course of describing what they did in their residence life leadership positions, participants could identify elements of their job duties in their SRM answers. The second purpose of this interview question was to obtain a job description for the leadership positions under examination from the participants themselves. As constructivism served as the philosophical perspective of this study, it was important to discover how the participants came to understand the responsibilities and duties of their positions.

The final interview question was, “Do you believe your experiences as a (insert title of residence life leadership position) influenced the answers you provided on the Sociomoral Reflection Measure, and if so, how?” This question provided participants with a final, and a more obvious, opportunity to connect their leadership experiences with the answers they provided on the SRM. The final interview question also provided participants the opportunity to state their opinion that no meaningful connection existed between their SRM answers and their residence life leadership experiences. Interview transcripts were coded to examine for emerging themes to compare with the initial proposition that an interrelationship exists between moral development and student leadership experiences in residence life.

RESULTS

Completed Sociomoral Reflection Measures (SRM) were collected from 42 students serving in residence life leadership positions. All participants who returned a completed SRM ranged from 19 to 23 years of age and reflected the lack of diversity in the student body.

One demographic category that was examined closely was gender. This comparison was of importance due to the concerns expressed by Gilligan (1982) regarding the ability of Kohlberg's (1984) theory to address moral development of women. Table 1 shows the mean moral development stage assignments of the 25 female and 17 male participants in each of the eight norms.

The life experiences cited by interview participants as having influenced their SRM responses that corresponded to stage 4 moral development are summarized in table 2. None of the participants cited a residence life, or any co-curricular, leadership experience as a factor influencing their stage 4 answer on the SRM. Responses to the second interview question, asking participants to provide a personal description of the position they held in residence life are summarized in table 3. Finally, participant views on the influence of their residence life leadership experiences on their SRM responses are summarized in table 4.

DISCUSSION

There appears to be a gender-based trend in the results of the Sociomoral Reflection Measure (SRM) administration and the interviews. Female participants outscore male participants in all eight norms of the SRM, but the difference in the scores between female and male students was the smallest in two very similar norms, legal justice and conscience, two of the norms McCarthy and Horn (1998) cite as not reflecting an ethic of care. When asked to describe what they did as resident assistants or hall managers, the female participants focused on creating a safe, welcoming, and caring environment for residents. While also citing the importance of a safe environment, the answer provided by the one male resident assistant in the case study focused on the issue of legal justice. This apparent difference in how male and female students address issues of legal justice provides much of the context for the findings and discussions of this study.

The first research question posed in the introduction to this study was “What is the interrelationship of residence life student leadership experiences and moral development?” Because the moral development theory of Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) served as the theoretical foundation of this study, it is in the context of his theory that the first research question will be discussed. The data that may be used in the discussion of the first research question are the results of the interviews, specifically, the degree to which participants credited life experiences associated with their residence life leadership positions as having influenced their answers on the SRM that scored at the highest levels of moral development.

The seven participants interviewed for this study were experienced student leaders in residence life. All seven scored at the two highest levels of moral development available on the

SRM. The lack of an acknowledgement of a relevancy of the SRM to residence life leadership experiences during the interviews suggests that the original proposition of this study, that an interrelationship between residence life leadership experiences and moral development, as defined by Kohlberg (1984), can not be supported.

A discussion of the second research question, “How useful is Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development in explaining the answers to the above question,” must begin with a look back at studies on the interrelationship between co-curricular experiences and moral development. All of these studies, with the exception of one, used Rest’s Defining Issues Test (DIT) as the data collection instrument and used a pre- and post-test methodology. The one study that did not use the DIT, that by Mathiasen (2005), was a case study of the moral development of members of a fraternity. In this study, Mathiasen found that Kohlberg’s (1984) theory of moral development could not account for all the gains in moral development and that the ethic of care proposed by Gilligan (1982) was needed to explain the goals established for the fraternity’s community service efforts.

Kohlberg’s (1984) theory of moral development holds the premise that moral development is a result of being exposed to moral and social perspectives different from one’s own and having the opportunity to test and discuss those newly discovered perspectives against one’s own. Contrary to my expectations, when presented an opportunity to describe their leadership positions, the participants of this study did not reference activities that were likely to have led them to consider the moral and social perspectives of others. The activities most commonly referenced by the participants were those that instead focused on meeting the basic needs of others, whether those needs were a sense of security and belonging or a friend with

which residents could share their concerns. This duty or desire to care for others is not fully accounted for in Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development with its focus on issues of justice. Therefore, while Kohlberg's theory of moral development may not be irrelevant to the life experiences of students serving in co-curricular leadership experiences, it is clearly not able to account for all the co-curricular leadership activities that may enhance moral development. This leads to the third and final research question, "What realities are not explained through Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development?"

Carol Gilligan (1982) describes increased moral development in her ethic of care orientation as "a progressively more adequate understanding of the psychology of human relationships, and increasing differentiation of self and other and a growing comprehension of the dynamics of social interaction" (p. 74). Nearly all of the interview participants pointed to the creation of a caring, safe and welcoming environment for others as the primary goal of their residence life leadership positions. While working to create such an environment, undergraduate residence life staff members must also work to meet their own basic, social, and academic needs. The primary lessons the participants took away from their leadership experiences, particularly female students, were those types of lessons that will assist them in overcoming what Gilligan refers to as the "confusion between self-sacrifice and care inherent in the conventions of feminine goodness" (p.74).

If the theoretical foundation of research on the interrelationship between co-curricular experiences and moral development is going to be expanded to include Gilligan's (1982) ethic of care, then a methodology based solely on the administration of an instrument that utilizes hypothetical dilemmas and follow-up questions will no longer be sufficient. According to

Gilligan, hypothetical dilemmas divest the moral problem from personal contexts and therefore fail to engage “the compassion and tolerance repeatedly noted to distinguish the moral judgments of women” (p. 100).

The findings of this study have implications for practice as well as research. Student Affairs professionals have taken note of the accountability movement (Hoover & Wasley, 2007). Gwen Dungy, executive director of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, has stated that student affairs administrators have much to contribute to the discussion on measures of student success. While instruments such as the Defining Issues Test and the Sociomoral Reflection Measure provide a numerical measure of moral development, there is no similar measure of moral development based upon an ethic of care. The type of research Gilligan (1982) suggests is necessary to identify moral development in an ethic of care does not lend itself well to quantifiable measures. For the student affairs profession to be seen of great value in the midst of the accountability movement, alternative means of demonstrating the achievements of student development professionals, including that of enhancing moral development, must be incorporated into accountability reports.

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Table 1

SRM Results – Mean Moral Development Stage Assignments by Gender

Gender	Norms							
	Affiliation	Life	Law and Property	Legal Justice	Conscience	Family Affiliation	Contract	Property
Female	2.92	2.80	3.13	3.24	3.24	3.20	3.40	3.23
Male	2.67	2.50	2.80	3.17	3.23	2.89	3.19	2.81

Table 2

Case Study Interviews – Life Experiences Cited as Influencing Stage 4 Responses

Participant	Gender	Life Experiences
1	Female	Work ethic instilled by parents at an early age and lessons taught by parents regarding the value of hard work
2	Female	Watching loved ones deal with serious illnesses and lessons learned about civil disobedience in history class
3	Male	Lessons learned in philosophy courses regarding the behavior required to maintain a civilized society
4	Female	Observing a friend's efforts to save the life of her mother who was battling cancer
5	Female	Participant's parents insisting that the participant pay for their own co-curricular activities in high school
6	Female	Lessons learned in church and from observing families in foreign nations during mission trips
7	Female	Lessons learned through Boy Scouts and from observing varying levels of parent involvement among younger students attending Boy Scout camps

Table 3

Case Study Interviews – Participant Created Leadership Position Descriptions

Participant	Gender	Position Description
1	Female	Helping students mature and develop so that they may be safe and happy living in a community
2	Female	Help students adjust to college life and make healthy choices. Be available as a friend and a resource
3	Male	Create a safer environment by selectively enforcing student conduct policies based on the context of a violation
4	Female	Provide a safe, happy, and positive environment and bring residents together as a community through programming
5	Female	Provide a safe and comfortable place for the residents to develop, learn, and live on campus.
6	Female	Plan activities that offered residents a positive experience so they could get to know other people they were living with
7	Female	Build a community where students could feel at home, safe, and welcome

Table 4

Case Study Interviews – Perception of Leadership Experience Influence on SRM Responses

Participant	Gender	Influence Cited
1	Female	Greater perception of how own actions and words affect others
2	Female	Difficulty of enforcing policies fairly when addressing the actions of friends
3	Male	Reinforced belief system already in place prior to taking the position
4	Female	Simply confirmed preexisting beliefs
5	Female	Emphasized the need to serve as a strong role model
6	Female	None
7	Female	None
