

INTRODUCTION

Existing studies on the relationship between co-curricular activities and college student moral development are often contradicted by equally credible studies.

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.

This study used Gibbs and Widaman's 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, including their residence life leadership experiences 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.

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?

METHODOLOGY

The SRM was designed using Kohlberg's theory of moral development, focusing on issues of justice, and relies on the same basic structure of inquiry as Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview. 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"

The SRM was chosen as the instrument for this study as asking open ended questions stimulates participants' engagement with the world they are interpreting. As this research was conducted from a constructivist theoretical perspective, the goal was to identify the meanings participants created from their life experiences, including their residence life leadership experiences.

Further support for the use of the SRM in research of this nature comes from Kohlberg, 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.

Answers provided to the SRM by participants were matched with sample answers written by Gibbs and Widaman 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.

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 which life experiences may have contributed to their answers on the SRM that were identified as indicating stage 4 moral reasoning.

RESULTS

Completed SRM were collected from 42 undergraduate students serving in residence life leadership positions. Female participants outscored 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 cite as not reflecting an ethic of care.

Seven students, six female and one male, were selected as interview participants. 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.

DISCUSSION

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 can not be supported.

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. This duty or desire to care for others is not fully accounted for in Kohlberg's theory of moral development with its focus on issues of justice..

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, 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"

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 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."

The type of research Gilligan 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.