Effects of Perceived Sexual Orientation on Moral Reasoning

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ABSTRACT

Kohlberg's theory of moral development claims that moral reasoning remains consistent across situations. Contrary to Kohlberg's ideas, recent research has suggested that individuals' levels of moral reasoning may vary across situations. This study explored the impact of varying a character's sexual orientation in a scenario to assess whether or not level of moral reasoning is influenced by this factor. In addition, participants' belief in a "just world" (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) and attitudes toward gays and lesbians were measured to examine possible correlations with moral reasoning. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions, one in which they read a moral dilemma involving a gay or lesbian individual and the other in which they read a moral dilemma involving a straight individual. Participants were 78 introductory psychology students at the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse. Contrary to what was expected, individuals who rated dilemmas with gay characters used significantly higher levels of moral reasoning than individuals who rated dilemmas with straight characters. There were no significant correlations between belief in a just world or attitudes towards gays and lesbians and moral reasoning scores.

INTRODUCTION

A main topic in the field of psychology is that of cognitive development in humans. Several theories explore the cognitive progress made by children and adolescents as they mature. One such theory, proposed by Jean Piaget, maintains that children's thought progresses through a series of steps, each of which represents a qualitatively different way of understanding the world (Sigelman, 1999). An area of development that has been closely linked to cognitive development is moral development. Moral development has been shown to parallel cognitive development in children and become increasingly more complex as they mature (Seligman, 1999). When psychologists study moral development they explore the reasoning behind moral decision-making. In other words, psychologists interesting in moral development ask the questions such as "What makes an action moral or immoral?" Thus, moral reasoning is the cognitive processing which occurs when humans make decisions about whether an act is right or wrong (Seligman, 1999). One of the leading theories in moral development was proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1963), who espoused a series of stages through which individuals may pass as they cognitively mature. This study draws from the work of Kohlberg to explore factors that influence moral reasoning

Kohlberg's theory of moral development

Kohlberg's research concentrated on individuals' responses to a series of moral dilemmas presented in scenarios. When studying moral reasoning, respondents' actual resolutions to the dilemmas are essentially unimportant. Instead, attention is focused on the *reasons* given for the answers. Table 1 provides a moral dilemma based on Kohlberg's theory and examples from each of the six stages of moral reasoning in response to the dilemma. For instance, in the lowest level of reasoning, people use punishment and obedience as the basis of reasoning about what is right or wrong.

Individuals in the highest level use reasoning based on overarching issues of universal human rights.

Kohlberg argued that his theory could be universally applied and that individuals proceed through the stages in the order he suggested. In addition, because the stages are associated with cognitive development, the reasoning shown by any particular individual should stay consistent across scenarios. However, recent research on Kohlberg's theory challenges his ideas of universality and cross-scenario consistency. For instance, Haviv and Leman (2002) found that dilemmas with a prosocial theme tend to pull for care-based moral judgments, whereas antisocial dilemmas showed a strong tendency to pull for justice-based moral judgments. In other words, individuals tend to use care-based reasoning when faced with dilemmas concerning care of others and use justice-based reasoning when reviewing dilemmas involving justice. Haviv and Leman's (2002) study is an example of research that challenges the cross-scenario consistency component of Kohlberg's theory. In their study, the type of dilemma presented influenced the moral reasoning used. In addition, Shelton and McAdams (1990) found that politically liberal

females are more likely to approve of prosocial behaviors than are conservative females indicating that political affiliation may have an impact on the level of moral reasoning used. Finally, if an individual relates closely to a character playing a positive role in a moral dilemma, they are more likely to rate the character's behavior in the dilemma as more ethical (Carlson, Kacmar, & Wadsworth, 2002). All of these studies indicate that the type of moral reasoning used can be influenced by situational and personal factors.

This study explored additional factors affecting moral reasoning by focusing on one stage of moral reasoning. The present study focused solely on the use of human rights based reasoning – the highest stage of Kohlberg's reasoning. At this stage of reasoning, the individual defines right and wrong in terms of broad principles that are universal in application (Seligman, 1999). A current area of controversy in our society involves the rights of gays and lesbians. Issues include legal marriage of homosexuals, domestic partnership rights of partners, adoption rights, and involvement in the military. To make sense of these issues and to better understand the arguments used for decision-making concerning these rights of the gay community, exploring moral reasoning should be useful.

Ellis (2002) used adaptations of Kohlberg's moral dilemmas to study the acceptability of arguments used toward gay and lesbian issues. She found that individuals were less likely to use the moral reasoning associated with a human rights orientation when assessing the rights of gay and lesbian individuals. Ellis changed the focus of a dilemma from racial discrimination to lesbian and gay discrimination by changing all terms referring to the original minority group to then refer to "gay men and lesbians." Ellis presented the participants with a dilemma contrasting obedience to authority and the right to freedom of expression of gay men and lesbians and their advocates. After reading the dilemma, participants were asked to specify the extent to which they were in agreement with the actions of the characters in the dilemma. Ellis found that when the characters were represented as gay or lesbian, respondents' tended to favor levels of moral reasoning associated with maintenance of social order and respect for authority over reasoning that favored human rights. That is, participants used lower levels of moral reasoning when evaluating the actions of gays and lesbians as compared to other minority groups. The main goal of the present study was to replicate Ellis' general findings by exploring the impact on moral reasoning of varying the sexual orientation of a character in a moral dilemma.

Table 1. Examples of a moral dilemma and stages of moral reasoning from Ellis (2002) based on Kohlberg's theory

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The Moral Dilemma

At Anytown University a group of students, called the Students for Lesbian and Gay Rights (SLGR), believe that the university should have a lesbian and gay issues awareness program. SLGR students are against harassment and discrimination against lesbians and gay men, and want a program to be created to educate staff and students about lesbian and gay issues. The SLGR students demanded that Anytown University should institute this program as an official university course. This would mean that Anytown students could take lesbian and gay issues awareness training as part of their regular course work, and get credit for it towards their degrees. Agreeing with the SLGR students, the lecturers at Anytown agreed to implement the program as a university course. But, the Vice-Chancellor of the university stated that he didn't want the program on campus as a course. The SLGR students felt that the Vice-Chancellor was not going to pay attention to the faculty vote or to their demands. So, one day last April, two hundred SLGR students walked into the university's administration building, and told everyone else to get out. They said they were doing this to force Anytown University to institute the lesbian and gay issues awareness program as a course.

Examples of the moral reasoning stages and the types of reasoning used in response to the dilemma shown above

- Stage 1: Punishment-obedience
    Reasoning: Because they weren't breaking any rules by doing it.
- Stage 2: Instrumental hedonism and concrete reciprocity
    Reasoning: Because the Vice-Chancellor had committed an injustice first, the students were justified in acting the way they did.
- Stage 3: Interpersonal relations of mutuality
    Reasoning: Because most students would approve of their action and many of them would be happy about it.
- Stage 4: Maintenance of social order, respect for law and authority
    Reasoning: Because they were restoring the equal opportunities policy which had been agreed to by the university.
- Stage 5: Social contract
    Reasoning: Because the students saw no legal means of revealing the Vice-Chancellor's misuse of authority.
- Stage 6: Universal ethical principles (human rights)
    Reasoning: Because equality for all counts more than any other consideration.

Just World Beliefs

In addition to replicating Ellis' work, this study assessed another concept to better understand the phenomena occurring when participants respond to gay and lesbian issues. Researchers have measured the extent to which individuals believe in a "just world." Belief in a just world (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) refers to how a person views the world in terms of who gets their just rewards. Someone with a high degree of belief in a just world believes that bad things do not happen to good people. Further, when bad things do happen, the misfortune must have been the individual's own fault. Lipkus and Siegler (1993) found that adults with stronger belief in a just world see themselves as being less discriminated against. When examining moral reasoning toward the gay and lesbian community, just world beliefs are of interest because if an individual believes that homosexuality is a choice, and that it is wrong, they are likely to believe that gays and lesbians do not deserve to be granted rights such as legal marriage. For example, a study examining the consistency of moral judgments about AIDS found a slight tendency for participants to believe that individuals with AIDS deserved their fate (Bush & Krebs, 1993). The present study assessed "just world" beliefs to examine whether participants respond differently to dilemmas based on their views of justice.

Hypotheses

I hypothesized that moral reasoning would be lower when participants were assessing a moral dilemma with a gay or lesbian character than when they were assessing a comparable dilemma involving a heterosexual character. It was also expected that belief in a just world would be negatively correlated with moral reasoning; specifically, the higher the level of belief in a just world, the lower the level of moral reasoning. In addition, I hypothesized that negative attitudes towards gay and lesbians would correlate with lower moral reasoning scores.

METHOD

Participants were 78 students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse. To control for gender differences, only female participants were utilized for this study. The average age of the participants was 19.49 years, with a range of 18 to 55 and standard deviation of 4.22. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire asking about their age, sex, and class standing. In addition, they were asked to indicate their sexual orientation on a scale from one to six and participants not reporting as exclusively heterosexual were excluded from the analyses.

Participants also responded to three of Kohlberg's moral dilemmas adapted for this study by changing the wording so that it infers sexual orientation of the character in the dilemma. Respondents were randomly assigned to two conditions, one in which main character is gay and the other in which the main character is straight (see Table 1 for an example). Research in Kohlberg's scenarios is traditionally conducted through in-depth face-to-face

interviews. These interviews require extensive training and much time with each respondent. However, more recent researchers have adapted Kohlberg's work such that respondent's can choose among fixed choices that reflect moral thinking. The Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1979) assesses the percent of time individuals use principled (i.e. human rights reasoning) reasoning in their responses to the moral dilemmas. Thus, the DIT principled score was used in the analyses.

In addition to responding to the scenarios, participants' degree of belief in a just world was assessed with the 20-item Belief in a Just World Scale (Rubin& Peplau, 1975). Examples of questions include, "Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded," and "People who meet with misfortune have often brought it on themselves."

Participants also completed three surveys measuring their attitudes towards gay and lesbian individuals to observe whether or not these attitudes correlate with moral reasoning scores or belief in a just world. These surveys measured attitudes and stereotypes toward gays and lesbians and discrimination against gays and lesbians.

RESULTS

An Independent Samples *t*-test was used to assess whether or not participants differed in their level of moral reasoning based on the sexual orientation of the characters in the scenarios. The mean principled scores of individuals rating gay scenarios ($M = 30.76$, $SD = 13.55$) was significantly higher than the mean principled scores of individuals rating straight scenarios ($M = 25.11$, $SD = 13.28$), [$t(66) = 1.74$, $p = .04$].

The correlations between belief in a just world and moral reasoning scores and attitudes and moral reasoning scores were not significant. There were several significant correlations between other variables (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Intercorrelations between Attitudes, Belief in a Just World, and Moral Reasoning Scores*

Scale	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attitudes	21.00	7.50	-	.52**	.64**	.26*	-.11
2. Stereotypes	21.16	5.71		-	.51**	.22	-.09
3. Equality	18.14	5.69			-	.28*	-.06
4. BJW	68.68	8.56				-	-.02
5. DITP	8.38	4.06					-

Note. $n = 68$. DITP = principled moral reasoning score. BJW = Belief in a Just World.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

The significant difference of moral reasoning scores based on sexual orientation of the character in the scenarios was in the opposite direction of what was predicted. That is, participants used higher levels of moral reasoning when assessing the gay scenarios as compared to the straight scenarios.

Moral reasoning scores were not significantly correlated with belief in a just world scores indicating that just world beliefs were not related to the level of moral reasoning used by participants. Scores on the attitude surveys also failed to correlate significantly with the moral reasoning scores, suggesting that attitudes towards gay and lesbian individuals did not affect the level of moral reasoning used.

Possible limitations to this study include the fact that the dilemmas used in the straight condition are fairly dated, referring to Harvard in the 1960s. Students may not have been able to relate as well to this scenario as to the gay condition, which talked about a more recent student rights group. Updating the scenario to make it more applicable to a college population would be a suggestion for future research.

Previous research suggests that females are more socially compassionate in their attitudes and beliefs than are men (Hutchings, Valentino & Philpot, 2004). The responses tended to favor higher moral reasoning when assessing the behavior of gay and lesbian individuals, and since only females responded in this study, social compassion could be an explanation for this finding.

Finally, as college students, the cohort, in general, may be more liberal. Moral development research has cited a "college effect" that indicates that as a person's level of education increases, their level of moral reasoning also increases (Rest & Thoma, 1985).

The results of the moral reasoning scores, though in the direction opposite of what was predicted, are quite interesting. Future research could expand on these findings by broadening the age range and therefore eliminating any possible cohort effects. It would also be beneficial to use both males and females to see if gender differences exist in the level of moral reasoning used towards gays and lesbians. Using male participants could also reduce the effect of social compassion discussed earlier. The results of this particular study are positive socially, suggesting that these participants did not use lower levels of moral reasoning based on the sexual orientation of the character they were judging.

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