

## MORAL REASONING AMONG KUWAITI ADOLESCENTS

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The goal in the study was to examine the moral reasoning patterns of a sample of Kuwaiti male and female adolescents, and whether or not gender had an influence on their moral reasoning. There were 90 participants; 45 males and 45 females. They were randomly selected from three high schools in Kuwait city and were in grades 10-12. They ranged in age from 15-17 years ( $M = 15.9$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ). The results show that the sample operated predominantly at stage 4 of Kohlberg's (1984) moral judgment stages. No significant gender differences were found in the participants' moral reasoning. These results are discussed in the light of previous research findings.

*Keywords:* moral reasoning, defining issues test, adolescents, Kuwait, gender.

The concept of moral judgment used in this paper is based on the pioneering work of Lawrence Kohlberg (1969, 1976) as modified by more recent research by Rest (1979, 1990); Rest, Edwards, and Thoma (1997); and Rest, Narvaez, Thomas, and Bebeau (2000). Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) described three levels of moral development (preconventional, conventional, and postconventional) through which an individual is said to progress as a result of his/her cognitive development. Each of Kohlberg's three levels is made up of two stages:

Level one, preconventional:

Stage 1 – A morality focusing on obedience, yielding to the wishes of those who are more powerful and thus avoiding punishment.

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Stage 2 – An instrumental morality that seeks personal benefit with little concern for the needs of others.

Level 2, conventional:

Stage 3 – A morality that seeks to maximize the quality of relationships.

Stage 4 – A morality of law and order. One has a duty to obey the law and maintain the social order.

Level 3, postconventional:

Stage 5 – A morality that focuses on social contract.

Stage 6 – A morality that uses abstract, universal ethical principles to decide what is the moral act. Reasoning at this stage respects all people without regard to their ethnicity, age, class, or other personal characteristics.

Kohlberg's cognitive developmental theory has stimulated a substantial amount of recent research about moral reasoning in many Western cultures (Barba, 2001, 2002; Britner, 2003; Ferguson & Cairns, 2003; Garcia-Alandete & Perez-Delgado, 2005; Gozávez, 2000; King & Mayhew, 2002; Pratt, 2003). However, an extensive review of the literature revealed there have been relatively few studies concerning moral development of subjects from Muslim countries (Bouhmama, 1984, 1988, 1989; Ismail, 1976; Maqsdud, 1977, 1998). In the present study an attempt was made to explore the moral judgment of a sample of Kuwait adolescents within the framework of the moral orientations delineated by Kohlberg (1984) and as measured by the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1990; Rest et al., 2000). Two nondirectional research questions were evaluated. Research question 1 asked, "What are the patterns of moral reasoning of Kuwaiti adolescents?" Research question 2 asked "Are there in principle moral judgment differences among the participants according to their gender?"

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

A total of 90 Kuwaiti adolescents participated in this study; 45 males and 45 females. They were randomly selected from three high schools in Kuwait city. The participants were in grades 10-12 and ranged in age from 15-17 years (with a mean age = 15.9 and a standard deviation = 1.8).

### INSTRUMENT

The Defining Issues Test (DIT; Rest, 1979) has been used extensively to measure moral reasoning (Rest, 1990; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999; Trevino, 1992). The DIT assesses how people justify, or support, their ethical decisions in terms of Kohlberg's (1969) levels of moral reasoning.

The most commonly used measure of the DIT is the P-score, which assesses the extent to which individuals use principled moral reasoning (the highest level of

Kohlberg's model, postconventional reasoning) in making ethical decisions. The DIT has been administered to thousands of subjects in hundreds of studies, and it is "the most widely used instrument of moral judgment and the best documented in terms of validity and reliability" (Rest, 1990, p. 1). Elm and Nichols (1993) support this assertion, stating that the reliability and validity of the DIT have been well established by research studies such as those by Davison (1979) and Davison and Robbins (1978). Davison and Robbins reviewed several studies and concluded that the test-retest reliability for the P-score is generally in the high .70s or .80s, and the Cronbach's alpha index of internal consistency is generally in the high .70s (Rest, 1990).

The full DIT consists of six stories. For each story, or ethical dilemma, subjects rate the importance of various items in terms of making a moral decision about that case. The DIT (short form), which was used in this study, is identical to the full instrument, except that it contains three stories instead of six. The validity and reliability levels of the short form are reported to be only slightly below those of the full instrument, and its scenarios were selected based upon their having the highest correlation of any three-story set with the full six-story set (Rest, 1990). Rest found that the P-score of the short form correlates at a high level (e.g., .93 and .91) with the P-score for the full instrument.

## PROCEDURE

The Arabic version of the short form of the DIT which includes three dilemmas: "Heinz and the Drug", "Escaped Prisoner", and "The Doctor's Dilemma", was administered to the participants in the study. Participants respond to three sets of questions for each dilemma. The first section required the participants to decide if the character in the dilemma a) should take action or b) should not take action. Participants are also given option c) cannot decide. The second set of questions contains 12 forced-choice questions about the dilemmas. The final section required that the participants rank what they view as the four most important statements in the previous section. The principled moral reasoning (P) scale is composed of Stages 5a, 5b, and 6 of the DIT test and broadly corresponds to Stages 5 and 6 on Kohlberg's scale. The P-score assesses the extent to which individuals believe that laws represent social contracts between individuals and society (Stage 5) or that there are universal principles (justice, equality of human rights, and respect for dignity of individuals) that are sometimes not compatible with existing laws (Stage 6).

## RESULTS

Rest advises allowing for a 10-15% invalidation rate of responding to DIT instruments due to the inconsistencies of item responses, and a tendency for some

respondents to place high importance on complex sounding, albeit meaningless answers (Rest, 1990). This procedure essentially acts as a social desirability check and increases the validity of the scored protocols.

Of the 104 subjects who filled out the short form DIT 14 protocols were invalidated due to excessive inconsistencies and/or a large number of meaningless responses. This resulted in a 13% loss which is within the accepted average norms (Rest, 1993). Ninety subjects were used in the final analysis. It is worth mentioning here that, in order to avoid cases of large percentage loss because of an invalid P-score measure, in future attempts at measuring moral development with the DIT, especially in adolescents, it may be helpful to repeat the instructions more than once and to work through an example with the group of participants. The instructions provided in the DIT manual include an example, but just talking about the example did not prove effective with the participant group in our study. Perhaps instructions would be better understood if the experimenter worked through an example, step by step, with the group.

Results concerning the first research question “What are the patterns of moral reasoning of Kuwait adolescents?” are shown below.

**TABLE 1**  
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF THE WHOLE SAMPLE (*N* = 90)

Stages	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2	6.24	7.47
3	25.35	12.9
4	29.34	12.87
5A	17.08	9.24
5B	1.84	4.21
6	8.44	5.81
A	7.31	5.34
M	5.41	4.64
P	25.71	13.44

*Note:* A = anti-establishment orientation; *M* = meaningless items throughout the DIT

As can be seen from Table 1, the mean of stage 4 of moral reasoning (29.34) is the highest score obtained by the sample as a whole; the P-score of the sample reached 25.71 followed by stage 3 (25.35). This result shows that stage 4 orientation is salient as a common pattern of thinking of the sample at large.

Results for the second research question “Are there differences in principled moral judgment among the participants according to their gender?” are shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND *T* TEST VALUE ACCORDING TO THE GENDER OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

Stages	Males		Females		<i>t</i> test
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
2	6.03	7.65	6.52	7.22	0.3125
3	25.23	12.16	25.12	13.68	0.0403
4	27.18	13.68	27.97	13.03	0.2805
5A	18.12	13.03	7.3	9.20	4.5505
5B	1.5	3.55	2.49	4.63	1.1383
6	8.95	5.43	7.77	6.09	0.9702
A	6.97	5.59	7.57	4.89	0.5892
M	4.47	3.63	6.66	5.40	2.257
P	25.51	13.08	25.96	13.87	0.1583

According to the DIT Manual (Rest, 1990), when the purpose of a study is to compare two or more groups in terms of moral reasoning, *t* tests or ANOVA are appropriate tests of significance on the DIT's P-scores. As can be seen from Table 2, the means of the scores for both males and females are quite similar across all stages (stages 5A, 5B and 6 present the P-score). There are no differences between the moral reasoning scores of males and females, and *t* tests indicate further that there are no statistically significant differences in the means of male and female students.

## DISCUSSION

The goal in the present study was to examine the moral reasoning patterns of a sample of Kuwaiti male and female adolescents, and whether or not gender had an influence on their moral reasoning. The findings show a trend to resolve moral dilemmas in the socially approved direction. The prominence of stage 4 moral judgment obtained by the sample in this study could be attributed to the emphasis that Kuwaiti culture places on conformity to the stereotypes of good behavior and meeting with social approval.

These results are congruent with the findings of a number of previous studies from Muslim samples (Bouhmama, 1984, 1988, 1989; Ismail, 1976; Maqsud, 1977, 1998). In addition these findings coincide with Kohlberg's contention that the conventional level of moral reasoning represented by intermediate stage 3-4 and stage 4, is the one most commonly found in the adolescent and adult population. In contrast, among children and younger adolescents, the pre-conventional level represented by stages 1 to 3 prevails. At this level parental authority and the desire to avoid punishment are determinative (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976, 1984).

Gender has been an issue extensively researched in the literature (e.g., King & Mayhew, 2002; Krebs, Vermeulen, Denton, & Carpendale, 1994; Walker, 1991; Ward, 1995). In the present study, no gender differences were found among the Kuwaiti adolescents. Overall, the present data are consistent with much of the previous research reporting no significant differences in moral reasoning according to the gender of the participants (Gump, Baker, & Roll, 2000; Maqsdud, 1977, 1998; White, 1988).

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