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Between Kohlberg and Gilligan: Levels of Moral Judgment among Elementary School Principals

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This research investigated levels of moral judgment among public elementary school principals as measured by the Defining Issues Test Version 2 for occupationally relevant and other moral dilemmas. The participants scored lower (38.7) than the predicted average P score (postconventional thinking) for individuals who have attained graduate level education (53.3) or general adults (40). Of the independent variables studied, only political views had a significant impact on moral judgment. Women, younger participants, and those with higher academic degrees scored higher. Although these findings are limited to the interpretations of participants, they demonstrate how neo-Kohlbergian research is responding to criticisms of Kohlberg.

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most value-laden issues confronting society today. Like society, educators do not always share the same values of what is right, what is good, or what is wrong (relativism). Campbell cautioned that “because of value relativism, responsible ethical choices become a matter of chance, and, even in the most basic moral and ethical sense, right and wrong become issues of contention and debate” (1996, p. 63). However, beyond the definition of right and wrong are deeper substratums of ethical and foundational virtues that may be distinguished in levels of enactment

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(Starrat, 2005, p. 61). Starrat explains that traditional analyses of ethical behavior have proven helpful. However, they have failed to get to the heart of moral leadership—to recognize that values manifested by individuals, groups, and organizations impact what occurs in schools. Values influence what individuals or groups select from available options (Begley, 2003). For example, values may influence the screening of information and/or the definition of alternatives (Starrat, 2005, p. 4; Stefkovich & Begley, 2007, p. 209). Personal values may also blind or illuminate the assessment of a situation (Begley, 1999; Larson & Ovando, 2001).

Schemas for personal values are culturally derived and developed over time. They provide the capacity to manage the realities of cognitive processes, but “may not always be an appropriate basis for decision making in many administrative situations, particularly those occurring in culturally diverse contexts” Stefkovich & Begley, 2007, (p. 209). These personal values are learned from a person’s or group’s environment (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Personal values provide people with a sense of what they might expect from others or a situation. And although these values are refined and enhanced over time, the primary features are difficult to change (Larson & Ovando, 2001; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). Personal values reflect “underlying human motivations, and shape the subsequent attitudes, speech and actions” (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007). On the other hand, Thompson (1997 as cited in Campbell, 2001) writes about professional ethics that, when internalized, become part of the individual conscience or schema. The combination of personal and professional ethics is in line with the argument for a multi-ethical paradigm of ethics (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). The multi-ethical paradigm explains educational leadership in terms of personal and professional codes, community issues, and what is in the best interest of students. Stefkovich and Begley (2007) have conceptualized the “best interest of students” as threefold: rights, responsibility, and respect. This perspective (the best interest of students) is the focus of the ethic of profession, as stipulated by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005). In addition, Leithwood and Steinbach describe professional ethics as what “school administrators do in response to predictable and/or routine problems as timetable building, teacher evaluations, and student discipline” (1995, p. 8). These responses are based on broad foundations of basic, policy, or disciplinary knowledge that generates frameworks for understanding specific problems, rules, or principles that can be used in a variety of situations. Thus, both personal and professional perspectives influence decision-making processes and actions of school leaders.

As stated by Begley (1999, p. 4), the study of how principals make decisions is justified because: (1) decision making inevitably involves personal values to the extent that preferred alternatives are selected; (2) educational leaders increasingly find themselves working in environments where value conflicts are common; (3) there can be differences between the values articulated by a group or individuals and the values to which they are actually committed; and

(4) in an increasingly pluralistic society, school administrators must understand and reflect on their motivations, biases, and actions as leaders. Gross has called for research that focuses upon ethical reasoning because of dynamic challenges “where critical and complex dilemmas are a daily element in the lives of educational leaders” (2006, 7). Specifically, elementary school principals make decisions on behalf of children and in place of their parents all the time. Strike and Ternasky argued, as we do here, that refusing to assess the decision-making hierarchy, strategies, and unspoken rules means we can “expect little more than unintended consequences from attempts at ethical reforms” (1993, p. 222). This study reports the findings of the investigation into the hierarchy/levels of ethical decision making among elementary school principals based on the Defining Issues Test (DIT-2) and Rest’s framework of ethical development.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

According to Strike, school administrators are not only decision makers, they are leaders, organizers of daily routines, and facilitators of the work of staff and faculty. They are expected to collaborate with the school community on tasks such as developing budgets, hiring and evaluating teachers, and allocating resources for school functions. “Many, perhaps all, of these administrative tasks involve an ethical component” (2005, p. 14), i.e. a question of fairness and democracy. For example, “if administrators allocate resources, they must do so justly and equitably. If they evaluate teachers, they must do so fairly and humanely. If they discipline students, their punishments must be just” (Strike, 2005, pp. 14–15). It is clear that “ethics seems to be a part of the job” (p. 15).

Fairness is especially crucial in elementary schools, where children rely on adults to make decisions on their behalf. School principals are continuously making judgments that not only resolve conflicts, but also impact young children. Although many of these judgmental issues may be resolved based on policies, regulations, or law, there are times when the school principal must decide between two equally undesirable or desirable alternatives that are not rooted in established policy, law, or regulations. These situations create moral or ethical dilemmas. They are situations in which the principal must make a decision based on context, a personal set of values, consequences, and/or knowledge (Kidder & Born, 2002; Strike, 2005). Because of these variables, the process of thinking through a moral dilemma may be hierarchically multilevel, as proposed by Kohlberg (Crain, 1985) and Starrat (2005). Kidder (1995) explains ethical dilemmas as “right-versus-right” situations, where two moral values come into conflict (pp. 113–114). According to Kidder and Born (2002), the best process of moral decision making requires four components, they must: “(1) be rooted in core, shared values, (2) be centered on right-versus-right dilemmas rather than on right-versus-wrong temptations, (3) provide clear, compelling

resolution principles, and (4) be infused with moral courage” (p. 14). On the other hand, according to Strike (2005), moral dilemmas have three distinct characteristics: (1) “the *right* thing to do, not just the most expedient or least trouble making, but the *fair* or *just* thing” (p. 3); (2) the facts of the situation that are available including rights and possible consequences; and (3) personal moral conflict (p. 4). To make sense of these components or characteristics, Scott and Wong (as cited in Beckner, 2004, p. 93) provide examples of the pressures (personal and professional) that impact educational leaders and that lead to ethical dilemmas requiring moral judgment. These include:

1. Personal values versus school district values;
2. Competitive pressures relative to student achievement at different schools or among different school districts;
3. Desire for approval of superiors and/or advancement;
4. Pressures to provide desirable opportunities for students/teachers;
5. Opportunities for personal, professional, or financial benefit;
6. Hierarchical pressures resulting from organizational factors;
7. Traditional versus modern theories of leadership;
8. Admonitions of religious leaders;
9. Legal requirements relative to equal opportunities or “equitable” opportunity (affirmative action);
10. Responsibilities to family and/or friends;
11. Employee rights and privacy;
12. Status of women and minorities;
13. Free speech traditions (or lack thereof);
14. The tradition of “innocent until proven guilty”;
15. Job security versus “employment at will” tradition; and
16. Loyalty to colleagues, superiors, or the organization.

Besides the ubiquity of these pressures and dilemmas, moral judgments in schools are compounded because educational leaders must also balance interests of students, parents, teachers, and special concerns. In public schools in the United States of America, these pressures have been heightened by laws, like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), that have reduced educational outcomes to test scores. In a book review, Loder referred to NCLB as one of the “essentialist educational policies that attempt to reduce the goals and purposes of education to the level of all things measurable—in this case, test scores” (2006, p. 31). For this reason we are reminded that,

Educators must not lose sight of their long-term purposes of preparing students for life. . . . To do so becomes an ethical matter as legitimate purposes of schools are neglected. Standards for justice, equity, freedom, and attention to human rights must be made to fit the purposes and context of school. (Beckner, 2004, p. 94)

Because of the persistent need to make socially just decisions in complex situations, various authors have researched and constructed methods to assess and improve capabilities for moral judgment. Kohlberg has been credited for pioneering work on the assessment and development of moral judgment (Aron, 1977; Crain, 1985; Gilligan, 1977; and Rest, 1986). He developed the six-stage model of moral judgment based on forms of cognition and social thought (Crain, 1985). His findings were derived from hundreds of interviews with men using a variety of dilemmas (Gilligan, 1988). Although this model has served as the basic framework for analyzing and understanding moral judgment and development, Kohlberg's stage model of moral development has come under severe criticism over the years, especially with regard to the exclusion of women. Other notable criticisms came from Gilligan, who pointed out that Kohlberg focused only on the first of Strike's characteristics of moral dilemmas (justice, fairness, impartiality). She also argued that women were consistently relegated to lower levels of moral judgment based on Kohlberg's flawed and gender-biased assessment (Gilligan, 1981; 1988). In her research on morality and decision making, Gilligan pointed out that unlike men, women's reasoning is contextual and rooted in relationships, leading to the ethic of care. She emphasized that, "The gender differences observed in moral reasoning signify differences in moral orientation, which, in turn, are tied to different ways of imagining self in relationships" and are not deficiencies (Gilligan, 1988, p. 8). In her analysis, the value of justice in Kohlberg's theory was limited because it considers "the individual as separate, and of relationships, as either hierarchical or contractual" (p. 8).

Despite these criticisms, Kohlberg's theory continues to be popular because of the dearth of alternative approaches (Aron, 1977). Aron explains that Kohlberg's theory is an application of the Piagetian structuralist approach to the sphere of morality. ". . . it represents a departure from works in which moral development was seen as the progressive conformity to societal norms, the institution of conscience, or the accumulation of values" (1977, p. 197). However, Kohlberg's theory is also rooted in Immanuel Kant's belief that morality was based on someone acting on the basis of duty and the respect for moral law, and not for selfish gain or out of sympathy for others (Gregor, 1998). In translating Kant, Gregor cites that "the moral worth of an action does not lie in its purpose, but rather in the 'maxim' on which it is done, that is, the principle on which the agent acts" (1998, p. xiv). An individual acting in a moral manner does so based on duty for its own sake and not for some ulterior motive. Kant further asserted that one's actions should not be to use individuals as means to an end, but rather to serve others as ends in themselves.

The concept of moral development that is pertinent to educational leaders in Kohlberg's theory is embedded in Aron's explanation that the "essential ingredient of moral development is not social pressure, superego,

or habit, but rather a certain mode of reasoning and judgment” (1977, p. 198). In other words, the moral context is supplied by the reasoning behind the decision. Because this reasoning ability undergoes significant change from childhood to adulthood based on social interactions (Aron, 1977; Narvaez, 2005), the next question would be how and whether social interactions can be structured to improve moral decision making among school leaders. According to Narvaez (2005) and Shapiro (2005), even though social interactions depend on one’s experiences and discourses, the likelihood of improved moral judgment requires new and different experiences, discourses, and dilemmas that challenge the individual’s beliefs, thoughts, assumptions, and/or knowledge.

Thus, the question under study is: when making decisions from a moral perspective, what levels or schemas are used by elementary school leaders in the suburbs of a Midwest state, USA? Kohlberg made the claim that “a higher or later stage of moral judgment is ‘objectively’ preferable to, or more adequate than, an earlier stage of judgment” (1973, p. 630). Therefore, assessing the levels of moral judgment among school leaders as an attempt to make them known is a critical step toward understanding leaders’ capacity to make moral judgments and to make sense of the moral issues in schools. As Larson and Ovando write, “Distorted perceptions . . . influence both interpretation and action and fuel inequitable practices in schools” (2001, p. 78).

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN KOHLBERG AND GILLIGAN

A group of neo-Kohlbergian researchers are addressing and responding to the issues raised by critics of Kohlberg and collecting more data using new methodologies (Narvaez, 2005). Narvaez’s summary of the criticisms leveled against Kohlberg’s theory of moral development include: a narrow focus on morality in terms of important psychological processes; a focus on only one piece of morality (justice); the overextension of Piaget’s operations to moral thinking; a hard-stage model that is too strict; a methodology of study that is overly dependent on verbal expressiveness; little evidence for postconventional thinking; an underestimation of children’s moral capabilities; confusion of domains (convention and morality); and the notion that culture overwhelms developmental differences in morality.

To counter some of these criticisms, neo-Kohlbergians based at the University of Minnesota have developed the Defining Issues Test (DIT), which assesses moral decision making both quantitatively and comprehensively (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999c; 2000). The neo-Kohlbergians have maintained Kohlberg’s emphasis on rationality, the development and construction of moral knowledge, and the stage change or shift from conventional to postconventional thinking (Narvaez, 2005). However, in place

of Kohlberg's cognitive stage model, they have developed a cognitive model composed of a set of moral schemas measured by the DIT. Schemas are basic storage devices in the brain organized in the form of network structures that are flexible in accessibility and adaptation and are constructed from understandings of prior knowledge (Narvaez, 2005). Each "schema consists of a representation of some prior stimulus phenomenon, applying organized prior knowledge to the understanding of new information" (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999a, p. 297). In their book, Larson and Ovando noted that schemas or mental constructs are necessary to human thought; they "help to make sense of individuals, groups, situations, or events that they encounter" (2001, p. 74). These cognitive processes also inform both our anticipation and interpretation of encounters; "they foster a way of thinking and way of seeing that frames our interpretation and informs our actions" (p. 74). The authors give examples of how schemas can determine the extent of our thinking:

We have schematic constructions for family, parties, men, women, racial groups, friendships, community, schools, and the roles of professionals within it. We even have a schema of ourselves—as persons, as teachers, or as administrators. Schemas develop very early in our lives. These schemas are helpful in that they enable us to organize our world, but they can also frame and limit our perceptions and expectations of others. (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 74)

It would seem that in situations where an individual's behavior does not align with our schema, the assumption is that something is wrong, or else we assume it is the fault of that individual and not our own way of thinking (Larson & Ovando, 2001). These schemas not only determine experiences, identities, and the decisions that school leaders make, they "limit our perceptions and interpretations" (p. 75). In other words, whether or not the decisions made are socially just or caring depends on the schema of the person making the decision.

According to Narvaez (2005), the schemas do not necessarily correspond to Kohlberg's three stages of moral reasoning. However, the schemas have a close relation to Kohlberg's progressive levels of moral development (Bebeau & Thoma, 2003, p. 30). The schemas reflect and are used to measure the ways that people answer questions of macromorality, rather than micromorality. "As with Kohlberg's theory, the schema scores purport to measure developmental adequacy," or the development of concepts of social justice (p. 30). Micromorality is concerned with questions on how to get along with family and friends, in particular, face-to-face relations that people have in everyday life. On the other hand, macromorality involves the "formal structure of society as defined by institutions, rules, and roles," and how to organize societywide cooperation with others (Rest, Narvaez,

Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999a, p. 293). These schemas are based on four components of moral behavior that include moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character.

Rest (1986, pp. 3–4) explains these four components of moral behavior as follows: Moral sensitivity means that a person must be able to make some sort of interpretation of the particular situation in terms of what actions are possible, who (including oneself) is affected by each course of action, and how the interested parties would regard such effect on their welfare. Moral judgment means that a person must be able to make a judgment about which course of action is morally right (or fair or just or morally good), thus labeling one possible line of action as what a person ought (morally ought) to do in that situation. Moral motivation implies that a person must give priority to moral values above other personal values. Thus, such a decision is made with the intention of doing what is morally right. And moral character means that a person must have sufficient perseverance, ego strength, and implementation skills to be able to follow through on his/her intention to behave morally, to withstand fatigue and flagging will, and to overcome obstacles. Based on these components, Narvaez (2005) argues that the ethic of care that concerned Gilligan (1988) is inherent in the ethic of justice as conceptualized by Kohlberg, and falls into the component of moral sensitivity (considering needs of others) or motivation (feeling responsible), as conceptualized by the neo-Kohlbergians.

Based on the four components of moral behavior, the three schemas developed by neo-Kohlbergians are: (1) the personal interest schema; (2) the maintaining norms schema; and (3) the postconventional schema. Although Narvaez (2005) claims that these schemas are not similar to Kohlberg's stages, there are a lot of similarities with Kohlberg's three levels of moral development. The personal interest schema is the most primal form of moral judgment thinking. In this schema, the subject "justifies a decision by appealing to the personal stake that an actor has in the consequences of an action, including prudential concerns and also concerns for those with whom the actor has a personal affectionate relationship" (Rest et al., 1999a, p. 305). In Kohlberg's first level of moral development, the reconventional level, the individual is motivated by reward or punishment, or exchange of favors. "The child is responsive to the cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong but interprets these labels either in terms of the physical or the hedonistic consequences" (Kohlberg, 1973, p. 631). It is apparent that at these levels (both the personal interest and preconventional), people's reasoning are limited to self and the exchange of favors, i.e., "you scratch my back, I scratch yours," not of loyalty, gratitude or justice" (p. 631).

The maintaining norms schema "is the first solution that typically occurs to adolescents for the problem of conceptualizing cooperation on a society-wide basis" (Rest et al., 1999a, p. 305). Included in this schema are elements like, "(a) need for norms; (b) society-wide scope; (c) uniform,

categorical application; (d) partial reciprocity; and (e) duty orientation” (Rest et al., 1999a, p. 305). The focus of this schema is “to gain consensus by appealing to established practice and existing authority” (Rest et al., 1999a, p. 309). Similarly, in Kohlberg’s second stage, the conventional level, the individual is concerned about maintaining the expectations of the family, group, nation, or other social order. Maintaining these expectations is valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is of conformity to personal expectations, social order, and loyalty (Kohlberg, 1973, p. 631). Like the conventional level, the maintaining norms schema takes on a relativistic outlook with a conception of the function of laws for society (Crain, 1985).

The postconventional schema is attained when “moral obligations are to be based on shared ideals, which are reciprocal and are open to debate and tests of logical consistency, and on the experience of the community” (Rest et al., 1999a, p. 307). According to Rest et al. “The strategy of the Postconventional Schema is to gain consensus by appealing to ideals and logical coherence” (1999a, p. 309). In postconventional thinking, the emphasis is on the protection of individual rights, democratic processes, and principles by which a society achieves justice, knowing that majority is not always right. In Kohlberg’s theory, at the postconventional level there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application independent of the group or other authority holding these principles. In other words, the principles are more universal, not based on the individual or social group (Kohlberg, 1973, pp. 631–632). This schema or level of reasoning encompasses what Stefkovich and Begley (2007) have described as the “best interest of students”—rights, responsibilities, and respect for the student.

The Defining Issues Test (DIT) measures the extent to which individuals use these cognitive schemas in making moral judgments. The use of schemas as a measure of cognitive process compares to the work of Leithwood and Steinbach, in which they studied cognitive problem-solving processes of school leaders. They argued that cognitive perspectives redefine effectiveness in terms of process, not behavior. They described the problem-solving process as “interpretation”—attempting to clarify the nature of the problem (1995, p. 74). Empirically, interpretation was demonstrated by: (a) the reasons for awarding priority to a problem; (b) the reason why a problem was considered difficult or easy, complex, or simple; and (c) ways of understanding the problem. The cognitive process in the DIT is based on the ranking and clustering of items. Items cluster around the three general schemas: arguments that appeal to: (a) personal interests (personal interest, or stages 2 and 3 of Kohlberg); (b) arguments that appeal to maintaining social laws and norms (maintaining norms, or stage 4 of Kohlberg); or arguments that appeal to moral ideals and/or theoretical frameworks for resolving complex moral issues (postconventional/P score, or stages 5 and 6 of

Kohlberg) (Bebeau & Thoma, 2003, p. 18). The P score “reflects the proportion of items selected that appeal to Postconventional moral frameworks for making decisions” (p. 18). The personal interest and maintaining norms scores provide information indicative of developmental change that may result from maturation, social interaction, and/or educational interventions.

The DIT is presumed to be objective and does not discriminate on the basis of gender or culture. Rest (1979) proposed that a quantitative route to assessing levels of moral development was an objective, worthy venture. Further, Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma stated that “a common assumption in the field of morality, and one with which we disagree, is that reliable information about the cognitive processes that underlie moral behavior is obtained only by interviewing people” (1999b, p. 645). Rest et al. believed that having a scorer categorize responses from individuals in an interview led the scorer to ponder whether the “subject’s thinking should be categorized under one point in the scoring guide or another” (1997, p. 86). They argued that “The interview method presumes that a person both is aware of his/her own inner processes and can verbally explain them” (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999a, p. 295). Seeking a more accurate way of assessing individuals’ perspectives, Rest proposed that “instead of having a subject talk about his moral thinking and then having a scorer categorize the response, why not present the subject with a set of standardized alternatives and have the subject sort out his own thinking?” (Rest, 1979, p. 88). Rest claimed that “this shifts the burden of classification away from the trained scorer into the hands of the person who, although untrained, has the greatest access to his own thinking” (Rest, 1979, p. 88). In addition, this shift would make it possible to investigate a larger population including both men and women. Besides, the DIT is designed to activate the moral judgment schemas present in the mind of the respondent (Narvaez, 2005), which can be applied, either consciously and/or subconsciously, irrespective of gender or culture.

METHOD

The focus of this study was to determine the levels of moral judgment of a group of public elementary school principals as measured by the Defining Issues Test Version 2 (DIT-2) for occupationally relevant and other moral dilemmas. The participants were from the suburbs of a Midwest state in the United States of America.

Instrument

The DIT-2 is a paper-pencil survey instrument that measures levels of moral judgment that was derived from Kohlberg’s theory and developed

in America. Unlike Kohlberg's instruments that scored free-responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas in an interview, the Defining Issues Test "employs a multiple-choice, recognition task asking the participants to rate and rank a set of items" (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999b, p. 295). The subject is presented with several hypothetical moral dilemmas, "and the task is to evaluate (among 12 items given to the subject) those items that raise the most important consideration for deciding the case" (Rest & Narvaez, 1994, pp. 11–12). The DIT is based on the assumption that the selection process provides insight into the cognitive processes by which and individual defines the most important issues of the particular dilemma, subsequently indicating a person's level of moral judgment or ethical decision making.

Though it is not timed, the participant must finish the entire test to be scored. The reading level for those taking the DIT should be equivalent to the reading levels of 12–13 years old, and may be problematic for subjects whose first language is not English (Bebeau & Thoma, 2003). Bebeau and Thoma note that the DIT system does not tolerate occasional missing data and requires that subjects fill out at least four stories each with at least nine rated items. Additionally, they are required to fill out at least 14 of the 20 ranks. The DIT may be distributed to subjects individually to take at their own place. Bebeau and Thoma (2003) warn that the researcher should ensure that those who respond are motivated to take the test, that they understand directions, that the answers are their own, and that they concentrate fully on their process. In this study, the test was mailed to each participant to take at their convenience. It is assumed, therefore, that the respondents were motivated, understood the directions, and took the test themselves.

The Defining Issues Test Version 2 (DIT-2) has more streamlined instructions, and is more powerful on validity criteria compared to the first (DIT) (Bebeau & Thoma, 2003, p. 5). The first of the moral dilemmas on the DIT-2 is called "famine." In this dilemma, "a father contemplates stealing food for his starving family from the warehouse of a rich man hoarding food" (Rest et. al, 1999b, p. 649). The second dilemma is entitled "reporter," and asks the respondents to answer questions as to whether or not a reporter should print a damaging story about a political candidate. The third dilemma, "school board," surrounds the debate as to whether or not a school board chair should hold an open meeting of the school board that could become contentious and dangerous. The fourth dilemma is called "cancer." In this dilemma, "a doctor must decide whether to give an overdose of a painkiller to a frail patient" (Rest et. al, 1999b, p. 649). The last of the five dilemmas is entitled "demonstration," and the respondents answer questions about college students holding demonstrations regarding issues of foreign policy.

Validity and Reliability of the DIT

According to Rest et al. validity and reliability for the Defining Issues Test has been assessed in terms of seven criteria.

1. *Differentiation of various age/education groups.* Studies of large composite samples (thousands of subjects) show that 30 to 50 percent of the variance of DIT scores is attributable to the level of education in samples ranging from junior-high education to PhDs.
2. *Longitudinal gains.* A ten-year longitudinal study shows significant gains of men and women, of college-attenders and people not attending college, from diverse walks of life. A review of a dozen studies of freshmen to senior college students ($N = 755$) shows effect size of 0.80 ("large" gains). DIT gains are one of the most dramatic longitudinal gains in college of any variable studied in college students.
3. DIT scores are significantly *related to cognitive capacity measures* of moral comprehension ($r = 0.60$ s), to recall and reconstruction of postconventional moral argument, to Kohlberg's measure, and (to a lesser degree) to other cognitive development measures.
4. DIT scores are *sensitive to moral education interventions*. One review of over fifty intervention studies reports an effect size for dilemma discussion interventions to be 0.41 ("moderate" gains), whereas the effect size for comparison groups was only 0.09 ("small" gains).
5. DIT scores are significantly *linked to many "prosocial" behaviors and to desired professional decision making*. One review reports that 32 of 47 measures were statistically significant.
6. DIT scores are significantly correlated with political attitudes and political choices. DIT scores typically correlate in the range of $r = 0.40$ to 0.65 . When combined in multiple regression with measures of cultural ideology, the combination predicts up to two-thirds of the variance in opinions about controversial public-policy issues (such as abortion, religion in the public school, women's roles, rights of the accused, rights of homosexuals, or free-speech issues). Because such issues are among the most hotly debated issues of our time, the DIT's predictability to these issues is important.
7. *Reliability.* Cronbach's alpha is in the upper 0.70s/low 0.80s. The test-retest reliability is about the same (1999a, pp. 309–311).

The "DIT scores show discriminant validity from verbal ability/general intelligence and from conservative/liberal political attitudes. That is, the information in DIT scores predicts the seven validity criteria, above and beyond that accounted for by scores of verbal ability/general intelligence or political attitude (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999a, p. 311). This claim is based on the suggestion that,

There is no other variable or construct that accounts as well for the combination of the seven validity findings than the construct of moral judgment. The persuasiveness of the validity data comes from the combination of criteria that many independent researchers have found, not just from one finding with one criteria. (Rest et al., 1999b, p. 647)

Participants

Sixty (24 male and 36 female) elementary school principals from a Midwest state, USA responded and returned the DIT-2 survey. The surveys were mailed to the respondents with stamped return envelopes. The returned DIT-2 protocols were submitted to the Center for the Study of Ethical Development at the University of Minnesota to be scored. The respondents ranged in age from 29 to 60, 43 having obtained a masters degree, four having professional degrees, and 13 having doctoral degrees. Two respondents reported that they were very liberal, 22 were somewhat liberal, 14 were neither liberal nor conservative, and 22 were somewhat conservative.

Data Analysis

According to Bebeau and Thoma (2003), the scoring process for the DIT-2 takes the subjects' responses and analyzes them based on how the dilemmas activate any one of the three schemas. The score therefore depends on the degree to which a person used each of the schemas in responding to the dilemmas. The individual scores high if the item is rated and ranked as highly important in terms of making sense to the subject and taps into the preferred schema (postconventional). In the process of scoring, if an item does not seem to make sense to the subject or seems simplistic, or the item is passed over by the subject, a lower rating is assigned. Rest et al. stated,

Presumably it is those schemas that structure and guide people's moral thinking. By the patterns of ratings and rankings, we arrive at estimates of the relative strength of the preferred schema. Using ratings and rankings in a multiple-choice task allows tacit reasoning and unarticulated processes to determine the ratings and rankings. The participant is not required to verbally explain and explicitly argue for a line of reasoning. We assume therefore that people are clearer in identifying what seems to be an important moral issue to them rather than in articulating a moral justification for one course of action or another (the usual data collected in Kohlbergian interviews). (1999a, p. 302)

The data were further analyzed using *t*-test, ANOVA, and Pearson Moment Correlations to determine if there were differences in moral judgment by age,

gender, level of education, and political views, and whether there were any correlations among the schemas.

FINDINGS

The DIT-2 provides the index that represents a participant's level of moral judgment—the P score (Postconventional thinking). The P score is the most frequently used score from the Defining Issues Test, and is based on “the proportion of items selected that appeal to postconventional moral frameworks for making decisions” (Bebeau & Thoma, 2003, p. 18). Furthermore, the P score is “based on a participant's ranking of prototypic items written for Kohlberg's Stages 5 and 6. The P index (score) is interpreted as the relative importance participants give to principled moral considerations (Stages 5 and 6) in making moral decisions” (Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, & Bebeau, 1997, p. 498). The P score ranges from 0–95. In general, according to Bebeau and Thoma (2003), the DIT scores of junior high school students average in the 20s, senior high school students average in the 30s, college students in the 40s, students graduating from professional school programs in the 50s, and moral philosophy/political science doctoral students in the 60s. Participants in this study had an average P score of 38.7 (SD = 15.78), placing them between general adults (P = 40) and senior high school students (P = 31.8), based on standardized placement scores of other groups as established by Rest and Narvaez (1994, p. 14). In a similar study, elementary school principals obtained an average score of 39.5 (Slavinsky, 2006). These scores are lower than the predicted average P score for individuals who have attained graduate level education (53.3) according to Rest (1979). In the placement table (Rest & Narvaez, 1994, p. 14), the top score of 65.2 was found amongst moral philosophy and political science graduate students. Second to them are liberal protestant seminarians, with a score of 59.8. At the bottom of the table are institutionalized delinquents (18.9) followed by junior high school students (21.3), prison inmates (23.5) and senior high school students (31.8) (Table 1).

In this study, the younger principals (29–47) obtained a nonsignificant higher P score (Table 2). Rest (1979) found that age had a positive impact (increased P score) on the moral judgment of individuals. The respondents in this study were all adults ranging in age from 29 to 60. This age range among adults did not have a significant impact in differentiating moral judgment. However, for practical purposes, this information is critical as younger people are entering educational leadership and educational leadership has become a moral imperative.

The study found no significant difference on the P score based on gender. It is noted however, that females had a higher mean of 41.39 (SD = 14.85) compared to men with the mean of 35.08 (SD = 16.69). This finding is

TABLE 1 DIT – P Scores by Groups.

P score	Group
62.2	Moral philosophy and political science graduate students
58.8	Liberal protestant seminarians
52.2	Law students
50.2	Medical students
49.2	Practicing physicians
47.6	Dental students
46.3	Staff nurses
42.8	Graduate students in business
42.3	College students in general
41.6	Navy enlisted men
40.0	Adults in general
38.9	Participants in this study
31.8	Senior high school students
23.5	Prison inmates
21.9	Junior high school students
18.9	Institutionalized delinquents

Source: (Rest & Narvaez, 1994, p. 14).

consistent with the findings of DIT researchers. Rest and Narvaez's (1994) work indicates that at every educational level, females score slightly higher than males, as opposed to the findings of Kohlberg's work that consistently placed women in lower levels of moral judgment compared to men. This finding confirms Gilligan's claims of biases against women and the limitations of the methodology used by Kohlberg, while at the same time affirming Kohlberg's theoretical framework that was maintained in the development of the DIT.

Despite the increases in the P score as the participant's level of education increased (Table 2), the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated that the participants' level of education did not have a significant impact on moral judgment. It is noted that all participants had postgraduate degrees. Conversely, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) found a significant difference in the P scores by political views. The post-hoc Tukey analysis indicated that the significant difference was between the moderate liberal and the moderate conservative groups in favor of moderate liberals. In their research, Narvaez, Getz, Rest, and Thoma (1999) found that religious ideology, political identity, and moral judgment in combination explained 67percent of the variance in attitudes toward human rights. They argue that moral judgment is the product of interactions between personal and societal processes that include political views. This study supports the findings that political views have a significant impact on moral judgment.

A Pearson Moment Correlation was computed to determine the correlations among the schemas (personal interest, maintaining norms, and post-conventional). These correlations would provide insight into the transitional tendencies from the lower to higher schemas of cognitive thinking. Aron claimed that Kohlberg "does not adequately describe the process which led

TABLE 2 Means Scores on Postconventional, Maintaining Norms, and Personal Interest Schemas by Independent Variables (Age, Gender, Education, Political Affiliation).

	Schema	<i>n</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation
Study group				
	Postconventional	60	38.90	15.78
	Maintaining norms	60	35.00	15.80
	Personal interest	60	21.90	11.37
Age group				
29–47	Postconventional	30	39.67	17.55
48–60	Postconventional	30	38.07	14.06
29–47	Maintaining norms	30	34.07	17.20
48–60	Maintaining norms	30	35.60	14.50
29–47	Personal interest	30	22.07	11.48
48–60	Personal interest	30	20.80	11.26
Gender				
Male	Postconventional	24	35.08	16.69
Female	Postconventional	36	41.39	4.85
Male	Maintaining norms	24	35.67	19.41
Female	Maintaining norms	36	34.28	13.12
Male	Personal interest	24	24.25	12.14
Female	Personal interest	36	19.56	10.22
Education				
Masters	Postconventional	43	37.72	16.15
Professional	Postconventional	4	40.00	12.54
Doctorate	Postconventional	13	42.30	15.95
Masters	Maintaining norms	43	35.44	15.02
Professional	Maintaining norms	4	32.00	2.83
Doctorate	Maintaining norms	13	33.69	20.72
Masters	Personal interest	43	22.23	11.47
Professional	Personal interest	4	22.00	8.16
Doctorate	Personal interest	13	18.62	11.79
Political affiliation				
Very liberal	Postconventional	2	35.00	26.87
Somewhat liberal	Postconventional	22	46.27	16.78
Neither	Postconventional	14	37.14	12.88
Somewhat conservative	Postconventional	22	32.91	13.53
Very liberal	Maintaining norms	2	34.00	5.66
Somewhat liberal	Maintaining norms	22	27.82	15.29
Neither	Maintaining norms	14	36.29	15.82
Somewhat conservative	Maintaining norms	22	41.00	14.75
Very liberal	Personal interest	2	26.00	14.14
Somewhat liberal	Personal interest	22	21.18	10.65
Neither	Personal interest	14	22.00	12.77
Somewhat conservative	Personal interest	22	20.90	11.48

to stage transition” (1977, p. 215). However, Turiel, a colleague of Kohlberg, found that transition from “one stage to the next involves a case of conflict or disequilibrium, during which the existing mode of thinking is reevaluated and a new mode is constructed” (1974, p. 14). He defined this transition through the stages of moral development as transformation in the organization of thought, rather than increase in knowledge of cultural values. This

transformation, he wrote, is a function of interaction with the environment. In this study, a low negative significant correlation between the P score (post-conventional) and personal interests ($r = -0.337$; $p < 0.01$) and a moderate negative correlation between P score and maintaining norms ($r = -0.685$; $p < 0.01$) were found. These analyses indicate that as the participants advance towards the use of postconventional thinking (higher P score), they do not abandon the use of maintaining norms and personal interest schemas in moral judgment. Instead, the use of lower levels of moral judgment (personal interest and maintaining norms) decreases. Turiel explained that developmental change is a gradual process in which the lower stages disintegrate as they are replaced by higher conceptions. He wrote,

The process of stage change entails deformation of one structure through its formation into another. . . . Movement from one stage to the next is a process of reflection and construction. Through an awareness of its contradictions and inadequacies, the logic of the existing stage is rejected and a new stage is then created. (1974, p. 28)

Based on these correlations, it is conceivable that people will shift back and forth between the schemas even though the tendency is to use the higher levels of moral judgment more often.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research was to determine the levels of moral judgment of public elementary school principals as measured by the Defining Issues Test Version 2 (DIT-2) for occupationally relevant and other moral dilemmas. However, the findings have also demonstrated how the work of neo-Kohlbergian researchers is responding to criticisms of Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Neo-Kohlbergians have created quantitative and comprehensive methods of determining and predicting moral judgment anchored on Kohlberg's theory of moral development. While they have stayed true to the core of Kohlberg's work, they have also acknowledged the limitations of Kohlberg's method of study and narrow focus. In response, they have constructed instruments that are not only more objective, but transfer the responsibility of the score from a scorer to the respondent. The major development is in the shift from reliance on qualitative to quantitative data. This quantitative method (DIT-2) advances the value of a multi-ethical approach to moral judgment. In the recent past, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) and Stefkovich and Begley (2007) have argued for an expanded model of multiple ethical perspectives (ethics of justice, care, critique, and profession). Previously, Begley, in describing authentic leadership described "value informed" multiple approaches to decision making

that involve sophistication, knowledge base, and skills (2003, p. 1). In other words, multiple perspectives enabled the leader to pursue dilemmas with personal sophistication, sensitivity to others, and reflective professional practice. These perspectives echo the characteristics of postconventional thinking and what is in the best interest of students.

In summary, this study found that: (a) the level of moral judgment among participants (elementary school principals) is much lower than predicted based on their levels of education and age; (b) gender, age in adulthood, and higher degrees beyond undergraduate did not have a significant impact in differentiating levels of moral judgment among participating elementary school principals; (c) political views (liberal or conservative) had a significant impact on the levels of moral judgment among respondents in this study; and (d) there is an inverse relationship between post-conventional thinking level (P score) and maintaining norms and personal interest levels.

Although the average P score of participants in this study was well below what would be considered appropriate for this group of respondents, 25percent of the participants received P scores ranging between 52 and 70, placing them at or above what is considered the norm for individuals with graduate level education. Fifty-three percent of the participants in this study obtained P scores at or above the general adult population. Thus, the average P score may not be a true reflection of the majority of the participants. This is specified because the low average score found in this study raises pertinent questions about the levels of justice and fairness as practiced by elementary school principals. In addition, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has placed undue stress on school leaders. As the focus for accountability and funding have shifted from inputs or processes to outputs, many school leaders have been forced make decisions that favor “drill and test” preparation over effective programming (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008, p. 252).

Despite NCLB, if the major trends in education (including issues of racism, achievement gaps, disparities in discipline, and the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education classes) are moral issues, then it is legitimate to subject the moral judgment of elementary school principals to critical analysis. The likelihood of reversing trends of injustice in schools will require the use of high levels of moral judgment among all school leaders. Further, even though the negative implications of such low scores on moral judgment among a group of professionals are not apparent in practice, it should be a significant consideration for institutions that prepare and hire school leaders, and for the communities and children they serve. According to Larson and Ovando, “distorted racial and ethnic schemas underpin many problematic practices in schools” (2001, p. 78).

The higher P score among females in this study is consistent with the findings of Rest and his colleagues and confirms Gilligan’s concerns (Gilligan, 1977; 1988). The higher scores among females indicate that the DIT-2

bridges the gap between Kohlberg and Gilligan in tapping into both the ethics of justice and the ethic of care. Gilligan justified her concerns saying, "Herein lies the paradox, for the very traits that have traditionally defined the 'goodness' of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development" (Gilligan, 1977, p. 484). The findings of this study indicate that neo-Kohlbergians have restored justice to women by incorporating the orientation of care in the instruments that assess moral judgment. Thus, the neo-Kohlbergians place women in a comparative or competitive standing with men in relation to moral judgment scores and school leadership. Rest's concept of moral judgment includes not only justice and fairness, but also social interaction and cooperation among members of a group. Therefore, it provides some congruency with Gilligan's belief that caring for others and relationship building is critical to moral judgment. It is also critical to leadership (Shapiro, 2006; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005; Starrat, 2005). Gilligan's research on moral reasoning and gender was based on her belief that females have a greater connectedness to people and are formidable in the building of relationships.

Yet the men whose theories have largely informed this understanding of development have all been plagued by the same problem, the problem of women, whose sexuality remains more diffuse, whose perceptions of self is so much more tenaciously embedded in relationships with others and whose moral dilemmas hold them in a mode of judgment that is insistently contextual. The solution has been to consider women as either deviant or deficient in their development. (Gilligan, 1977, p. 482)

Furthermore, participants in this study who identified themselves as more liberal had a significantly higher P score than self-identified conservatives. In other words, liberals used higher levels of moral judgment based on the DIT-2 compared to those who identified themselves as conservative. In another study of public administrators, Rizzo and Swisher (2004) found that liberals had a significantly higher score than conservatives in postconventional thinking based on the DIT-2. The implication is that the more conservative an elementary school principal is, the less likely she/he is to use the "preferable" or "more adequate" Postconventional thinking in making moral judgments (Kohlberg, 1973, p. 630). According to Narvaez (2005), the DIT is a significant predictor of political views that are developed through the process of socialization and social experiences. She explains that individual moral judgment and socialization occur simultaneously. As social experiences occur, they promote development by stimulating mental processes (Crain, 1985, Turiel, 1974). This finding is supported by Larson and Ovando's discussions of schematic thinking and cognitive construction. Initially, individuals' (school leaders') schemas are based on what they have

learned from their environment through socialization. These schemas enable individuals to enter situations with a set of expectations. As the years pass, their schemas are refined and enhanced. This process is significant because the schemas “trigger and influence . . . everyday interactions with each other. In schools, this means that teachers’ and administrators’ images of the children they serve have a direct impact on their interactions with them” (2001, p. 80).

The question that is raised by this finding is: what does it mean when over 40 percent of elementary school leaders are less likely to use postconventional thinking in the process of making moral judgments? The Pearson Moment Correlation found significant low and moderate negative correlations between the P score and maintaining norms and personal interest schemas, respectively. These relatively low and moderate correlations indicate that some traits of lower levels of moral judgment are maintained in adulthood, especially among participants who identified themselves as moderately conservative. Larson and Ovando specify that schemas are highly resistant to change, and that “the primary features of these schemas generally remain unchanged” (2001, p. 75). For this reason, Campbell (2001) argues that the focus for resolving ethical dilemmas in education should be ideals and principles rather than codes or standards. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) and Stefkovich and Begley (2007) argue for the use of multiple ethical perspectives (ethics of justice, care, critique, and profession), while Begley (2003) argues for multiple approaches to decision making that involve personal sophistication, sensitivity to others, and reflective professional practice.

This study indicates that political views, which are often based on social experiences, may explain some of the variance (low P score) among the respondents. Narvaez (2005) reported that religious authoritarianism is related to high scores in the maintaining norms schema, as measured by the DIT-2. This may be attributed to the fact that those who are religious fundamentalists do not question the authority of that doctrine. They are also more likely to hold conservative views. According to Narvaez, when persons who are at the point of shifting to postconventional thinking is entrenched in a fundamentalist social context, they will have difficulty transitioning into the postconventional level of thinking. In this social context, open, democratic, and diverse discussions and debates with others that may lead to the questioning and challenging of one’s existing views may be limited and should be enhanced (Crain, 1985; Narvaez, 2005; Turiel, 1974).

The negative correlations between postconventional thinking and both personal interest and maintaining norms, along with the lower than expected P score, may be attributed to the fact that schemas are powerful and slow to change, especially among those who identified themselves as conservatives. According to Pajares, “The process of accommodating new information and developing beliefs is gradual, one of taking initial steps,

one of accepting and rejecting certain ideas, modifying existing beliefs systems, and finally accepting new ideas" (1993, p. 45). On the other hand, we argue that ethical dilemmas in schools in the USA have become more complex in practice due to policies like NCLB. In addition, leadership preparation programs have not kept pace with such complex challenges. According to Campbell, there are "inevitable human dilemmas, tensions, and complexities that ultimately complicate the implementation of the 'right'" (2001, p. 396). These complex dilemmas, in conjunction with personal and professional schemas, require more than a set of codes or standards to determine the right decision/action in the best interest of students. Therefore, leadership preparation programs must deal with the questions and concerns relating to the capacity to act morally in the complex reality of schools. The majority of leadership programs do not provide courses on ethics and moral decision making that may lead to the progressive hierarchical integration (from personal interest to postconventional thinking), as proposed by Kohlberg and Rest. Such courses may lead aspiring school leaders to new, different, and more comprehensive ways of thinking. Engagement in direct and sustained experiences that challenge their core beliefs (Wasonga, 2005), or case studies using real dilemmas (Shapiro, 2006), have been found to impact educators.

Kohlberg explained that through hierarchical integration, people incorporate insights gained from earlier levels of moral development into new, broader frameworks (Crain, 1985). The principle of hierarchical integration enabled Kohlberg and the neo-Kohlbergians to explain the progressive direction and sequence of the levels or schemas. Rest (1973) found that even though people understood the earlier levels of moral judgment, they preferred to use the higher levels. Similarly, in this study, the participants' mean scores were consistently higher in postconventional thinking followed by maintaining norms, and personal interest, except for the moderate conservatives who had a higher average score in maintaining norms (41.0; SD = 14.75) than in postconventional thinking (32.92; SD = 13.53). Kohlberg explained that each new (higher) stage is "a new structure which includes elements of earlier structures but transforms them in such a way as to represent a more stable and extensive equilibrium," (1973, p. 632). This study indicates that among these elementary school principals, the equilibrium is more stable at higher levels (postconventional) among liberals compared to conservatives (maintaining norms).

Even though the findings of this study are limited to the participants, the impact of political views, gender, and education on moral judgment bring two issues into focus: (1) who is preferable for elementary schools in terms of using postconventional thinking, liberals or conservatives; women or men; more or less educated? (2) what should preparation programs do to change or create the right schemas for moral judgment? Although Kohlberg's

scale was designed for moral thinking, and not moral action, Crain (1985) explains that Kohlberg would expect a positive correlation between thinking and action, albeit not perfect. At higher stages of moral judgment, Kohlberg found that behavior is more consistent and predictable. For this reason, Narvaez (2005) explicates that levels of moral judgment based on Kohlberg's theory provide insight to people's motivations, sensitivities, and potential actions. The findings of this study also provide insights as to who is more likely to use postconventional thinking in their leadership practice and actions. Without generalizing these findings, the data indicate that elementary school districts that seek principals who are likely to use postconventional thinking would be scouting for a younger, moderately liberal, and highly educated female.

What is the role of school leadership preparation programs in the process of developing postconventional thinking? School leadership preparation programs are at a crossroad. They are not only preparing aspiring school leaders who come to them with formed schemas, the faculty are often products of the same environment and possess the same schemas. Through the unconscious process of selective seeing, they are just as "vulnerable to forming and acting on partial and distorted schemas" (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 77). They

consistently sort and classify women, men, rich, poor, and all people of color by schemas that reduce individuals and groups to social and cultural stereotypes. These stereotypes or partial schemas perpetuate inaccurate constructions of "the other." Such unconscious schema constructions can hinder teachers' and administrators' perceptions, interpretations, and judgments in diverse school communities. . . . Thus, educators' unconscious constructions can obstruct perceptions and impair professional judgment. (pp. 77–78)

This being the case, educational administration programs must put forth conscious efforts in challenging the existing normative logic and the belief that the established order of leading schools is universally neutral (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Within the context of preparation programs, Brown found that participating in transformative learning processes and strategies may impact the learners' schemas because of the growth in awareness, acknowledgement, and action toward social justice. Preparation programs should create and use strategies that help faculty and "future leaders develop as transformative, reflective scholars and practitioners actively engaged in political, emancipatory interests . . . requiring the examination of ontological and epistemological assumption, values and beliefs, context and experience, and comparing world views" (2006, p. 700). In addition, Shapiro (2006) suggests that the merging of theory with practice through the use of ethical dilemmas is one way to prepare school leaders for the real world. These

strategies are likely to initiate the process of transforming school leaders' schemas towards the use of the preferred postconventional thinking for moral judgment.

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