

# AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE MORAL JUDGMENT DEVELOPMENT OF A SAMPLE OF HIGH SCHOOL KUWAITI TEACHERS

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This study was conducted to investigate the moral development of one hundred Kuwaiti high school teachers. They ranged in age from 23 to 48 years with a mean of 28.6 years and a standard deviation of 8.3 years. The teachers' individual moral judgment levels were assessed by the Defining Issues Test (DIT)- an objective test designed by James Rest to measure levels of moral reasoning stages .

The results revealed that the participants reasoned predominantly at the conventional level of Kohlberg's moral taxonomy. Principles morality score (P-score) was found to be below the norms reported in the literature for this group. The results related to the gender variable indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the level of moral reasoning of high school teachers based on their gender.

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest and concern among educationists, psychologists, philosophers and theologians in studying morality and moral development. Perhaps the major important contribution by a psychologist to the field of moral development, after Piaget, has been made by the late Harvard psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg. While Kohlberg relies heavily on previous moral development theories of Piaget (1932), McDougall (1908), Baldwin (1906), Mead (1934), and Dewey (1895), he nevertheless builds a unique empirical framework that allows the observation of normative ethics, research hypotheses, and interpretation of results (Kohlberg , 1969; 1981).Kohlberg (1984) identified three levels and six stages of moral reasoning:

Preconventional Moral Reasoning level: is divided into two stages that are

characterized by a responsiveness to cultural rules and notions of right and wrong. It is the way children and young adolescents typically think about moral issues. Individuals' reasoning at stage one, Punishment and obedience orientation, is to avoid breaking rules that result in punishment. Individuals at this stage have no internal standard for judging moral issues and are incapable of understanding another person's point of view. To those at stage two, Instrumental-Relativist Orientation, right is viewed as what is equal or fair. They tend to be concerned about reciprocity and fair exchange (doing something in exchange for something else). When a stage two individual's personal interests are fulfilled, he or she tends to follow established rules.

Conventional Level reasoning : It consists of conformity to personal and social

expectations, and loyalty to maintaining, supporting, and justifying social order. The two stages at this level are typical of the moral reasoning of many adults. Interpersonal Concordance or "Good Boy-Nice Girl" Orientation is the third stage. At this stage, individuals perceive good behavior as pleasing or helping others and being "nice." Stage four, Law and Order, is characterized by concern for authority, rules, and enforcement of social duties. "Laws are upheld except in extreme cases where they conflict with other fixed social duties" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 175).

Postconventional Level moral reasoning: is Kohlberg's highest level. It is characterized by "moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles and apart from the individual's own identification with these groups" (Smith, 1978, p. 56). At stage five, Social Contract and Legalistic Orientation, individuals view right in terms of individual rights that have been examined and supported by society and they have a clear awareness of the relativism of personal rules and opinions. Stage six, Universal-Ethical-Principled Orientation, is defined as following self-chosen ethical principles that are comprehensive, universal, and consistent. The principles are abstract and ethical, not concrete rules or laws (Smith, 1978; Kohlberg, 1984).

*Kohlberg, Rest, and the Defining Issues Test.*

Kohlberg's work was followed by that of James Rest (1941-1999), who concurred with the majority of Kohlberg's theory. However, while Kohlberg's primary inter-

est was to devise a theoretical system to represent the logic of moral thinking, Rest was also concerned with the development of a valid, reliable measurement instrument that could be used to assess ethical reasoning and to test hypotheses about moral reasoning. Rest (1979) developed the Defining Issues Test (DIT) as an objective test of ethical development based on the six stages defined by Kohlberg. DIT research is based on the assumption "that developmental stages of moral judgment involve distinctive ways of defining social moral dilemmas and of evaluating crucial issues in them" (Rest, 1979, p. 85). The output of the DIT is a continuous variable, the P-score, that is "interpreted as the relative importance a subject gives to principled moral considerations in making a decision about ethical dilemmas" (Rest, 1975, p. 740). Rest (1979, p. 101) presented results that indicate the P-score is a good surrogate measurement for locating a subject along the underlying developmental continuum represented by the stages of development.

Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning development has stimulated considerable amount of research about moral reasoning in many western cultures (e.g., Rest, 1986 ; Latif, and Dunn, 2004; ). However, there have been relatively few studies concerning moral development of subjects from Muslim countries. An extensive review of the literature revealed a few of such investigations of moral reasoning among Muslim subjects (Ismail, 1976; Maqsud, 1977, 1998 ; Bouhmama , 1984, 1988, 18989). The purpose of the present study was to investigate the patterns of

moral reasoning of a sample of Kuwaiti secondary school teachers. Specifically, two research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What is the profile of moral reasoning of a sample of Kuwaiti secondary school teachers as measured by the Defining Issues test (DIT) ?
2. Are there differences in moral reasoning of the participants in this research according to their gender ?

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

The participants in the present study were one hundred Kuwaiti teachers (50 females 50 males) from two secondary schools in Kuwait city. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 48 years with a mean of 26.6 years and a standard deviation of 8.3 years.

#### *Instrument*

The instrument most often used to operationalize moral development and place individuals within a Kohlberg level is Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT). The DIT assesses recognition, comprehension, and preference. It is a multiple-choice instrument that yields a continuous number, the P score, representing the relative importance each subject places on Kohlberg's postconventional level of moral development. The DIT presents a subject with six moral dilemmas.

After reading each dilemma the subject then rank orders a list of twelve questions that describes what ought to be done in the

dilemma. Each of the twelve statements represents considerations at different stages of Kohlberg moral development. A subject who gives a higher ranking to post-conventional-oriented questions receives a higher P score (Rest 1986; Elm and Weber 1994). Researchers have administered the DIT in hundreds of studies to thousands of subjects and have documented the instrument in terms of reliability, validity, and stability. Cross-sectional and longitudinal DIT studies provide empirical evidence that people change over time from less to more advanced levels of moral development. In a review of twelve thousand subjects, Rest (1993) finds that the most important determinants of moral development are education and age, and longitudinal studies report significant changes in DIT scores from high school into adulthood (White, Bushnell, and Regnemer 1978).

The most commonly-used index 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, post-conventional 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, pg. i). 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). A review of several studies by Davison and Robbins (1978) concluded

that the test-retest reliability for the P-score are 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 for 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). Research evidence indicates 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 (Rest, 1990).

### Procedure

The Arabic version of the short form of the DIT was used in this study as mentioned above. The three dilemmas included: "Heinz and the Drug", "Escaped Prisoner", and "The Doctor's Dilemma", they were administered to the participants in the study who responded 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

Research Question 1: What is the profile of moral reasoning of a sample of secondary Kuwaiti school teachers as measured by the Defining Issues test (DIT) ?

One major goal of this study was to investigate the profile of the moral reasoning of a sample of Kuwaiti secondary school teachers as measured by the Defining Issues test (DIT). Table 1 shows the mean stage scores for the DIT for the sample of Kuwaiti secondary teachers. As can be seen, for the entire sample, the scores for the conventional level are apparently higher than for the postconventional level of moral judgment development. The means of the stage 4 of moral reasoning (40.88) is the highest score obtained by the sample as a whole, whereas, the principle moral reasoning score (P-score) of the sample reached only 24.66.

The total sample mean P -score of 24.66% was lower than the normative mean for comparison groups in other studies employing the DIT. It is quite evident

**TABLE 1: A SUMMARY OF THE DIT MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF STAGE SCORES (N=100)**

Stages	Means	SDs
Stage 2	5.32	6.85
Stage 3	35.02	18.86
Stage A	10.32	10.12
Stage 4	40.88	19.53
Stage 5a	13.24	9.36
Stage 5b	3.08	4.80
Stage 6	8.34	5.14
P-Score	24.66	10.76

from the table 1 that stage 4 moral orientation received the highest mean score (40.88) with a standard deviation of 19.53. This result shows that stage 4 orientation is salient as a common pattern of thinking of the sample at large.

Research Question 2 : Are there differences in moral reasoning of the participants in this research according to their gender ?

The second research question addressed in the present study concerned the gender differences. Table 2 displays the Means, Standards Deviations and t-test values according to the gender of the participants.

Table (2) Means and Standards Deviations and t-test value  
according to the gender of the participants.

Stages	Males		Females		t- test
	means	SD	means	SD	
2	8.53	6.24	6.32	5.89	2.56
3	33.82	12.81	29.54	17.42	1.97
4	31	10.55	27.18	15.99	1.98
5A	9	8.36	17.12	9.83	6.29
5B	2.83	3.85	8.33	8.10	6.1
6	7.33	9.85	11.12	12.54	2.36
A	8	7.30	3.46	4.16	6.39
P	19.17	12.34	36.57	13.66	5.62

Results from Table 2 above revealed that males scored higher on the conventional level (stages 3 and 4 =64.82) than females (stages 3 and 4 = 56.72); whereas, females scored higher on the postconventional level (P- score= 36.57) than males (P-score= 19.17).T-tests examinations also revealed that the differences were significant ( $t=1.97$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for stage 3;  $t=1.98$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for stage 4 ;  $t=2.36$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for P-score/post conventional level).

#### Discussion

The results of the present research are not startling and perhaps merely reinforce the results of other researchers using similar group. Yeazell and Johnson(1988) reported that most of the studies have found that teacher education students are functioning at the conventional level reasoning , the so-called "law and order" stage described by Kohlberg(Kohlberg, 1969; 1976; 1984).The same is true in the present study. In fact, the participants in this study scored lower than those of senior

high school students in the Rest normative population. The nature of this finding might raise doubts about the ability of this sample to understand and teach ethical principles and to facilitate the development of their own students' moral reasoning. It might also raise questions about how they will make decisions in their daily classroom activities with regard to moral situations such as fairness and classroom discipline as suggested by Yeazell and Johnson(1988). And indeed, as suggested by Yeazell and Johnson(1988) we cannot expect from persons who cannot recognize moral and ethical principles to use them in the heat of the classroom. Obviously, if we are concerned that teachers become morally responsible agents, it is not sufficient to train them to be merely technically competent, we must begin to pay attention to their moral dimension in teacher education.

Thus, the importance of ethics in teaching cannot be overstated. If the vulnerability of children is considered, ethical concerns become imperative for teachers, because teachers usually work in isolation and children are likely to feel helpless and are unable to recognize unethical treatment ( Strike & Soltis, 1992). In a word, children tend to be victimized if teachers behave unethically.

The second research question of this study is concerned with the influence of gender differences on moral reasoning. Gender issue has been an issue extensively researched in the literature ( e.g., Walker, 1991; Krebs., Vermeulen; Denton, & Carpendale. (1994); Ward, 1995; King., & Mayhew, (2002). In this present study, no gender differences were found among

the Kuwait adolescents. Overall, the present data is consistent with much research reporting no significant differences on moral reasoning according to gender of the participants (Maqsd, 1977, 1998; White, 1988; Gump, L. S.; Baker, R. C.; & Roll, S. (2000).

### Conclusion

In this paper we extended the research on teachers' ethics by using the DIT to examine the moral judgment development of a sample of Kuwaiti high school teachers. The results revealed that Kuwaiti high school teachers demonstrated higher stage scores for the conventional level than for the postconventional level of the moral judgment development. The findings showed a trend to resolve the moral dilemmas in the socially approved direction. The prominence of stage 4 of moral judgment level obtained by the sample of this study may be interpreted as due to the conformity to the stereotypes of good behaviour and meeting with social approval which are stressed in their culture.

In a democracy, teaching is essentially a moral activity particularly as it involves assimilating the young into a democratic society. It is a moral activity because teachers have a specific responsibility for the appropriate moral development of their students. And it is basically irresponsible to engage teachers in this important enterprise without them first achieving adequate knowledge and a high degree of moral sensitivity. These are acquired, essentially, through critical, disciplined socialization in the full array of expectations and community responsibilities. This is unlikely to

occur in the usual teacher preparation experiences (Goodlad, 1990).

The requisite knowledge base for teachers is not simply an understanding of subject matter and pedagogical techniques. What is required is for them to learn to be their own persons so that they can in turn teach their students to be their own persons. Teaching the young to be their own persons is likely to be unsound when teachers lack a reasonable understanding of the general capacities necessary for choosing, holding, and pursuing one's own personal and social good. Being one's own person involves possessing a strength of personality, and independence of judgment, and a degree of self-understanding that permits individuals to use freedom for their own personal as well as social purposes. Students can be their own persons depending on how penetrating and discriminating their judgment, and how acute their self-understanding. Their purposes can be their own depending on how broad the range of possibilities from which they are chosen and how deep their understanding is of these possibilities. Their sense of justice can regulate their actions to the extent to which they are willing to forego the advancement of their own good in order to treat others fairly (Fenstermacher, 1990).

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