

# MORAL REASONING OF MSW SOCIAL WORKERS AND THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION

**Laura E. Kaplan**

University of Northern Iowa

This research examined the influence of undergraduate degree and ethics education on the moral reasoning of social workers. Statistical analyses found MSW social workers with liberal arts undergraduate degrees more likely to prefer postconventional levels of moral reasoning, defined as greater complexity of thought and principled reasoning. The overall mean Defining Issues Test scores of 44.77 place the sample in maintaining-norms levels, i.e., authority-based moral reasoning. Ethics courses were found to be somewhat related to levels of moral reasoning.

SIMILAR TO OTHER PROFESSIONS, social work deals in moral issues. On a daily basis, social workers confront these issues in the form of questions about the rights of individuals to make decisions about their own lives and behaviors, the distribution of limited resources among individuals and families, and about our own duties to the profession, to society, and to our clients. Social workers are responsible for making judgments that are critical to the lives of individuals and their communities, from those that influence a child's future to those decisions that affect their communities—are children better off living in troubled families than in foster care? Is treatment for drug addiction better than jail for the individual and the community? When needed services are available for only a few clients, who will

receive them? When the community resources are overwhelmed, how are new services to be funded? Who are the best parents for adoptive or foster care children? These moral questions are intrinsic to daily social work practice.

To deal with moral quandaries, professions have developed behavior and knowledge standards for members. These include codes of ethics, licensing requirements, specific missions, specialized intellectual knowledge including literature and research, and organizations that develop and maintain adjudication processes for members who do not follow the expected standards (Barber, 1988; Bayles, 1988; Goldstein, 1990; Kugelman, 1992). The *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* of the Council of Social Work Education (2001), requires that,

Social work education programs integrate content about values and principles of ethical decision making as presented in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. The educational experience provides students with the opportunity to be aware of personal values; develop, demonstrate, and promote the values of the profession; and analyze ethical dilemmas and the ways in which these affect practice, services, and clients. (Sec. 4.0)

Thus, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires ethics and values education to be integrated throughout the social work curriculum. However, it does not provide specific information on the type, content, or method for achieving this.

While the subject of ethics is integrated throughout the curriculum, some schools offer separate, specific ethics classes in social work or in other disciplines. This article discusses the first research examining the moral reasoning of MSW graduates who hold varying undergraduate degrees, those whose ethics education was only via integration in the curriculum, and those with an additional, specific course in ethics.

Data for this project were collected in 2001 using the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (a measure of moral judgment—Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999) to measure the dependent variable of moral reasoning. Moral reasoning and moral judgment are considered equivalent here, as often occurs in research literature (Eisenberg et al., 2002; Fleck-Henderson, 1991). The DIT is a measure based on Rest et al.'s (1999) model in which progression

in moral development is reflected in one's ability to think about moral issues in increasingly complex ways. In the first (personal-interest level) moral reasoning is based on what one may gain or lose. The maintaining-norms level follows, in which judgments are based on the established authority. The highest level, postconventional moral reasoning, is indicative of the ability to think critically about moral issues, to consider societal and individual concerns, and to critically analyze issues and resolutions rather than moral reasoning relying upon self-centered or authority-based criteria. Instruments were mailed to a random sampling of 1,000 U.S. social workers who completed their MSW degrees between 1999 (the 1st year of the CSWE ethics requirement) and 2001. Three hypotheses were tested: (1) MSW social workers with undergraduate degrees in social work would show less preference for using postconventional moral reasoning than MSW social workers with undergraduate degrees in liberal arts; (2) MSW social workers with specific ethics courses in their undergraduate education would show greater preference for using postconventional moral reasoning than those who did not have ethics courses in undergraduate education; and (3) MSW social workers with specific ethics courses in their graduate education would show greater preference for using postconventional moral reasoning than those without an ethics course in graduate education.

## Literature Review

### Ethics in Social Work Practice

A key indicator of moral or ethical social work practice is adherence to state licensure regula-

tions and the National Association of Social Workers (1999) *Code of Ethics*. However, research shows that social workers are not always ethical. Some social workers behave in ways that are in clear opposition to the Code, others behave in ways that may be considered questionable—practices the Code recommends not doing or behaviors falling into grey areas that require thoughtful analysis to determine their appropriateness. For example, social workers engage in bartering, friendships, business relationships, and sexual relationships with potential, current, and former clients (Kaplan, 2001). Jayaratne, Croxton, and Mattison (1997) reported that social workers in their study saw relatives or friends as clients; sat on community boards or committees with clients; and participated in social activities or recreation with clients. Strom-Gottfried (1999, 2003) found that between 1986 and 1997, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) adjudicated 267 ethics violations (the most recent data available in the literature). The most common violations of the NASW *Code of Ethics* were sexual activity, dual relationships, other boundary violations, failure to seek supervision or consultation, failure to use accepted practice skills, fraudulent behavior, premature termination, inadequate provisions for case transfer or referral, failure to maintain adequate records or reports, failure to discuss policies as part of informed consent (Strom-Gottfried, 2003).

Certainly, most social workers do conduct themselves within the parameters of ethical and legal expectations. With an estimated 600,000 individuals now holding social work degrees and an expected 20% increase in this number over the next 5 years (NASW, 2005),

this is an opportune moment to develop baseline research on the connections between education and ethical practice.

The social work ethics literature focuses on a variety of areas, including: specific ethical dilemmas, dual relationships, the NASW *Code of Ethics*, values, risk management and legal issues, boundaries, frameworks for dilemma resolution, explorations of professional or student opinions on ethics issues, and higher education course content (Kaplan, 2001). Research in the broad category of helping professions (social work, psychology, marriage and family therapy, counseling) indicates that education may be a factor in determining how professionals identify and respond to ethical dilemmas (Bernsen, Tabachnick, & Pope, 1994; Borys & Pope, 1989; Jayaratne et al., 1997; Webb, 1997).

If social workers are expected to conduct themselves in an ethical manner, then it follows that enhancing moral reasoning (or moral judgment) is integral to the CSWE requirement for ethics integration throughout social work curricula. If moral reasoning is a precursor to ethical conduct (Albers, 2000; Goldstein, 1998; Manning, 1997; Morelock, 1997; Reamer, 1999; Wakefield, 2000), and social work education is a venue for teaching ethical conduct, then a relationship between moral reasoning and social work education would be evident.

Interest in social workers' moral reasoning, seen as the basis for ethical conduct, is receiving attention (Fleck-Henderson, 1998; Goldstein, 1987, 1998; Gray, 1995; Manning, 1997, Reamer, 1998; Speicher, 1998). To look closer at the relationship, we first turn to the definition of moral reasoning and the theoretical background of the study.

### **Rest's Neo-Kohlbergian Theory**

I have conceptualized moral reasoning and moral development based on Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma's (1999) neo-Kohlbergian theory. This theory emerged from the work of Kohlberg and Gilligan, moving from Kohlberg's (1984) six-stage developmental model to Gilligan's (1977) contextual care model, then to a model based on schemas, with an increasing focus on the individual having an active role in the reasoning process within the context of society. Kohlberg's (1984) highest level, the postconventional stage, is based particularly in Rawlsian theory. In this stage, the individual considers the principle of justice in viewing the world. To reach this high stage of moral development, an individual passes through earlier consecutive stages by constructing moral judgments based on her or his own thinking, with no social context involved.

In the neo-Kohlbergian postconventional schema (or stage), the individual does not move through steps of development, rather as development occurs there is a gradual shifting in the "distributions of the use and preference for more developed thinking . . . the higher stages gaining in use whereas the lower stages diminish" (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999, p. 57). Schemas are the structures of information individuals hold from previous experience and knowledge. These structures provide the lens through which new experiences are seen and understood. They provide a way to match new information to that which is in our long-term memory; our interpretation of events depends on which schema is stimulated by them. Thus, as we develop, our moral reasoning process increases in complex-

ity, we use the higher schemas (stages) more and the lower ones less. This increasing complexity is indicative of critical thinkers, the ability to think through the messy issues in life and see the nuances involved in the problems and their resolutions. Morality is not solely based in the individual's psyche, but emerges from the social condition because we live in groups (Rest, 1988). In neo-Kohlbergian theory (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999), moral development is not tied to one moral theory or principle, "postconventional thinking proposes a sharable ideal for society open to scrutiny and debate" (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999, p. 57). Principled theories can fit this description, but so may others. Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, and Beabeau (1999) developed the Defining Issues Test (DIT) as a method of measuring individuals' preference for using postconventional reasoning.

### **DIT as a Measurement of Moral Reasoning**

The Defining Issues Test (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999) has been used extensively to measure moral reasoning. The DIT consists of vignettes based on the actual responses from Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview research. Each vignette is followed by a set of 12 items that are to be rated and prioritized by their importance in deciding the resolution of the dilemma. For scoring, items are categorized by schema (preconventional to postconventional). If the respondent does not function at the higher schemas, she will not select items associated with them. Lower schema items will be familiar but will be passed over if the respondent uses higher lev-

els. This is not a conscious process. For example, in a dilemma of whether to steal life-saving medication for a loved one, a subject may prioritize an item concerning the importance of compliance with the law. This response fits into Kohlberg's Stage 4 and Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma's (1999) maintaining-norms schema. After rating and ranking each item, the respondent considers all 12 items at the same time and prioritizes which were the most important ones to consider in making a decision.

Research using DIT indicates that using certain educational methods such as volunteer service combined with reflection in journal writing, discussions, and readings can enhance moral judgment (Bebeau, 1991; Duckett & Ryden, 1994; Narvaez, 2001; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). There is consensus that combinations of experiential practice, reflection, reading, discussion, exploration of philosophical concepts, and writing in a series of classes are more effective than one shot or integrated methods, particularly if the content is unidentifiable as ethics related (Rest, 1994, pp. 217-219). The research thus far suggests that the type of education one has, and the content and form of moral education, are related to the development and enhancement of moral reasoning as measured by the DIT.

### **Education and Moral Reasoning**

A number of studies have found formal education to have a significant positive correlation with moral judgment (Izzo, 2000; Marnburg, 2001; McNeel, 1994; Perez-Delgado & Oliver, 1995; Rest, 1988; Rest, Nar-

vaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999; Walker, Rowland, & Boyes, 1991; Windsor & Cappel, 1999). Formal education is a predictor of more complex moral reasoning because individuals who seek higher education tend to be people who enjoy learning, are interested in self-growth, prosper in intellectually and socially stimulating environments, and are more interested and involved in community and societal issues (Rest, 1994). This may point to issues concerning what type of students entering a program might have the best potential to graduate as ethical professionals.

McNeel (1994) found liberal arts programs to be the strongest college-related variable influencing levels of moral reasoning, exceeding the effects of

verbal and quantitative skills, oral skills, written skills, communication skills, personal adjustment, self-esteem, independence, interpersonal relations, and intellectual orientation, and is exceeded only by the effect sizes reported for critical thinking, use of reason, and ability to deal with conceptual complexity. (p. 33)

These findings indicate that effective ethics education would enhance the moral reasoning of students by including curriculum content from liberal arts, and, importantly, by including content and teaching methods that enhance the students' critical-thinking abilities. If we can identify the moral reasoning (judgment) skills of social workers, we can first determine if their DIT scores are within the postconventional reasoning schema. We

can then examine the content and methods of ethics education to consider if the curriculum needs greater emphasis on liberal arts and critical thinking to best prepare graduates for working with complex moral problems in practice. McNeel's (1994) meta-analysis of DIT pre- and posttest studies of students in freshman and senior years at 12 colleges (7 liberal arts colleges, 3 universities, and 2 Bible colleges) found the following variations in moral-judgment levels across majors (effect size in parentheses): "psychology (1.48), nursing (1.47), English (1.26) . . . and social work (1.01)" (p. 34). The least amount of growth from freshman to senior year was seen in business and education majors, these together showed a moderate effect (0.58). McNeel indicates that social work does have an effect on moral reasoning, though not as much as other majors.

Social work literature is currently asking how we can behave ethically in practice, but it is not sufficiently connected to how we think. There remains a critical gap in social work research, as we have not examined the ability to consider complex moral concerns and choose the ethical behavior, and how social work curriculum content best prepares students to think and act ethically.

Recommendations about ethics education content in the social work literature such as case studies, written and oral analysis, and moral philosophy (Morelock, 1997) are congruent with the DIT research, including the use of varied classroom strategies (Bebeau, 1991; Duckett & Ryden, 1994; Narvaez, 2001; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, Thoma, 1999; Sprinthall, 1994). The DIT is an appropriate and tested instrument with which to measure social

workers' moral reasoning, and to provide data on which to build research, bringing together ethical education, behaviors, and thinking in our profession. It is used here to determine a baseline examination of social workers' moral reasoning. The DIT gives us a first look at comparisons of moral reasoning among social workers whose education included integrated ethics, discrete ethics courses, and liberal arts and other undergraduate degrees to consider the effects of these variables on moral judgment.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The research project received approval from the university Institutional Review Board. The sample was drawn from MSW programs accredited by CSWE using the following strategy: a convenience sampling of programs from private sectarian, public, and private nonsectarian colleges and universities provided a source for MSW graduates from 1999 through 2001. This group was selected intentionally to sample a cross section of programs. It is assumed all have integrated ethics course material, some also require specific ethics courses in their MSW programs. Additionally, variation was sought in private, public, sectarian, and nonsectarian schools to enable consideration of these characteristics as possible variables in the research. From these, a stratified cluster sample ( $n=1,000$ ) was used to identify potential participants from each school. MSW alumni from eight CSWE-accredited colleges and universities (labeled as five nonsectarian I, II, III, IV, and V; and 3 sectarian I, II, and III) were selected for research.

The DIT, two additional instruments, and postage-paid return envelopes were mailed to potential subjects (500 to sectarian school graduates, 500 to nonsectarian school graduates). Of the total 265 (26%) returned surveys, 221 (83%) were from women, 44 (17%) were from men, 226 (85%) were Caucasian/White, 18 (7%) African American/Black, 8 (3%) Hispanic/Latino, 4 (2%) Native American/Indian, and 3 (2%) each indicated Asian/Pacific Islander, Other, or made no response. The average age of respondents was 38.6 ( $SD=10.26$ ) and ranged from 23 to 68 years old.

Participants identified 83 different undergraduate majors that were grouped into four categories: social work, psychology, liberal arts (humanities, art, English, languages, history, women's studies, American studies, philosophy, and literature), and other (health, social, and physical sciences; business, and education). This last category formed the largest group of respondents ( $n=98$ , 37%), with sociology as the most common ( $n=17$ , 18%). Psychology was the next largest group

( $n=78$ , 30%) followed by social work ( $n=63$ , 24%), and liberal arts ( $n=26$ , 10%).

An over-sampling of smaller programs was taken. In three cases (Nonsectarian III, Sectarian I, and Nonsectarian V) the entire population was selected because of lower numbers of responses from a few programs. Table 1 reflects the entire sampling frame.

### Instrumentation

The DIT has moderate-to-high internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha with ranges between .70 and .80 (Dobrin, 1989; Glover, 1997; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999; Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997; Windsor & Cappell, 1999).

DIT scores, ranging from 0 to 95, measure a subject's preference for postconventional thinking. Scores below 50 are interpreted as meaning the individual's moral reasoning lies in the maintaining-norms schema. These individuals believe the maintenance of existing norms, laws, and obeying authority are the key

**TABLE 1. Sample Population by University Affiliation**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Total Graduates 1999–2001</b>	<b>Graduates Sampled</b>	<b>Completed Surveys</b>	
			<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Nonsectarian I	160	90	26	28
Nonsectarian II	339	113	37	33
Nonsectarian III	75	75	22	29
Nonsectarian IV	352	113	23	20
Nonsectarian V	109	109	31	28
Sectarian I	88	88	11	13
Sectarian II	447	262	77	29
Sectarian III	300	150	38	25

aspects of moral considerations. Previous research reports mean DIT scores for the general population of adults at 40, and a range from 19 for incarcerated youth, to a high of 65 among moral philosophy and political science doctoral students (Rest, 1994; Rest & Narvaez, 1998). In health professions, the mean score for groups of nurses tested was 46 and for medical students it was 50 (Rest, 1994; Rest & Narvaez, 1998). In the only previous study in social work using the DIT, Dobrin (1989) surveyed NASW members varied in employment settings, degree (undergraduate to doctorate), and years in practice, finding a mean score of 50.

Data analyses included independent-samples *t* tests, regression analysis, and the SPSS 10 forward elimination technique to remove variables of less significance. Analyses used a significance level of  $p \leq .05$ .

## Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that MSW social workers with undergraduate degrees in social

work would show less preference for using postconventional moral reasoning than MSW social workers with undergraduate degrees in liberal arts. The DIT scores for social work majors ranged from 12.89 to 71.77. The scores for liberal arts majors ranged from 31.94 to 70.95. The results of an independent-samples *t* test support this hypothesis, showing a statistically significant difference ( $t = -2.834$ ) between the social work and liberal arts undergraduates (see Table 2).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that MSW social workers with specific ethics courses in their undergraduate education would show greater preference for using postconventional moral reasoning than those who did not have ethics courses in undergraduate education. The results of the independent-samples *t* test ( $t = -1.383$ ,  $p = .168$ ,  $df = 254$ ) do not support this hypothesis (see Table 3).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that MSW social workers with specific ethics courses in their graduate education would show greater pref-

**TABLE 2. Mean Comparisons on DIT Scores for Social Work and Liberal Arts Undergraduate Majors**

Major	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Social work	58	42.16	16.74	-2.834	82	.006
Liberal arts	26	52.27	10.52			

Note. DIT=Defining Issues Test.

**TABLE 3. Mean Comparisons on DIT Scores for Undergraduate Ethics Course**

Undergraduate Course	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Yes	87	43.05	14.92	-1.383	254	.168
No	169	45.67	13.97			

Note. DIT=Defining Issues Test.

erence for using postconventional moral reasoning than those without an ethics course in graduate education. Just the opposite occurred, those with specific ethics courses in graduate school scored lower on the DIT. The results of this independent-samples *t* test do not support this directional hypothesis (see Table 4). While the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, the findings are significant in the opposite direction of what was hypothesized ( $t=-2.033$ ,  $p=.043$ ,  $df=254$ ). Possible explanations for this unexpected finding are considered in the discussion section.

Because some participants may have had both an undergraduate and a graduate ethics course, additional correlation analysis was completed. This confirmed that only the graduate ethics class had a significant correlation with DIT scores ( $r=.127$ ,  $p=.05$ ).

An Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis was completed on the independ-

ent variables of sex, social work undergraduate major, liberal arts, undergraduate major, undergraduate ethics course, graduate ethics course, nonsectarian school, sectarian school (although the present article focuses on selected variables only) and the dependent variable DIT scores to find the best overall model.

Using a reduced model (see Table 5) and forward elimination technique in SPSS 10 to eliminate variables that were of less significance, only two variables—liberal arts undergraduate education ( $\beta=.162$ ,  $p=.009$ ) and having an ethics course ( $\beta=-.150$ ,  $p=.016$ ) were predictive of DIT scores.

As expected, liberal arts had a significant positive correlation with DIT scores. However, having had an ethics course was found, unexpectedly, to have a negative correlation with DIT scores. Despite the fact that these correlations were found to be significant, they account for only 5% of the variance in the models.

**TABLE 4. Mean Comparisons on DIT Scores for Graduate Ethics Course**

Graduate Course	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Yes	169	43.48	14.96	-2.033	254	.043
No	87	47.30	12.73			

Note. DIT=Defining Issues Test.

**TABLE 5. Regression Analyses Between DIT Scores and Independent Variables**

Variable	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SE</i>
Liberal arts undergraduate major	.162	.009	7.085	.001	.053	14.0006
Ethics course	-.150	.016				

Note. DIT=Defining Issues Test.

### **Limitations**

The small return rate of 27% ( $N=265$ ) may be a result of the time and context of mailing which took place within the winter holiday season shortly after the World Trade Center attacks. These attacks may have influenced the return rate in that mail, even from universities, received from people unknown to the recipient may have caused concern to some. No incentive was awarded because of cost and concerns of what might appear to be suspicious packaging. Although the timing may be an influence in response rates, the DIT research does not indicate variations in scoring because of short-term events. However, it may be interesting to examine if such events influence DIT scores over time.

A rich sample was sought, drawing directly from the colleges and universities but to respect privacy, the colleges rather than the researcher maintained all address lists. This meant the researcher was limited in the ability to re-contact individuals who failed to respond to mailings.

The DIT (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999) measures only one component (moral judgment) of their Four Component Model of Moral Development (moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character). Moral actions are said to emerge from an integration of all these, therefore, it cannot be stated here that the preference for postconventional reasoning is the sole predictor of moral action. However, there is evidence that moral reasoning is related to moral actions. Bebeau (2002) reports a relationship between moral judgment and clinical performance in nursing and medicine.

Affiliation of the colleges was considered (although the sample was too small to analyze this as a variable), but the full context of the colleges was not a feasible part of this task at this time. This would be an important aspect for further research. As reported by King and Mayhew (2002), college context includes such factors as racial and ethnic diversity of the students, faculty, and administration; the philosophy and values of the institution (e.g., are intellectual and moral inquiry encouraged?); what kinds of students are attracted to the college (i.e., are DIT scores higher because of the nature of the school or nature of the student?); size of classes; and the culture. Looking at these factors in addition to affiliation, and in larger samples, is recommended.

### **Discussion**

Subjects with undergraduate degrees in social work (BSW) were found to have lower scores on the DIT than subjects with undergraduate degrees in the liberal arts. The average DIT score of the BSW graduate ( $M=42.16$ ) fell in the maintaining-norms schema (similar to Kohlberg's stage 4) of Rest's neo-Kohlbergian moral theory, whereas the average score for liberal arts BA graduates ( $M=52.27$ ) fell into the postconventional schema. This finding is in accordance with earlier research findings, that a liberal arts education best prepares individuals for postconventional reasoning (McNeel, 1994).

CSWE (2001, Sec. 1.2) educational policy notes that social work education is grounded in liberal arts education, however there is a significant difference between the scores of participants with undergraduate social work degrees (note that BASW and BSW degrees

were considered equivalent). This opens up several questions for consideration. The CSWE (2001) educational policy for both MSW and BSW programs requires "Providing curricula that build on a liberal arts perspective to promote breadth of knowledge, critical thinking, and communication skills" (Sec. 1.2). This policy leads us to expect similar DIT scores for participants with BSWs and those with liberal arts undergraduate degrees. But these research results indicate the need for closer examination of curriculum content and teaching methods to respond to the question of what ethics content would best equip students with the critical thinking needed in multi-problem families. Although the sample size in this study was rather small, we may not be linking BSW curricula to practice as effectively as we may believe in current practice. Liberal arts curricula offer a wider variety of courses than do most undergraduate social work programs. BSW programs may emphasize coursework that is more technical and targeted to specific behaviors seen as standard to practice. Liberal arts courses, by nature, are concerned with analytical discourse of wide ranging subject matter. It may be the thoughtful approach and broader knowledge offered in liberal arts that influences the ability to think in more complex ways than the training approach and narrow subject matter that may be more common in undergraduate social work programs.

There was no significant difference in DIT scores between participants with an undergraduate ethics course and those without a specific course. Both groups scored in the maintaining-norms schema range. We must take caution in considering the findings in

graduate ethics education because the hypothesis was a directional one and results were significant but not as predicted. That said, in this study, respondents with graduate-level ethics courses were more likely to be in the maintaining norms schema than those with no graduate ethics course. Instead of finding that having had an ethics course correlates with preference for postconventional reasoning (DIT score >50), I found these individuals had *less* preference for postconventional reasoning than those with ethics education that was solely integrated within the curriculum. This unexpected finding may be the result of the sample, and replication of this hypothesis is needed before any clear conclusions can emerge.

### **Implications**

This research found MSW social workers to achieve an average score of approximately 45 ( $M=44.7$ ), certainly higher than the average score of 40 in the general adult population, but as a profession, we must ask ourselves what kind of moral reasoning should we expect in professional social workers? Thoma's (1994) argument is particularly noteworthy in considering this question,

[The postconventional thinker] . . . determines what is morally right from the perspective of a society that balances the interests of its participants, optimizes the stake of each participant in supporting that society, and eliminates arbitrary advantages or influence. . . . For low scoring students, discussions of intermediate-level concepts (e.g., *informed consent, paternalistic deception*,

*privileged confidentiality . . . [ital in original]) do not find lodging in bedrock of basic cognitive structure, but rather seem like superfluous solutions for problems neither foreseen nor recognized.* For students with low moral judgment scores, it means that the principled solutions to ethical problems must be learned one at a time . . . largely by rote, since their default schemas do not provide a general perspective for anticipating principled solutions. These students have trouble extending principles beyond the cases specifically taught. They are baffled when ideals conflict. In real life, it means that people with low moral judgment scores are likely to oversimplify life situations, and although they might have good technical skills and generally good intentions, they are vulnerable to finding themselves involved in ethical problems over their heads. (p. 214)

Which of these two individuals would be considered the better social worker? What skills do we want to impart to our students—"good technical skills and generally good intentions" or the ability to think critically about balancing individual and societal claims? Ethics education for social workers usually revolves around cases and decision trees; discussion of social work values (too often memorization rather than analysis of conceptualization of values); expression of personal values, and reference to the *Code of Ethics*. This is followed by the expectation that students can integrate these concrete and abstract concepts into practice as moral

agents. However, do we more commonly reinforce rote learning instead of enhancing critical thinking skills that can enhance moral reasoning?

Social workers should be expected to perform primarily using postconventional levels of moral reasoning. How might the profession and education enhance social workers' moral reasoning? It may be important to re-visit the question of how the quality and outcome of integration of ethics education compares to discrete ethics courses. Examination of specific teaching methods, course content, and expertise of faculty concerning ethics, moral reasoning, and values will help in determining if integration of ethics and values is actually the best method to use in social work curricula. Despite subjects reporting a specific ethics course, few programs require these and some may be electives taught in social work (more likely at the graduate level than undergraduate) or in another department (particularly at the undergraduate level). Adjunct instructors, who may have more or less knowledge of the subject area than regular faculty, may be teaching these courses. Although this study did not ask under which department the course was taken (perhaps a question for further study), it may be likely these courses were in health sciences, philosophy, women's studies, or counseling and psychology departments. Content of these courses, as well as process, are important considerations for future study—what would best help students move to more complex moral thinking? As stated earlier, there are indications of specific processes and content that would be most helpful, including thoughtful reflection, reading in moral philosophy, writing, experiential

practice, and discussion (Rest, 1994). Research is needed to see how, or if, these recommendations are reflected in social work curricula.

McNeel (1994) found that the highest growth in moral development occurred in students whose majors were in areas "that focus on understanding humans in all their diversity and/or majors that include a central integration of ethical considerations within the content of a professional course of study" (p. 34). This would seem to indicate that social work education would further students' moral development, and it may well do so. Further research may support this; using additional components of Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma's (1999) moral development model (moral sensitivity, motivation, and character) in addition to pre- and posttest use of the DIT to measure moral judgment, can provide a more complete picture of students and curriculum content from point of entry to completion of social work degrees. Perhaps the social work curriculum does not provide sufficient exposure to the liberal arts, resulting in the lower DIT scores. Further research, with specific consideration of social work programs within liberal arts institutions and required liberal arts components may provide important curriculum guidance.

Because Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999) explain that schemas are not strictly hierarchical stages, perhaps individuals choose (consciously or not) to use less complex thinking processes to function in certain roles. This idea may be important to examine in the future, it may add to the knowledge of why some people become whistleblowers. In social work, we may consider why some practitioners do not identify

severe problems in families or do not take proactive stances in child protection before tragedy results and we may learn how to enhance social workers' abilities to think more critically in their practice.

### Conclusion

How do we define ethical practice? How do we best teach individuals to be ethical practitioners? This article reviews the literature on ethical practice from a "how are we doing?" approach—what kinds of behaviors are seen in the field, what is seen by the adjudication arm of the National Association of Social Workers. Most social workers don't receive ethics complaints, but the growing emphasis in the literature and training focus on risk management indicates concern in this area. It is beyond the scope of this article to determine if this is a reflection of a litigious society or a reflection of changes in professional conduct, however, clearly there is strong dedication in the profession to assure ethical conduct. Integral to defining ethical practice is the understanding of social work as a profession dealing in moral issues; the literature reinforces this and the connections between moral reasoning and ethical conduct.

This study begins to approach the complex question of how we can teach individuals to be ethical professionals. Closer examination is needed of ethics coursework content including methods; classroom process; and expectations of a liberal arts perspective in teaching. This study found the integrated method works better than specific courses; however, participants remained in authoritarian-based moral reasoning. One might expect a program with both integrated and specific ethics cours-

es would enhance students' moral reasoning. Perhaps the lower scores of subjects taking ethics courses were because of classes that focused on formulaic method (e.g., decision-making trees). How do we ensure BSW programs have a strong liberal arts base rather than become a training curriculum based on needs determined by governing authorities and justice systems? We can take on these challenges to strengthen social work and assure it remains a profession rather than a technical vocation.

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**Laura E. Kaplan** is assistant professor of social work, University of Northern Iowa.

Address correspondence to Laura E. Kaplan at University of Northern Iowa, Department of Social Work, 30 Sabin Hall, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0405; e-mail: laura.kaplan@uni.edu.

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