

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FIRST YEAR COLLEGE MEN'S RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND THEIR MORAL DEVELOPMENT

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The purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between first year college men's religious preference (Catholic, Protestant, or none) and their level of moral development as measured by the Defining Issues Test-Short Form (Rest, 1986). Data analyses were conducted based upon results for 161 in-coming college men. Results of an analysis of variance indicated that those with no stated religious preference had significantly higher *P* scores ($M = 45.2, SD = 16.8$) than respondents who identified as Roman Catholic ($M = 36.1, SD = 16.7$) or as Protestant ($M = 38.6, SD = 17.3$). Implications are discussed regarding the relevance of Kohlberg's conceptualization of moral development for men who identify as Protestant or Roman Catholic.

Issues of morality, spirituality, and religion are increasingly discussed in the literature about college students (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). A nationwide survey of over 100,000 college students found that 80% were interested in spirituality, three quarters were searching for meaning and purpose in life, and three quarters were also having discussions about the meaning of life with friends (Astin et al.). Signs of college student interest in religion include data showing that four out of five have attended religious services in the past year, 77% believe in God and 69% pray (Astin

et al.). In addition, 4 out of 10 consider it essential or very important to follow religious teachings in their everyday lives (Astin & Astin, 2010).

Two different recent national studies have found that today's youth and emerging adults aged 18-24 decline in their identification with religious groups over time. One study found that the proportion of teens who identify as either Catholic or Protestant drops from 77 to 64% during this time while the proportion of students who identify as not religious jumps from 14 to 27% (Smith, 2009). A later national

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study reported that the group of students who identified as unaffiliated went from 11 to 25% from childhood the college years. It bears noting that the most movement from religious groups to the unaffiliated category was from Catholic and white mainline protestant groups (Jones, Cox, & Banchoff, 2012). This unaffiliated group is characterized by 84% of people who say that religion is either not too important or not at all important. Conversely, 8 in 10 White evangelical (78%) and Black protestant (78%) 18- to 24-year-olds say that religion is either very important or the most important thing in their life, compared to 37% of White mainline protestant millennials and 44% of Catholics (Jones et al.). Religion has shown conceptual linkages to moral issues in the research, with religious attitudes correlating with more conservative attitudes toward issues like abortion, divorce, and premarital sex (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009).

Among the current emphases in moral theory, Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development have led the way. He asserted that moral development occurs along a sequence of stages that are based primarily upon notions of duty and justice. Individuals begin with a self-focused perspective concerning what is best for them, and progress sequentially through a series of stages that culminate in an adherence to universal ethical principles. Not all individuals achieve this final stage, and in fact, most do not exceed the fourth stage. Given a recent surge in research on both college men (Harris, 2010), religious development (Astin et al., 2011), and students who identify with various Christian identities (Moran, Lang, & Oliver, 2007), the present study focused on the religious development of men who identified as Protestant, Roman Catholic, or "none."

KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Thousands of studies appear in the literature based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn,

2010). Kohlberg's theory focuses on how individuals develop as their interpretations of society's rules and expectations change. Kohlberg notes that people make moral judgments in reaction to their views of the world (Kohlberg, 1981). By studying how college men describe their reactions to hypothetical moral dilemmas, Kohlberg explored the reasoning participants gave for deciding a particular course of action when confronted with a moral dilemma (Kohlberg). It stands to reason that this kind of moral reasoning is influenced by religious perspectives.

Kohlberg (1981) viewed the concept of justice as the primary moral imperative. He posited that as people increase their capacity for perspective taking, they become cognitively ready for higher levels of progression in their moral development. Perspective taking is seen by Kohlberg as a necessary, though not completely sufficient, condition for moral development (Kohlberg, 1981; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000). Kohlberg defines higher stages of moral development as being desirable because individuals can comprehend, respond to, and make use of all the previous stages when confronted with moral dilemmas.

Based on his research, Kohlberg identified six stages of moral reasoning grouped into three major levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Each level represents a fundamental shift in the social-moral perspective of the individual as he or she advances from selfishness to adhering to universal principles. Within each level, two stages represent smaller shifts in moral judgment. A Stage 1 heteronomous orientation focuses on avoiding the physical consequences of an action to persons and property and is characterized by egocentrism and the inability to consider the perspectives of others. At Stage 2, there is the early emergence of moral reciprocity and the practical value of an action. What is right is what is fair in the sense of an equal exchange. Individuals at Stage 3 define what is right in terms of what is expected by people close to one's self, and in terms of the stereotypical roles that define being good, while Stage

4 marks the shift from defining what is right in terms of local norms and role expectations to defining right in terms of the laws and norms established by the larger social system. In Stage 4, individuals emphasize rules, doing ones duty, and respect for authority. In this stage, the social order is valued for its own sake. Individuals at Stage 5 make moral decisions based on the principles that underlie rules and norms, but reject a uniform application of a rule or norm. Finally, the sixth stage is characterized by principles such as justice and regard for human life that transcend particular cultures and societies and are to be upheld irrespective of other conventions or normal obligations. Both Stages 4 and 5 rely heavily on social and cultural principles which are increasingly at odds with principles held by religious peoples.

Kohlberg (1981) further speculated that a seventh stage may exist that is more ontological in nature and thus serves to connect moral development to spirituality. Due to his difficulties in providing empirical evidence for even the sixth stage, however, he emphasized that most of his speculation of a seventh stage was merely theoretical. This seventh stage draws heavily upon Fowler's (1981) stages of faith, and posits that Stage 6 moral reasoning assumes an ultimate stage focused upon spirituality. Faith, on the other hand, is the basis for moral reasoning from the Judeo Christian perspective.

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE

One of the challenges inherent in reviewing the largely secular literature on moral, religious, spiritual, and faith development is the lack of consistency in operational definitions used by studies of these constructs. Generally speaking, the terms "spirituality" and "religion" are used in reference to how people find meaning and experience the transcendent (Parks, 2000). Although these terms are frequently used interchangeably and evidence

suggests they are correlated (Higher Education Research Institute, 2005), researchers recognize differences between them and choose to define them as distinct concepts (Parks, 2000).

Spirituality is commonly described using such words as "transcendent," "subjective," "personal," "meaning," "purpose," and "authenticity" (e.g., Barnett, Krell, & Sendry, 2000; Parks, 2000), whereas *religion* is described using terms like "social," "system," "institution," and "doctrine" (e.g., Barnett et al., 2000; Buchko, 2004).

Religion may be an expression of spirituality, but it is possible for a person to be spiritual without adhering to a particular religion and to practice a religion without an accompanying sense of spirituality. One is neither "a necessary nor sufficient condition" for development of the other (Barnett et al., 2000, p. 574). For example, during their first year of college, students show a declining interest in religious practice but, by the end of their first year, they also show an increased desire to integrate spirituality into their lives (Barry & Nelson, 2005). As students grow more spiritual and less religious, students become more ecumenical in their worldview, believing that nonreligious people can live just as morally as religious believers, and reject the notion that God will punish those who do not believe in Him (Astin & Astin, 2010). Research has also shown that religious struggle during college have a negative relationship with psychological well-being, perhaps due to the stress related to the struggle experienced (Park & Millora, 2010).

SEX DIFFERENCES

Several lines of research in college student development theory suggest that men and women follow different developmental pathways throughout their college experience. Research on some aspects of students' spiritual and religious development has shown that more women than men believe in God (Barry & Nelson, 2005). In addition, research has shown some areas of sex differences in reli-

gious attitudes and beliefs among college students, along with some areas of similarity. For example, although men and women report the same level of connection to God, women report a stronger belief in God (Buchko, 2004; Barry & Nelson, 2005). Studies have found that women are more religious than men using several different criteria (Simpson, Cloud, Newmann, & Fuqua, 2008). Women and men also report the same levels of influence of religion on their everyday lives and belief in the continuance of a soul after death. Women are significantly more likely than men to report taking religious advice into account in times of significant personal crisis and note a greater degree to which religion provides for feelings of security and comfort (Buchko, 2004).

Foundational theories in moral development have also identified differing fundamental moral principles followed by men (justice) and women (care). One of the best-known criticisms of the justice-based approaches to moral psychology was levied by Gilligan (1982) who asserted that some individuals make decisions based upon justice while others focus instead upon their concern for and interdependence with, other people. She emphasized that some individuals reasoned according to the moral virtues of duty and justice whereas others reasoned according to the moral virtues of care and connectedness. As these differing perspectives were highly related to sex, Gilligan (1982) believed that Kohlberg's model had a potential bias against women since his research had been conducted only with males and because males were more likely to reason in terms of rules and justice, thus resulting in males achieving higher developmental stages.

Given these differences between men and women, it is prudent and even necessary for some of the studies undertaken in the research literature to focus on single-sex issues in order to better understand the developmental processes involved concerning a specific construct or constructs for a particular sex. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to conduct an inquiry into the moral development

of male college students. In particular, we were interested in the intersection between men's moral development and their identified religious affiliation. We specifically sought to determine the relationship between students' religious affiliation of the groups containing critical mass in our study population (Catholic, Protestant, or none) and levels of moral development for first year college men. Due to our focus upon male students, Kohlberg's theory of moral development seemed to be an appropriate choice for this study given that it was created based primarily on the experiences of college men. In addition, research on the attitudes of student affairs professionals has shown that even though they espouse the value of holistic development of students, they often do not include spiritual development in their practice (Kiessling, 2010). Therefore, given our interest in studying the religious development of people who identify with various descriptors that fall under the mantle of Christian, a further goal of this study was to gain insight into the relationship between religious preference and moral development of college-aged men so that researchers, administrators, and campus ministry staff can obtain a better understanding of the development of male college students. Level of moral development was the dependent variable for this study and the independent variable was religious affiliation (Catholic, Protestant, or none).

METHOD

Participants

All first year college men who were 18 years old or older and who enrolled in the higher education institution where the study took place were solicited for participation ($N = 513$). Of the 626 study electronic invitations for study participation that were sent, 513 men were eligible to participate (i.e., 18 years or older) in the study. In addition, of the original 626 study invitations sent, 256 (41%) first year men logged into the website and answered at least one question on the survey. Instrument

protocols from 37 (15%) men were dropped from the study because they responded to less than 85% of the questions, resulting in an initial analysis of 219 surveys (George & Malley, 2006).

The mean age of the participants was 18.5 years ($SD = .29$), and the racial breakdown of participants was as follows: 75% Caucasian, 12% Asian, 6% Hispanic/Latino, 2% African American/Black, 2% Native American/Alaskan Native. The remaining participants chose not to disclose their racial group. Relative to the university population, Asian students were slightly overrepresented and African American/Black students were underrepresented. The institution was a highly selective public, secular institution with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 5,000 students located in the southern United States.

Instruments

The participants completed a web-based questionnaire that included all items from the Defining Issues Test-Short Form (DIT-SF) (Rest, 1993) as well as demographic information (e.g., participant's age, race, and religious affiliation). The various forms of the Defining Issues Test have been used consistently by researchers attempting to measure Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999).

Defining Issues Test – Short Form. The DIT-SF measures moral judgment as defined by Kohlberg (1976). However, the DIT differs from Kohlberg's interview-based procedure in that participants respond to a series of 12 statements that they rate and rank in terms of their perceived importance after reading three hypothetical moral dilemmas (e.g., Heinz, Newspaper, and Prisoner dilemmas; Rest & Narvaez, 1998). Once the participants completed the DIT, a *P* score was calculated according to procedures found within the scoring manual (Rest & Narvaez, 1998). The *P* score repre-

sents the proportion of postconventional moral reasoning that participants used when confronted with each hypothetical moral dilemma.

According to Rest (1993) and Rest and Narvaez (1998), the technical quality of the DIT is well established including test-retest reliability that ranges from .70 to .80 and internal consistency of .77. Validity for the DIT has been demonstrated through longitudinal gains over a 10 year period as would be expected through maturation and studies showing that DIT scores are linked to prosocial behaviors in at least 37 studies (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Further, the DIT-SF demonstrates a strong relationship ($r = .91$ to $.93$) with the full version (Windsor, 2000). The DIT was selected for the present study given that there are over 500 studies available in the literature using this measure, thus facilitating a comparison between our findings and related research (King & Mayhew, 2002).

Procedures

Once institutional review board approval was gained for this study, a list of all incoming (academic year 2007-2008) first year men's e-mail addresses was obtained from the college's dean of student's office. An invitation and two reminders to participate in the study were sent via e-mail. In addition to the invitation to participate, the e-mail also provided participants with an embedded web-link to the site that hosted the survey. Once participants opened the survey, they were provided with a consent form followed by detailed instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. Participant names were never known to the researcher, only e-mail addresses uploaded into an online data collection system. E-mail addresses were removed from the data file to insure participant anonymity. As an incentive to participate, participants' names were entered into a random prize drawing for one \$100 gift card, three \$50 gift cards, and five \$25 gift cards.

RESULTS

Of the 513 men who were eligible to participate (i.e., 18 years or older) in the study, 256 (41%) first year men logged into the website and answered at least one question on the survey. Instrument protocols from 37 (15%) men were dropped from the study because they responded to less than 85% of the questions (George & Mallery, 2006). Using Rest's (1986) scoring guidelines and preexisting DIT participant reliability checks resulted in the subsequent removal of additional instrument protocols: 36 (14%) protocols were removed for failing the DIT Meaningless Score (M Score) check; and, 10 (4%) instrument protocols were removed for failing the DIT Consistency Check. Finally, 12 (5%) instrument protocols were removed from any data analysis because the participants indicated they were younger than 18 years old. The total usable yield of surveys was 161 (63%) of the original 256 respondents. Thus, 31% ($N = 161$) of the *eligible* in-coming first year college men ($N = 513$) completed enough questions and passed all necessary DIT participant reliability checks to be included in the data analysis.

The dependent variable for this study consisted of the calculated P score from the DIT-SF. The average P score for respondents from this sample was 40.33 ($SD = 17.30$). Internal consistency for the DIT-SF for this study sample was found to be .76.

In order to determine whether mean scores significantly differed for the DIT, based on respondents' chosen category of religious preference, an ANOVA was conducted. Not all participants, however, were included within this portion of analysis. Specifically, the following religious preference categories were excluded due to an insufficient number of participants: Eastern Orthodox Christian ($n = 5$), Jewish ($n = 5$), Hindu ($n = 2$), Muslim ($n = 1$), and Undisclosed ($n = 14$). Therefore, only mean scores from the following three religious preference categories were included within this portion of the data analysis: (a) none ($n =$

49), (b) Protestant ($n = 45$), and (c) Roman Catholic ($n = 40$).

ANOVA results indicated that there were differences in men's level of moral development relative to their religious preference category ($F_{(2, 133)} = 3.558, p < .05$). Helmert contrasts were performed comparing the combined Protestant and Catholic groups to the nonreligious group first, and then the Protestant group was compared to the Catholic group. The mean for the nonreligious group ($M = 45.27$) was found to be significantly higher than the mean for the Protestants and Catholics ($M = 37.69$) when they were combined, $F_{(1, 131)} = 6.36, p = .013$. The Cohen's d value for this significant comparison was found to be .44, a moderate effect size. The comparison of the Protestant group ($M = 38.94$) to the Catholic group ($M = 36.28$) was not statistically significant, $F_{(1, 131)} = .52, p = .470$.

DISCUSSION

Participants who selected the religious preference category "none" had significantly higher assessed levels of moral development than men who self-identified as Roman Catholic or Protestant. Regarding effect size differences, men in the "none" category tended to utilize post conventional moral reasoning about 9% more on the DIT than men who chose either Roman Catholic or Protestant as their religious preference.

Research suggests that one's religious preference and moral development are interrelated. For example, Rest (1986) reported that groups identified as religiously conservative tend to have significantly lower levels of moral development (i.e., P scores) when compared to those identified as having more liberal theology. In addition, King and Mayhew (2002) found that college students who objected to moral dilemmas based on a personal moral code—as opposed to religious convictions—had significantly higher moral development when compared to those who used religion as their criterion for opposing the moral dilemma.

TABLE 1
One-way ANOVA of *P* Scores by Selected Category of Religious Preference

Religious Preference	<i>P</i> Score	
	Mean	SD
None (<i>n</i> = 49)	45.27	(10.56) ^a
Protestant (<i>n</i> = 45)	38.94	(9.54) ^b
Roman Catholic (<i>n</i> = 40)	36.28	(9.84) ^b

Note: Overall difference for 3 groups was significant, $F(2, 133) = 3.558, p < .05$

^aHelmert contrast showed "none" group had higher *p* scores than combined Protestant and Roman Catholic Group, $F(1, 131) = 6.36, p = .013$. Cohen's $d = .44$

^bProtestant and Roman Catholic group did not significantly differ from each other.

This may explain why men from the present study who selected the religious preference category of "none" had significantly higher DIT scores when compared to men who identified as Roman Catholic or Protestant as their religious preference. Those who make decisions from personal moral codes may score higher on the DIT and may also be more likely to report a religious preference of "none."

An important concern arises here regarding the assessment of moral development from the perspective of Christian peoples. Modern concepts of moral development assume a constructivist or relativistic system of moral judgments. Christian doctrine teaches that moral judgment should be made based on the great commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and its companion "love your neighbor as yourself." These reflect an emphasis on mercy rather than justice. A bedrock of evangelical Christianity is the belief in absolute Truth (Driscoll & Breshears, 2010). Thus, their inclination is to make moral judgments based on that absolute truth revealed supernaturally through scripture, a very different epistemological perspective. One must wonder if the moral development of people who identify as Christian, including some who responded as Protestant and Roman Catholic in our study, can be adequately assessed by secular epistemological perspectives. Rather than classifying Christians as

morally inferior, as suggested by Kohlberg's theory, a reconsideration considering the cultural importance of mercy among Christians is worthy of consideration when measuring moral development.

When interpreting data about religious preference and moral development, scholars, administrators, and campus ministers should note that the measure used in this study operationalized moral development from only one theoretical perspective. Specifically, this study used the DIT-SF as its measure of moral development. This instrument focused on the concept of morality based on how Kohlberg (1981) and Rest et al. (2000) viewed moral decision making, who posited that moral related decisions were made by individuals based around notions of justice. Other theorists, however, claim that moral development is more complex. For example, other researchers have found evidence to suggest that moral decision making also connects to notions of care and relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Jorgensen, 2006). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the concept of morality is more complex than only the notion of justice. In other words, moral development, and morality in general, is arguably more complex than justice alone. Operationalizing moral development in this study from a different theoretical perspective would have potentially led to different findings.

Limitations of Study

One limitation of this study is that it assessed religious preference without taking into consideration the frequency of attending religious services (Astin & Astin, 2010) or other variables that indicate level of religious involvement. Future research should include such indicators to better explore the complexities of the relationships among the variables examined in this study. Among those who identify as Protestant, Roman Catholic, and the broader category of Christian, specific belief systems vary substantially. Consequently, there is good reason to explore the relationship of specific beliefs to moral development. Nonetheless, the results of the present study add to the understanding of how characteristics of college men are influenced by their religious preferences.

Another limitation of this study is that participants came from only one institution. The results of this study, therefore, have limited generalizability. In fact, students from this institution may exhibit their own unique patterns of moral development. Another limitation is the reliance on participants' self-reporting of data. This is viewed as a limitation for several reasons. For example, participants could have confounded the study by providing misleading or false information (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). However, using self-reported measures facilitated the ability to learn the participants' attitudes and beliefs, all the while conducting the research in an ethical manner.

An additional limitation was the overall usable response rate. The overall response rate was greatly influenced by the number of research protocols removed from data analysis. Using the scoring guidelines established by Rest (1986), 36 protocols were removed because they failed the Meaningless Score (M Score) checks and 10 were removed because they failed the DIT consistency check. In addition, 12 protocols were removed because analysis of participants' demographic data indicated some respondents were in fact minors (i.e., younger than the required 18

years). Removing protocols from any data analysis obviously reduced the statistical power to detect differences. As with all reduction in statistical power, this could be viewed as a limitation of the study. However, conducting the research in an ethical manner could not have been accomplished otherwise—especially when one considers the necessity to remove and destroy all protocols submitted by minors.

Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research

Because this study was conducted using men from only one college, it might prove beneficial for additional studies to be conducted using men from various types/kinds of campuses with different institutional characteristics. For example, investigations into the impact of institutional characteristics between historically Black colleges or universities, community colleges, land-grant institutions, and private colleges/universities could prove useful when trying to learn whether findings from the present study remains true across different populations of students.

A study using qualitative research techniques might also provide beneficial research findings. For example, a mixed-methods research design could prove useful to researchers by using the DIT to help identify unique cases of men. After collecting the quantitative portion of data unique men could then be invited to participate in a phenomenological study that investigated underlying reasons for this phenomenon. The intent of conducting a phenomenological study of this kind would be to understand how the personal experiences of participants supported or reinforced their moral development.

Finally, given that moral development is a complex construct, it would be beneficial to explore the relationship between religious preference and moral development from a variety of perspectives and using various research instruments, including those that include operationalized versions of Gilligan's

(1982) care-based moral development such as the Measure of Moral Orientation (Liddell, Halpin, & Halpin, 1990) as well as other approaches to the justice-based operationalization, such as the moral judgment competence approach promoted by Lind (1978). Perhaps, existing instruments that emphasize secular approaches to moral reasoning, judgment, and development will need to be supplemented by instruments that operationalize the constructs differently based on the epistemological assumptions of different religious systems. Such broad approaches to studying these variables will aid researchers in better defining the relationship between religion and moral development.

Recommendations for Practice

Thousands of articles have been published about moral development, with over a thousand based on Kohlberg's theory alone (Evans et al., 2010). Yet little has been studied about how people of differing religious identities score on secular moral development models. The present study found that students who identify as Catholic or Protestant exhibited less postconventional thinking than those who identified no religious preference. This result has several implications for student affairs practitioners. First, student affairs practitioners should consider that when they work with students who identify with one of the major Christian religious groups, their frequency of postconventional thinking is likely to be lower than those who do not identify with a religious group. At first blush, student affairs educators might be tempted to view this as a moral deficit. Given the importance of mercy rather than justice to many Christian peoples, student affairs educators might consider the moral development of such students as different rather than as less advanced. Such individuals may simply value mercy more than justice or other common values. When interacting with self-identified Christian students, educators might explore the concept of mercy to more

fully understand how these students make moral decisions and make meaning of their environment. Secondly, this study offers student affairs educators information on the moral development of students who identify as having no religious affiliation. Such students report high levels of principled moral reasoning. Knowing that such students operate at advanced levels on Kohlberg's scale can help educators to have conversations with such students that are at their level, or a level above, to facilitate the plus one staging to promote development.

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