International
Socioeconomics
Laboratory™

How do education and social learning influence moral development in the United States?

Stanley Huang, Radiah Jamil, Daniel Khaitov, Abby Tenenbaum, Suyash Bhardwaj, Tasmia Afrin
Principal Investigator: Sarah Blevins
Affiliation: International Socioeconomics Laboratory™, The George
Washington University

Abstract:

As our years of education correspond to the time our brain takes to fully develop, it shapes a person's perspective from a young age to their college lives in areas from academic development to social life. Moral and ethical development is no exception, as their connection to academic and social life develop a person's moral standpoint throughout their life, greatly influencing their views on morality are greatly influenced by their education. We conducted a survey to gauge the extent of the effect that someone's level of education had on their moral stance, while also taking factors such as economic status and gender identity into account. These were variables that were not considered in Kohlberg's research and thus proved to be drawbacks. Our results reinforced certain aspects of Kohlberg's theory of Moral Development as well as presented new findings to the connection of age/academic level to an individual's moral choices.

Categories: Education, Learning, Psychology
Key Words: Moral development, ethical development

Introduction:

It is known to the point of redundancy that educational programs and institutions require consistent decision-making of all sorts, from the decision to participate in class to the amount of effort a student decides to put into studying for a test. Since the brain isn't fully developed until 25 years of age, academic life has a huge influence on character development, especially evident as 94% of Americans have a high school diploma, 49% have an associates degree, 39% have a bachelor's degree (Hanson 2020), and 13.1% have a masters degree (US Census Bureau 2019). Under most circumstances, education spans throughout most of the brain's developmental period in America. Factors in educational environments, such as relationships with teachers and other students, set a foundation for much of the remainder of students' lives, both ethically and socially; this is through academic content and the perspectives in which the content is taught, as well as through the quality of interaction between students. All of the various aspects that come with education vastly shape a person's ethics over the course of their psychological growth due to the large extent that academic and social life are interconnected for most Americans.

Morality is a system of beliefs and values that distinguishes between right and wrong, or acceptable and unacceptable behavior (APA Dictionary of Psychology). This is a highly multifaceted concept that is influenced by various factors such as interpersonal relationships. Factors like socialization, internalization, culture, familial bonds, and peers all play a role in shaping an individual's view and moral beliefs (Arduini-Van Hoose, 2020). Regardless of the factors, moral and ethical education should be an integral part of the classroom and should be taught to every student. For children, families and teachers are role models that are major influences on a child's moral and ethical perception. Investments made in developing moral and ethical curriculums are met with numerous benefits such as the ability to lead a life with "peace, confidence, and healthy communications." (Yeliz Temli Durmuş, 2019). Moral and ethical education centers around understanding a sense of meaning and value, engaging with principles of ethical issues, and much more ("Ethical Education Curriculum," 2017). Schools need to implement moral and ethical education and find ways to integrate it with the various humanities-oriented curriculum. Additionally, more research needs to be conducted to understand the spectrum of moral development in relation to socio-economic factors and education.

To start off, one must consider Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Kohlberg, a psychologist, conducted a study and suggested three broad categories of moral development separated into six identifiable stages. Kohlberg's theory outlined the following three levels of moral thinking: preconventional morality, conventional morality, and post-conventional morality (Kurt, 2020).

1. Preconventional Morality
    a. Obedience and Punishment Oriented
    b. Individualism, Instrumentalism, and Exchange
2. Conventional Morality
    a. Interpersonal Relationships

International
Socioeconomics
Laboratory™

        b.   Social Order Maintenance
   3. Postconventional Morality
        a.   Social Contract and Individual Rights
        b.   Universal Principles

Kohlberg implemented a longitudinal study as a means to gather evidence and support his theory of moral development. In order to establish a basis for his study, he interviewed a sample population of 72 white Chicago boys and presented them with hypothetical and philosophical moral dilemmas (Mcleod, 2013). These participants—ages 10-16 at the start of the study and ages 22-28 at the end—were questioned to determine the reasoning behind their judgments of each circumstance (*Kohlberg (1968)*, n.d.). He then classified these reasonings into their relative stages of moral development. The results of his overall study revealed that the sample population advanced through the stages as they got older. It was observed that participants could only progress through these stages one stage at a time and passed through levels in the fixed order. However, some individuals were not able to progress to the final stage (Barger, n.d.). In addition, Kohlberg believed that individuals could not skip any stages and participants never receded levels. The findings exhibited that middle-class children progressed further through the stages and at a faster rate than lower-class children (Barger, Ph.D., n.d.).

Although Kohlberg's conducted study remains influential and significant within our contemporary society, it continues to instigate criticism and possesses numerous flaws. The following questions remain that directly address the shortcomings of Kohlberg's theory: Is justice the most rudimentary moral property? Does moral judgment have a one-on-one correspondence with moral behavior? (Arduini-Van Hoose, 2020) These defects of Kohlberg's study continue to emphasize the countless factors that he did not consider. Moreover, the most prominent flaw of his research-based model was that his chosen dilemmas were not applicable to most participants, one of which includes the Heinz dilemma. The Heinz dilemma proposed a decision to the subjects of whether Heinz should steal a drug to save his wife (Haffey, 1991). However, this moral predicament was impractical to the subjects as their ages ranged from 10-16 years old—the participants did not experience marriage nor will they encounter a circumstance similar to the presented dilemma (Haffey, 1991). Simply put, Kohlberg's dilemmas were not appropriate for the sample population and essentially artificial. This prompts a question about the validity of the results obtained through this research because people may respond differently when presented with a realistic dilemma as opposed to a hypothetical situation(Haffey, 1991). In addition, Kohlberg's theory was formulated on an all-male sample, thus exposing the gender bias involved within his study (Haffey, 1991). Kohlberg's research diagram illuminated an androcentric definition of molarity: this gender limitation has significantly restricted and impacted the results attained through Kohlberg's psychological research.

   I.   Potential socio-economic implications of education, gender identity, and household income on moral view.
   II.   Socio-economic implications such as level of education, gender identity, and household income can have a large effect on a person's moral view. People with a lack of material

resources, especially income, have harsher moral judgments, due to the person feeling vulnerable (Association for Psychological Science, 2014). Poverty also has a large impact on moral development, as poverty can force people to do immoral acts out of desperation, such as stealing for food or money, and these actions further diminish their moral values (Association for Psychological Science, 2014). Another socio-economic factor that can have a large impact on a person's moral view is their gender identity, as while there is little difference in moral judgment, females are more moral than males in areas such as empathy, guilt, and prosocial behavior (Walker, 2006). Another socio-economic factor that has a great impact on a person's moral development is their level of education.

Materials and Methods:

In order to analyze potential patterns in the two age groups we tested, we collected results from a survey sent out to hundreds of students worldwide that had two different moral dilemma questions--situations in which an individual stands under a conflicting moral requirement with unique consequences. Additionally, we examined archival research to identify the pre-existing claims and theories in regards to development. Having utilized past research pertaining to this topic, we were able to find crucial gaps in research due to bias from the past. As per our survey research, our questionnaires extracted information regarding gender identity, age, and household income. Our first question is:

> "You are on a cruise line far from land and the ship starts to sink. You are now walking in the water as lifeboats are quickly being filled up. Luckily, you are able to find the last lifeboat and get on. There are still two more spots left, but unfortunately, you see people still in the water. There is an elderly man, a young boy, a sailor who can navigate the sea, a pregnant woman in her second trimester, and a doctor. You are far from the shoreline, with no sense of direction of where to go. You also feel sick. Which TWO (2) do you choose?"

This question targets the second stage of moral development where we analyze possible socioeconomic factors in relation to the value they place on interpersonal relationships. We gave our participants the ability to choose two members of the above choices all of which have a distinct reason for why they should be chosen (will be discussed under the Analysis portion). For the next question, we asked,

"A girl is taken to a carnival by her dad. It is her tenth birthday and he's promised her that she can choose any 5 rides. But as they approach the gate, he discovers that he has forgotten his wallet. This is the last day of the carnival and it's too far to go home and come back before it closes. He counts the change in his pockets and tells his daughter that he has enough money to pay the entrance fee and they can go inside and look at all the exhibits and the parade, but there wouldn't be any money for rides, OR she could lie about her age and say she was five and get in for half-price, which would leave enough money for the 5 rides. They walk to the gate and the ticket seller asks the girl, "How old are you?" What should she say?"

This question presents a less intense scenario. However, here the data we collect allows us to scrutinize an individual's reasoning and moral choices for non-harmful events. The two choices an individual is presented with is (1) the father lies about her age to get in for half-price and be able to enjoy 5 rides or (2) the father doesn't lie about her age and get in for the full price but not be able to enjoy the rides. Both scenarios have non-harmful consequences and give us valuable insight into post-conventional morality. Our questions take into consideration gender identity, and family income especially the effects wealth differences play on moral choices.

Data Analysis / Result Analysis:

75 students completed a Moral Development survey assessing their moral standpoints and its potential correlation with socioeconomic as well as educational background. Participants were questioned regarding gender identity, age, education level, and household income. Subsequently, they were presented with two different moral dilemmas which aimed to determine the moral standpoint of participants relative to their age, education, socioeconomic status, and gender. Of the 75 students, 54.7% were 14-16 years old, 34.6% were 17-19 years old, while 10.6% were 20+ years of age. The sample was unevenly split by gender as 54.7% were Female, whereas 45.3% were Male. Next the household income was observed and it was noted that 10.7% of the participants were between $0 - $25,000, 25.3% were between $25,000 - $55,000, 13.3% were between $55,000 - $80,000, 21.3% were between $80,000 -$100,000, and 29.3% had a household income of $100,000 or more.

The Shapiro-Wilk test analyzes the distribution of normality which allows us to analyze the accuracy of the distribution or whether data is skewed because of a single factor. Ultimately, w = 1 represents that the distribution is proper and 'normal.' W values < 1 may indicate a significance of variance for the distribution. However, this can ultimately be disregarded as our income brackets ranging from 20k-30k.

Assumption Checks ▼

Test of Normality (Shapiro–Wilk)

		W	p
Income	1	0.858	< .001
	2	0.852	< .001
Moral Input	1	0.793	< .001
	2	0.845	< .001
Moral Input Dos	1	0.547	< .001
	2	0.522	< .001

Note. Significant results suggest a deviation from normality.

ANOVA – Moral Input ▼

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Gender	18.196	1	18.196	3.316	0.074
Income	15.782	4	3.945	0.719	0.582
Gender ∗ Income	37.603	4	9.401	1.713	0.159
Residuals	329.183	60	5.486		

Note. Type III Sum of Squares

After analyzing survey results regarding moral dilemmas, results show that there is a common pattern between each of the two age groups we tested: youth under 18 and youth over 18. The moral dilemma decisions for older youth had reasoned that prioritized allocating resources for self before others as primary answers for which two people to save from a sinking cruise ship consisted of the sailor and doctor, with the pregnant woman coming in third popularity. Younger youth had more of a variety in answers but repetition was found within their decisions, which had a mix of saving the sailor and pregnant woman, with the doctor coming in third popularity overall. From the data of the younger youth, an inference derived from it was that there was a stronger balance between putting yourself first and helping others. The sailor was the most popular choice among both test groups due to the gained ability of navigation for individual purposes but the pregnant woman was also popular because test subjects considered it saving two lives instead of one. When replacing the pregnant woman with the doctor among older youth, the reasoning given was that the doctor could save your life as you are sick as well in the context. These findings can be connected back to Carol Gilligan's theories. Gilligan believed that while mens' morality is more oriented around concepts such as justice, womens' principles were more focused on principles such as compassion. The responses in the survey showed that the men responding tended to pick to save the sailor and the doctor, while the women were more likely to pick sailor and pregnant woman; the majority of women answering this survey were more concerned with saving as many lives as possible, which is a response that leans close to the "compassionate" principles that Gilligan defined in women, while the majority of responses from men that aimed to save the doctor spoke of increasing chances of survival for everyone, connecting closer to the more logical concepts that Gilligan emphasized in men.

Discussion:

After conducting our surveys and research, we uncovered several limitations that may have impacted our results. One limitation was the number of participants who took the survey, as we only collected 75 responses from high school and college students combined. In particular, we received a very limited amount of responses from college students, having only 16 as compared to the 59 from high school students. The absence of elementary and middle school students restricted our responses to a narrow age group, thus resulting in an insufficient sample size. Our first moral dilemma required participants to select two options as opposed to just one, which would make interpreting the data more difficult and potentially produce inaccurate results in the ANOVA test. Additionally, these questions we ask did not take into consideration outside, external relationships or scenarios such as trauma. However, this factor can not be completely taken into consideration as each participant's life experiences are unique and all play a role in shaping moral standards.

International
Socioeconomics
Laboratory™

References:

Arduini-Van Hoose, N. (2020, June 1). *Influences on Moral Development | Adolescent Psychology*. Lumen Learning. https://courses.lumenlearning.com/adolescent/chapter/influences-on-moral-development/#:%7E:t ext=Moral%20development%20is%20strongly%20influenced,%2C%20emotions%2C%20and%2 0even%20neurodevelopment.

Association for Psychological Science. (2014, March). *Money and Morality: Lack of Resources May Lead to Harsher Moral Judgments*. Association for Psychological Science - APS. https://www.psychologicalscience.org/publications/observer/obsonline/money-and-morality-lack- of-resources-may-lead-to-harsher-moral-judgments.html

Barger, Ph.D., R. N. (n.d.). *A Summary Of Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development*. A Summary Of Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Retrieved April 13, 2021, from https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/medical_ethics_text/Chapter_2_Ethical_Tradi tions/Reading-Barger-on-Kohlberg.htm

Ethical Education Curriculum. (2017). *Educate Together*, 3–24. http://www.worldwiseschools.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Eth_Ed_Oct2017.pdf

Haffey, D. L. (1991, August). *MORAL DEVELOPMENT: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON KOHLBERGIAN STAGE THEORY*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED345121.pdf

Kohlberg (1968). (n.d.). Tutor2u. https://www.tutor2u.net/psychology/reference/kohlberg-1968#:%7E:text=Background%20and%2 0aim%3A%20Motivated%20by,is%20made%20up%20of%201.

Kurt, S. (2020, August 17). *Stages of Moral Development - Lawrence Kohlberg*. Educational Technology. https://educationaltechnology.net/stages-of-moral-development-lawrence-kohlberg/

Mcleod, S. (2013, February 5). *Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development*. Simply Psychology. https://www.simplypsychology.org/kohlberg.html

Walker, L.J.. (2006). Gender and morality. M. Killen & J. G. Smetana (Eds.), Handbook of moral development. 93-115.

Yeliz Temli Durmuş i, Y. T. (2019). Early Childhood Education Teachers' Experiences on Moral Dilemmas and Suggestions for Morality and Ethics in Education Course in Faculty of Educations. *International Journal of Progressive Education, Volume 15 Number 5, 2019*, *15*(5), 301–314. https://doi.org/10.29329/ijpe.2019.212.20