

## **Gender Bias and Moral Decision Making: The Moral Orientations of Justice and Care**

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*This study investigated gender related moral reasoning in student essays containing arguments on moral issues. Undergraduate students in a medical ethics course viewed two films on morally controversial issues. The students wrote brief essays about the films which were transcribed and numerically coded to conceal the author's gender from the evaluator. Using a coding scheme originated by Lyons, the evaluator classified each essay as a justice/right essay or a care/response essay or an equal response essay. Subsequently, calculations were made to determine the percentage of male authored essays that were justice/rights essays or care/response essays and the percentage of female authored essays that were justice/rights or care/response essays. The males (87.7%) tended to exhibit the justice/rights moral orientation, and the females (69.4%) exhibited the care/response moral orientation. Several different calculations were made to determine various degrees of gender related orientations also. The difference in orientation was highly statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). These data contribute to understanding moral orientation and development. Interpretations are given to explain some differences between the genders and help explain the traditional roles in society that males and females have played historically.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the past two decades, much of the work in moral development has stemmed directly from Kohlberg's original longitudinal study which served as the basis for his widely known moral stage theory.<sup>1-3</sup> Recently

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several studies have challenged the traditionally accepted Kohlbergian theory of Cognitive Moral Development.<sup>4-6</sup> As a result of these studies Gilligan has noted that from an all-male sample such as Kohlberg's original study, it is methodologically inappropriate to draw generalizations that are applied to both males and females. Furthermore, she contends that, as a research strategy, a single sex sample is inherently problematic. Walker, though, has reported empirical data to dispute Gilligan's assertion.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the mere fact that Kohlberg used a non-random group to develop his theory is sufficient reason to question his theory. For a generalization to be valid, the group should at least be an adequate cross-section of society. Brownfield has noted that following Kohlberg's proposal of a justice theory of morality, studies have usually compared men and women in their moral reasoning and evaluated the responses of the women within the same theoretical framework as that developed from men.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, more comprehensive studies which incorporate a design to explore and assess both males' and females' sense of morality are needed in order to develop a more accurate understanding of morality and its development.

Gilligan's work inspired Lyons to study the relationship of the self to morality which became an early determinant behind the notion that men and women think differently about themselves in relation to others.<sup>9</sup> In Gilligan's classic work, *In a Different Voice*, she recognized differences in the empirical data which led her to propose her moral theory about the distinctive ways that males and females think about moral problems and about how they view themselves in relation to others.<sup>10</sup> It became clear to her that not only is there a justice/rights moral orientation, but also that there is a care/response moral orientation and that these serve as two distinct moral foundations from which people derive their decisions, or by which people support their choices. She referred to this as the moral voice of justice and the moral voice of care.

Although distinct, the suggestion is not that the two voices are diametrically opposed; rather, that they differ from one another in their fundamental origins. Gilligan and Attanucci note that the distinction pertains to the ways in which moral problems are conceived and interpreted to give rise to moral concern.<sup>11</sup> For example, a care/response moral orientation is grounded in the view that moral agents are interdependent on the relationships that are shared between them. This is viewed as a connected form of moral reasoning.<sup>12</sup> A moral dilemma is then a threat to those relationships. A justice/rights based moral orientation is grounded in the principles of fairness, equality, autonomy, respect, and reciprocity. The justice/rights based moral orientation is viewed as a separated or objective form of moral reasoning because it requires an

individual to look at whether or not an action would be good or bad if it were done to any individual, including the one making the decision.

The decisions made with these two orientations differ significantly. Decisions using the former, care/response, are judged on whether or not the integrity of the relationships that were endangered are upheld, and if any relationships which were severed prior to the moral decision were again restored. The latter of the two approaches, the justice/rights orientation, has its decision judged from a different perspective altogether. A person using justice/rights based moral reasoning will judge the decisions made on whether or not the principles used to make the decisions were violated. For example, the principle of fairness or reciprocity which is the most commonly used principle in justice oriented moral decision making must not be violated or altered if there is to be a "good" moral decision made.

Although these two perspectives seem very different, both of them offer a foundation for resolution to moral conflicts. Neither is better, but as noted above it has been observed that a particular orientation is predominant for a particular gender. Gilligan has often used the analogy of the ambiguous figure, noting that we can see the same situation two ways but only from one perspective at a time. We can shift our view, but we cannot see both images or moral frames simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> Both justice and care are incorporated into people's thinking about moral dilemmas. But people usually tend to focus on and adhere to one set of concerns at a time and minimally represent the other. Brabeck has pointed out that many times the direct aim of studies is not to detect gender differences; instead, these differences are only a peripheral observation.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, this project was designed to collect and analyze data specifically directed at assessing gender differences in moral orientations.

## HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis of this study was that males exhibit more of a justice/rights orientation in their moral thinking, whereas females exhibit more of a care/response based orientation in their moral thinking.

## METHOD

In order to test the hypothesis, undergraduate students who were taking a medical ethics course were asked to write brief essays in response to viewing two films. A film on the history of abortion entitled *Supreme*

*Court Decisions That Changed the Nation: Roe v. Wade* was shown to the group.<sup>15</sup> This film which covered social, legal, and medical implications of abortion is briefly summarized in Appendix A. Following the viewing, essays were written by the students. Several weeks later, a film entitled *A Jury of Her Peers* was shown to the group as well.<sup>16</sup> This film is briefly summarized in Appendix B. Again essays were written in response to the film. The essays were transcribed in order to avoid preconceived judgments about the gender of the author based on name or penmanship. The essays were coded so that subsequent to the evaluation the essays could be matched with the authors' gender.

A coding scheme which was borrowed from Lyons' study was modified, adapted and used in classifying the essays.<sup>17</sup> The coding scheme is found in Table I. Also, an outline compiled by Brabeck on the differences between a care/response orientation and a justice/rights orientation was used to analyze the essays.<sup>18</sup> The outline is in Table II. In order to avoid problems with inter-rater reliability, two safeguards were followed. First, the evaluations were done by only one author (J.M.S.) so that if a bias did exist, the bias would be consistent and would not affect the marginal analysis of some essays. Second, the coding scheme which was used was meticulously chosen and adapted in order to ensure that the evaluator had a specific scale on which to base the analysis, instead of judging the essays against each other which is the inevitable outcome if such a scale is not provided.

The coding scheme for the care/response based moral reasoning embodies a notion of a connected self. This care/response view of moral determination rests on the idea that moral agents are connected with all other people in their lives. The relationships with other people are viewed as the important ties which must not be severed. This is important in order to understand how agents using a care/response oriented moral approach make decisions. Also, different from the justice/rights based sense of morality, the evaluation of the decision as a good one or a bad one rests on the final outcome of all the relationships involved as elaborated in Table I.

The justice/rights based moral reasoning involves a separate/objective scheme which embodies the use of the reciprocity principle, the use of specific rules to make moral judgments, and the use of rule evaluation to determine whether or not a decision is a good one or a bad one. Both moral inclinations can and often times do offer a foundation to solve the same moral dilemmas, but there is a tendency to rely on one or the other for moral determinations. The categorizing of the essays into either one of the two coding schemes was then very straightforward. With all identifying titles removed, the essays were examined for content of moral

Table I. Summary of the Two Moral Orientations (Adapted from Nona Lyons' Study: *Two Perspectives: On Self, Relationships, and Morality*).

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<i>The Care/Response Moral Orientation*</i>	
Moral agents using a care based morality to determine proper moral decisions view themselves as intricately involved with the people around them. Therefore, the moral problems that face an agent using this response mechanism are concerned with maintaining relationships. According to Nona Lyons (Lyons 1983) agents must consider the following:	
1)	maintaining relationships and response, that is, the connections of interdependent individuals to one another, or
2)	promoting the welfare of others or preventing their harm; or relieving the burdens, hurt, or suffering (physical or psychological) of others.
Even the evaluating procedure of their decisions revolve around judging whether or not the relationships were maintained or restored. The evaluating considerations are as follows:	
1)	what happened/will happen, or how things worked out; or
2)	whether relationships were/are maintained or restored.

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<i>The Justice/Rights Moral Orientation*</i>	
A morality of justice involves separate considerations than those from a care based moral theory. A justic or rights grounded scheme involves an objective assessment which is a product of separating oneself from an act in question. In other words, an act which is being evaluated is seen from a third party perspective. In coordination with this, an agent will use principles or guidelines to direct proper decisions. Usually, the reciprocity principle (the Golden Rule) will be used to produce an adequately acceptable decision. The agent using this moral theory also considers the roles and social duties or expectations placed upon him/her. The considerations are as follows:	
1)	one's role-related obligations, duty, or commitments; or
2)	standards, rules, or principles for self, others or society; including reciprocity, that is, fairness-how one should treat another considering how one would like to be treated if in their place.
After a decision is made, the evaluation of the decision requires certain considerations:	
1)	how decisions are thought about and justified; or
2)	whether values, principles, or standards are (were) maintained, especially fairness.

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\*For implications about definition of self and further elaboration on this coding scheme, see reference number 9.

considerations. As in the Gilligan and Attanucci study, the unit of analysis was the *consideration*, defined as each idea the participant presents in discussing a moral problem.<sup>19</sup> Each moral consideration from each essay was recognized as either care/response based, or justice/rights based using the criteria elaborated in Table I. The considerations were counted and expressed as a percentage of each subject's overall references. A conclusion was then made about their overall tendency toward a care/response orientation or a justice/rights orientation. If a conclusion could not be made because of equal references to the two approaches, then the essay was counted as an equal response essay. An essay was

Table II. Comparisons of Care and Response Orientation vs. Justice and Rights Orientation.

	Care/Response Orientation	Justice/Rights Orientation
Components	nonviolence/care relationships responsibility for self and others care harmony compassion self-sacrifice	justice sanctity of individuals (autonomy) rights of self and others fairness reciprocity respect rules/legalities
Nature of moral dilemma	threats to relationships	conflicting rights
Determinants of Moral Obligation	relationships	principles
Process for Resolving dilemmas	inductive thinking	formal/logic deductive thinking
View of Self	connected	individual/separate
Philosophical Orientation	contextual relativism	principle of justice

determined to be either a care/response or justice/rights essay by the number of respective responses versus its total responses. If a student's responses were at least 70% care/response or justice/rights, the student's essay was labeled as such. This determination was used for essays that contained at least six considerations. For essays with less than six considerations, 100% of the considerations had to be of one or the other orientation for it to be categorized in that orientation. Any essay which did not exceed the 70% or the 100% mark respectively, was categorized as a neutral or equal reference essay.

After all the essays were analyzed, the essays were matched with their author's gender. The results of how many students were categorized as care/response oriented and of how many were categorized as justice/rights oriented were then calculated and expressed by a percentage of total female population and male population, respectively.

As in the Lyons study, a different analysis of the essays was computed. An absence of orientation was calculated. The number of females that had no care/response considerations, and the number of females that had no justice/rights considerations were calculated. Again, the same was

done for the males. This was done to determine whether there were any outliers on the extreme. These were also expressed as percentages.

RESULTS

Initially, the study began with 125 essays. Out of the original number, six (6) essays were dropped from the study because of insufficient moral considerations on the subjects at hand. This represented a 4.8% loss of data. The total number of useable essays was then reduced to 119. With such a small percent of lost data, there was no reason to believe that the results would be significantly affected. The study was carried out with N = 119 of which the female population was N = 62, and the male population was N = 57.

Analysis of the data could not refute the original hypothesis that males exhibit more of a justice/rights orientation in their moral reasoning and that females exhibit more of a care/response orientation in their moral reasoning. Out of the total female population in the study, 69.4% (43/62) exhibited a care/response based morality. Only 16.1% (10/62) of the female population were linked to a justice/rights based morality in the essays on both films. The remaining female students, (9/62) or 14.5%, were classified as neutral or equal response subjects. These data are presented in Table III.

Among the males, the results were even more dramatic with 87.7% (50/57) of the males exhibiting the characteristics of a justice/rights based moral orientation in the essays on both films. Furthermore, only 3.5% (2/57) of the males exhibited the characteristics of the care/response moral orientation. There were also 8.8% (5/57) males that were classified as neutral or equal response subjects. These data are presented in Table III.

For further analysis on the specific moral issues which were posed here, statistics were gathered for the individual films and their respective

Table III. Combined Total Female/Male Population Analysis for Both Essays.

Total N = 119	Care/Response Orientation % (N)	Justice/Rights Orientation % (N)	Equal Response/Neutral Orientation % (N)
FEMALE: N = 62	69.4% (43)	16.1% (10)	14.5% (9)
MALE: N = 57	3.5% (2)	87.7% (50)	8.8% (5)

essays. The individual statistics still held true. There were some variances, but the data remain consistent with the total statistics in supporting the hypothesis as shown in Table IV and Table V.

The population size was, to some extent, small so calculations were done to see if the results could have occurred simply by chance. When the data were tabulated and analyzed the statistical significance was very high ( $p \leq 0.001$ ).

An absence of orientation calculation was also made to determine how many, if any, students exhibited only characteristics of just one or the other moral orientation. As seen in Table VI, more than a quarter (26.3%) of the male students in the study had only justice/rights considerations and no care/response considerations. For the females, 11.3% of them exhibited only care/response considerations and no justice/rights considerations. These are students that represent the extremes of the orientations. Furthermore only 1.6%, or only one (1) female student had only justice/rights considerations with no care/response considerations,

Table IV. Total Female/Male Population Analysis for Essays on *A Jury of Her Peers*.

Total N = 68	Care/Response Orientation % (N)	Justice/Rights Orientation % (N)	Equal Response/Neutral Orientation % (N)
FEMALE: N = 36	72.2% (26)	16.7% (6)	11.1% (4)
MALE: N = 32	6.3% (2)	81.3% (26)	12.5% (4)

Table V. Total Female/Male Population Analysis for Essays on *Roe V. Wade*.

Total N = 51	Care/Response Orientation % (N)	Justice/Rights Orientation % (N)	Equal Response/Neutral Orientation % (N)
FEMALE: N = 26	65.4% (17)	15.4% (4)	19.2% (5)
MALE: N = 25	0.0% (0)	96.0% (24)	4.0% (1)



and no male student exhibited only care/response considerations with no justice/rights considerations.

DISCUSSION

These results effectively support the hypothesis presented here and the work that Gilligan and Lyons have reported. Using moral problems and highlighting the differences between male and female thinking about them, this study produced evidence which supports the hypothesis of gender related moral orientations. If one accepts Gilligan's conceptualization of the difference between the two potential definitions of self and its relationship with others in terms of care and justice, then these results are valid for establishing gender related orientations.

Several key observations were made. First, the fact that females did primarily exhibit a care/response moral orientation and that males did primarily exhibit a justice/rights moral orientation is an important observation in understanding moral orientation. Second, data such as these help explain traditional gender stereotypes, professional stereotypes, and social stereotypes. Lastly, an interesting observation was made in that twice as many females than males fell under the neutral category.

The first observation is interesting because of the traditional views on moral development that have been widely held, namely that justice is the basis of moral reasoning. This view is deeply rooted in the results which Kohlberg derived from his quarter of a century long research study.<sup>20</sup> A challenge came from Gilligan when she noted that Kohlberg's study contained an experimental flaw in the design. Kohlberg used only male subjects from which he made generalizations about moral development. Gilligan, convinced that cognitive moral development was problematic because of this design, proposed her care/response moral orientation theory.<sup>21</sup> According to critics, empirical data to substantiate her

Table VI. Absence of Care/Response or Justice/Rights Considerations.

Total N = 119	No Care/Response Considerations % (N)	No Justice/Rights Considerations % (N)
FEMALE: N = 62	1.6% (1)	11.3% (7)
MALE: N = 57	26.3% (15)	0.0% (0)

theory has been lacking.<sup>22</sup> Even the study that Lyons did about the definition of self and how females and males view themselves differently with respect to others and with respect to moral problems had a limited scope.<sup>23</sup> Although the results were promising, there was still a need for additional empirical support data. The data presented here offer empirical support for Gilligan's position. These data do not refute Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory; rather, they recognize that a justice/rights moral theory does in fact exist and is predominately exhibited by males. At the same time though, these data support the idea that females do predominately exhibit a different moral orientation which is rooted in care and compassion. With data that demonstrates that there exists a difference between the genders in their moral orientations, it is possible that many of the rifts that cause gender typecasting may be bridged.

Secondly, it is apparent that inequities still exist based on gender. Today's society is one in which many stereotypes are enforced and passed down from generation to generation, often without any intention of malice. The fact that evidence supports the idea that females are more care and compassion oriented offers a feasible explanation of why females have traditionally held compassion roles in society, i.e. homemakers, teacher, social workers, and nurses. In the same respect, males being more justice oriented offers some insight as to why men have held the traditional roles of providers, principals, lawyers, and judges. These are roles of structure and regulations, not to mention the inherent justice features which these roles represent. With results such as these and a more comprehensive understanding of moral diversification among the genders, society can perhaps begin to overcome such discriminations. Discriminations and stereotypes seem to come from ignorance or a lack of understanding. Hopefully, these results will shed light on moral problem solving, moral orientations, and foster moral equality.

The last observation has to do with the fact that twice as many females than males were classified as having neutral or equal response positions. There are several possible explanations for this. First, it could be that the "Gestalt" issue mentioned earlier holds especially true for males. A male either sees through a justice point of view or a care point of view, but not through both at the same time. For males, more often a moral dilemma is black or white, with little or no grey. On the other hand, a female may be able to see (to a greater extent relative to a male) through both a care sense and a justice sense simultaneously, thus giving rise to the ambiguity.

There is another interpretation which may be more accurate, though. It may be that society as a whole has been institutionally condi-

tioned to have a strong justice sense of morality. Gilligan and Attanucci noted that in pairs of examples of justice/rights and care/response considerations, the justice/rights construction is the more familiar one, capturing the way such problems are usually defined from a moral standpoint.<sup>24</sup> Society is dependent on laws, parameters, *morés*, and even ethical principles. Males have a very strong justice foundation, and females have been justice conditioned to a male dominated world. Even if females did not recognize that there could be a gender specific response, and gave true responses, the fact that they have been indoctrinated all their lives by justice views would sway the types of moral considerations which they offered. Also, females may be aware that they are a part of a society which has historically been male and thus justice dominated. They may have intended to give the socially correct responses. All this would result in ambiguous moral reasoning about what is right. More study needs to be done in this regard.

### CONCLUSION

The research study presented here is important in the understanding of moral thinking, development, and orientation. Certainly not all the questions about the diversity between the genders and their views of morality have been answered. These observations offer valuable information, but create many questions as well. Why is it that females are more responsive and compassionate in a moral dilemma? Does the fact that males are more concerned with justice and fairness as a universal principle explain why traditionally male-ruled countries, such as in the middle-east, are very justice/rights based? Even today's judicial system may be effected. Would a predominately female jury be more likely to acquit a person being charged with a crime because of a more holistic view of the situation? Or, would a predominately male jury be more likely to convict a person because of a more "justice is called for" sense of morality and duty? Some aspects of morality are clearer now, but by no means is there a clear understanding of why males and females make the decisions they do. Further studies are clearly needed.

Maybe one day, situations like gender specific professions, gender related salary differences, and criticisms due to superficial views such as gender, will disappear. The results here clearly provide a foundation for a reeducation about genders. These data support that females do in fact predominately exhibit a care/response moral orientation. Likewise, these data also support that males predominately exhibit a justice/rights moral orientation. An interesting future research study would be to test this

separate orientation theory in an academic setting to see if it holds up for different fields of study, i.e., law, medicine, engineering and so forth. Also it would be interesting to see if at different levels of education, high school, collegiate, and/or graduate level, one would find the same results.

Nonetheless, for now, this data seems to point in a clear direction. It may be that in the future, moral orientation can be directly linked to the social and environmental roles that are placed on people as children. Walker, one of Gilligan's most adamant critics, proposes that it is time to stop looking at the gender bias and more at such things as "the role of cognitive prerequisites and sociomoral experiences in facilitating moral development and of the relationship of moral reasoning to moral emotions and behaviors."<sup>25</sup> Instead of morality being a function of gender, it is possible that it is environmentally determined. As Sidney Callahan puts it, "when an outcome of a woman's moral decision making differs from that of a man's, the difference may have less to do with a psychologically gendered self employing different styles of moral thought and feeling, and more to do with certain environmental experiences that women are more likely to have undergone."<sup>26</sup> Further studies of the influence of environment are needed. For now though, we are getting closer to understanding moral orientation a little better.

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## APPENDIX A

### Supreme Court Decisions that Changed the Nation: Roe v. Wade

This short film is an historic overview of abortion. The film begins with a review of the practices of abortion since the days of the ancient Greeks. The film then moves to the U.S. during the industrial revolution and offers a political, social and medical summary of where abortion stands in the eyes of most people. Also covered in the film is the movement by physicians to stop abortion because of unsafe health procedures due to inadequate knowledge. From there, the film proceeds to the late 1960s and early 1970s. The film covers the medical profession's change

in attitude about the abortion issue. Physicians and lobbyists began arguing that abortion was now a safe procedure and thus the allowing of it posed no danger to women. The medical community, according to the film, agrees that with the contemporary technology an abortion can be performed with relatively few complications.

It seems that at that point (subsequent to *Roe v. Wade*), the focus of society and of the film veers to moral issues instead of medical issues. The film outlines how no longer is abortion a medical problem that society has to contend with, but rather a moral dilemma that needs to be addressed. Since then, American society has been in turmoil over what to do about this issue.

The film clearly outlines (as unbiased as possible) the medical, political, and moral ramifications of the historic events of abortion practices to date. The film does raise several questions that modern society must answer if a solution to the abortion debate is ever going to occur. Regardless of one's moral reasoning and personal views about abortion, all sides were presented.

## APPENDIX B

### A Jury of Her Peers

*A Jury of Her Peers* is a short story from the early 1900s. It is set in a rural farming community. Winter is in full force, and the mood is very cold and dreary. The story begins as two representatives (males), who are trying to convince farmers to allow the placement of phone lines, reach the house of Mr. and Mrs. Burke. The men enter the home and ask for Mr. Burke. Mrs. Burke replies that he is dead. She elaborates that someone must have wrung his neck while they slept. She also states that she slept through the murder.

The men send for the sheriff. The next scene shows the sheriff, an assistant and one of the men from the first scene arrive at the Burke home. Accompanying them are two women, Mrs. Hale (a neighbor) and the sheriff's wife Mrs. Peters. The men are there to investigate the murder and look for clues. The women are there to gather some things for Mrs. Burke, who has been detained as a prime suspect and is in jail.

While the men look around for clues, the women stay in the house and discuss what could have happened. Through the conversations that take place within the two groups, a clear and distinct rift surfaces. The men are primarily concerned with finding a motive in order to prove that she committed the murder. For the women, though, the situation is not

so cut and dry. The women discuss the situation in an attempt to understand why Mrs. Burke could have committed this crime. In the end, the women accept that Mrs. Burke probably did commit the crime, but that her actions might have been justified and therefore believed that she should not be punished. The women hide evidence from the men and lie to the men. The questions left up to the viewer to answer then, are questions of justice, law, fairness, and compassion.