Moral Development Theory in Higher Education

And The Moral Development of Student Leaders

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A Review of the Literature

Moral development is a progressive theory that unfolds throughout one's lifetime. Chickering (1969) suggested that the development of integrity, which involves humanizing and personalizing values as well as establishing a congruence between one's beliefs and behavior, should be the cumulating component of development during the college years (Evans, 1987, p.191). Moral development is heightened through receiving a college education. Morality surrounds students in the higher education setting. A growing number of presidents, deans, faculty, and staff members are supporting curricular and co-curricular initiatives that affect student’s character in a helpful way (Yanikoski, 2004, p.15). Ethical and moral decisions are made every day on a college campus.

The development of morality is crucial to the education of the whole student. Educational psychologist Howard Gardner found that scholastic knowledge “seems strictly bound to the school setting” and when confronted with moral issues outside of the academic setting students simply revert back to their earlier forms of moral reasoning (Boss, 1994, p.19). Students are exposed to moral and ethical issues not just in the classroom but also through their extra curricular experiences. Leadership in higher education is a unique platform in which students have an opportunity to learn, grow, and construct their moral development. Colleges and Universities have begun to expand upon mission statements to include a clause pertaining the moral and ethical development of each student creating moral citizens in society. The mission statement of most colleges and universities advocate the development of values and ethical behaviors as an important educational goal (Evans, 1987, p.193). Every student who
attends college is given rare exposure to moral and ethical dilemmas, but student leaders experiences are more progressive. Student leaders moral development is cultivated and developed in the higher education setting. Effective student leaders have been identified as those leaders who possess a value system, flexibility, a healthy self-concept, insight, and human relation skills (Miles, 2011, p.7). Through the mentorship and guidance of student affairs professional’s, student leaders are able to engage in deliberate experiences which foster moral development. It is important to first understand the theory behind the practice of moral development and how theory interacts with college student’s growth.

**Major Theorists**

Lawrence Kholberg created a stage model for moral development theory. Before Kholberg’s theory can be explained one must first understand the framework for stage theory. There are three criteria for stage theory the first being structure criterion. The structure criterion is the most fundamental and is described as an individual having similar reasoning patterns regardless of the experience the individual is having. The second criterion is sequencing; stages appear in a specific order. Lastly is hierarchy criterion; each stage of Kholberg’s theory is more highly developed that the previous one because aspects of the earlier stages are incorporated.

Kholberg believed that moral reasoning and social perspective taking were closely related, the two or both necessary but not sufficient conditions of moral development, growth in both domains aids in the readiness for development. Exposure to higher stage thinking and cognitive conflict create internal contradictions in one’s moral reasoning structure. College provides a stimulating environment in which students are faced with new and unique circumstances. Bringing students into contact with literature, philosophy, and other disciplines addressing the complexities of the world can bring them into contact with a highly diverse range
of facts and views of the world. According to Kholberg it is these experiences that provide cognitive disequilibrium, which leads to growth in moral judgment (Good & Cartwright, 1998, p.7). Disequilibrium facilitates higher levels of moral development.

Kholberg’s theory consists of three levels and within each level are two stages. The first level of Kholberg’s moral development theory is preconventional; in which an individual does not understand societal rules and one’s own perspective is concrete. Within the preconventional level is the first stage Heteronymous morality. What is right is defined by obeying rule, refraining from harming others, and avoiding punishment. The second stage under the first level is individualistic, instrumental morality. An individual follows rules if it is in their interest to do so, beginning to understand others have needs and interests that may differ from own perspective.

The second level is conventional, defined as the member of society perspective, individuals identify with the rules and expectations put forth by society. Under the second level is stage three, interpersonally normative morality. The individual becomes focused on meeting the needs and expectations of others, working to gain approval. The fourth stage is also part of Kholberg’s conventional level, social system morality. An individual begins to understand societal rules as applied equally to all, laws and duties must be agreed on and upheld.

Theorists have challenged Kholberg’s final level; the postconventional level because there is little empirical evidence supporting it. It is believed that very few people fully reach and envelope the final level of Kholberg’s moral development theory. The postconventional level is described as an individual separating self from society and concern becomes focused on everyone’s wellbeing. The last two stages fall under the postconventional level. Stage five human rights and social welfare morality, individuals are able to evaluate laws and promote
fundamental human rights and values. Social system is viewed as a social contract that is meant to protect member’s rights and welfare. The final stage is morality of unviersalizable, reversible, and prescriptive general ethical principles; individual’s morality involves point of view and welfare of everyone. Concern for human rights and principles that can be applied to all situations. Studies suggest that collegiate experiences do promote moral development, more specifically, during college students tend to decrease their preference for conventional level reasoning and increase their preference for postconventional moral reasoning (King & Mayhew, 2002, p.249). It is the goal of a college or university for students to reach the postconventional level prior to graduating.

The second major Theorist of moral development theory was James Rest. Rest took a Neo-Kholbergian approach to the development of morality. Rest examined two elements in a persons thinking; how expectations about rules are known and shared, and how interests of all involved are balanced. After an analysis of several studies, Rest (1986, 1988) concluded that “people who develop moral judgments are those who love to learn, who seek new challenges, who enjoy intellectually stimulating environments, who are reflective, who make plans and sets goals, who take risks, who see themselves in the larger social contexts of history and institutions and broad cultural trends, who take responsibility for themselves and their environs,” (Good & Cartwright, 1998, p.3). Rest’s theory is made up of six central concepts and three schemas. James rest believed that you could be in multiple areas of moral development at once, and he did not believe in stage theory. He rejected the idea of a step-by-step development through stages, and envisioned development as shifting distributions rather than a staircase. Different from Kholberg who believed that individuals regardless of experience or situation develop through each stage, Rest’s theory focuses on the considerations people use when making decisions.
The six central concepts for determining moral rights and responsibilities are obedience, instrumental egoism and simple exchange, interpersonal concordance, law and duty to have social order, societal consensus, and non-arbitrary social cooperation. It is important to note that each of Rest’s schemas is derived from Kholberg’s stages. Rest’s first schema is personal interest. Derived from Kholberg’s stages two and three is developed in childhood and paramount by the time an individual reaches a twelve year old reading level. An individual is able to recognize some awareness of others when making moral decisions, considers what each stakeholder has to gain or lose. The second schema maintaining norms comes from Kholberg’s fourth stage. Individual begins to envision societal collaboration. There is a need for rules ad laws and believe norms apply to all living in society. The final schema post conventional is derived from Kholberg’s stages five and six. In the post conventional schema Rest identifies four critical schemas; primacy moral criteria, appeal to ideal, shareable values, full reciprocity. Rest believed that the final schema is a leading indicator of student’s development in college.

Carol Gilligan took a different stance on moral development theory than her predecessors had. Prior to Gilligan’s success human development theorists used only men to set the standard of what was believed as “normal.” Gilligan believed that relationships with others carried equal weight with self-care when making moral decisions. Gilligan’s moral development theory is concerned with the ethic of care. The theory is made up of three levels and two transitions.

The first level orientation to individual survival is centered on self, individual is unable to distinguish between necessity and desire. In the first level is the first transition; from selfishness to responsibility. In this transition the individual struggles with a connection to others, the conflict between necessity and desire is distinguishable. Individuals are able to begin considering doing the right thing.
Level two goodness as self-sacrifice; in which survival becomes a part of societal acceptance. Individual becomes concerned with consensus and seeks a parallel between self-definition and the care of others. Within level two is the second transition, from goodness to truth. Within this transition an individual is able to begin looking for balance between own needs and others. Individuals in this transition can be conflicted between survival and morality.

Gilligan’s final level, the morality of nonviolence is viewed as a moral mandate to avoid hurt to the overriding principles that govern moral judgment. The dichotomization of selfishness and responsibility disappears.

Since Gilligan’s moral development theory has been formed there has been much research done on gender differences. Gilligan believed that men and women frame moral judgment in two different ways care and justice. There has also been a shift from studying white privileged females to the examination of women and girl’s relationships and how cultural differences influence their development.

It is important to understand college aged student leaders moral development in the context of higher education. Student leaders are presented with many experiences that will facilitate their moral development.

**Safe Learning Opportunities**

Student leaders must not only be given opportunities to engage in the development of their morality but it must be facilitated in an engaging and safe learning environment. Student leaders must be given an environment in which they are able to practice and engage in moral action. Providing safe learning opportunities in which wrong answers are permissible, risks are tolerated, and real life consequences are mitigated is essential for students to develop their morality (Liddell, Cooper, Healy & Stewart, 2010, p.14). Student leaders or moral learners need
opportunities to critically reflect their moral decision-making. Institutions are increasingly engaging undergraduate students in activities in and out of the classroom that bring them into personal and meaningful contact with ethical issues, moral codes, and civic responsibilities (Yanikoski, 2004, p.15). Students must receive supportive, constructive feedback from Student Affairs professionals. Student Affairs professionals must aid in conceiving and implementing moral action for student leaders.

Conformity and Peer-Group Pressures

Student’s moral and ethical awareness can be retarded with the fear of not fitting in. For a student the desire to fit in and avoid standing out can cause silence or non-action (Liddell et al., 2010, p.4). Many students need to feel familiarity or connection with those they surround themselves with. A student’s moral motivation may be hampered by the pull of conformity. When working in peer groups such as a club or student run organization norms and expectations can be set forth and in turn encourage conformity. The goal of these expectations is to socialize new members and reinforce expected behaviors. Student leaders must be cognizant of these reinforcing and be encouraged to challenge the process.

If students are able to create dissonance between members they in turn are fostering moral development for all involved. The challenge with student involvement is that many clubs, organizations, and leadership positions have a pre-existing identifiable culture. To challenge these norms can be unpopular and a risk to students. When students advocate for the unpopular position they are in turn being ethical and developing a stronger morality. Thoma and Ladewing (1993) conducted a study that examined a particular aspect of student’s experiences; they hypothesized that the quality of a students peer relationships would affect their moral judgment development during college. The finding suggested friendships and peer relationships provide a
context for challenging students to consider issues of fairness from others’ perspective, and those who seek more are open to developmental challenges (King & Mayhew, 2002, p.258). Students should be encouraged to challenge the ethics of others.

**Cultural Context**

The context in which one learns and works can intensify a sense of moral development. Group membership must be looked at in an objective point of view; students must be able to view themselves in relation to others. Organizations over time develop a unique culture with its own norms, traditions, and habitual responses. A belief that risk taking may be an embarrassment or decrease access to resources may drive students’ behaviors (Liddell et al., 2010, p.15). It is the responsibility of Student Affairs professionals to encourage new and growing normality’s and traditions. What is normal may not be what is ethical and there must be room for student interpretation. Kholberg places the responsibility for changing or reorganizing principles comprising moral reasoning upon the individual. He recognizes however the important role the environment can play on exposing individuals to new and unfamiliar stimuli (Mayhew & Engberg, 2010, p.460). Cultural influence can reinforce conformity, but with the development or student leaders morality they are able to interpret the societal expectations and agree to uphold what they feel fits their ethical beliefs.

**Ethical Awareness**

Ethical dilemmas are dilemmas because the right course of action is not always clearly visible (Liddell et al., 2010, p.14). In Rest’s model ethical principles involve both moral sensitivity and moral judgment. If a student is unsure about an ethical course of action it can impede moral action and create barriers.
Ethical awareness can be clouded when students practice situational ethics. What is ethical to a student will depend on the context of the situation as opposed to the consistent application of the student’s ethical principles. Students should be encouraged to follow and adhere to ethical principles even if it negates the group norm. A student leader must understand the needs of others and create an ethical collaboration between all individuals involved.

**Self-Efficacy**

Student leaders must obtain the confidence to respond accordingly to ethical and moral dilemmas. Lacking the confidence to respond can block moral action, and impede the development of moral character (Liddell et al., 2010, p.15). Student leaders must feel empowered to act ethically and morally. Student leaders must understand that self-efficacy is built over time with exposure to diverse and difficult situations. Student Affairs professionals must support student’s growth and work with student to build moral confidence.

**Balance Individual and Community Needs**

Student Leaders must be cognizant of the conflict that will arise when individual moral and ethical needs do not match the community needs. Clubs or organizations will work to uphold common standards of conduct. Gilligan’s second transition from goodness to truth individuals begins working to balance individual needs with community needs. Students work to find a parallel between ethical necessities within the group normality. Students must be aware of their development and pursue growth and learning opportunities that allows students to mature moral and ethical decision-making.

**Importance of a Mentor**

Mentoring student leader is a process not just an outcome. Mentors must coach for growth. Mentors must intentionally build collaborative learning environments that foster
intergroup learning and engage students in the process of self-discovery around issues of power, privilege, and social responsibility (Mayhew & Engberg, 2010, p.459). Committing oneself not only to a just outcome but also to a caring process is an important aspect of mentoring moral and ethical development. Evans (1987) created five principles that should guide interactions with students. A) Respect autonomy, give students freedom of action and choice. B) Do no harm, avoid actions that hurt others or place them at risk. C) Benefit others, contribute to others welfare and promote their growth. D) Be just, treat everyone equal regardless of background. E) Be faithful, keep promises and be loyal (Evans, 1987, p.192). Students remain free to make their own decisions and Student Affairs professionals must create a climate in which students can assert different moral and ethical positions.

Student Involvement should plan interventions that are spelled out in advance for students, which help increase student’s motivations to behave in a moral and ethical way (Evans, 1987, p.192). As a mentor it is critical to demonstrate ethical and moral behavior in interactions with students. It is critical to facilitate campus conversations about ethical and moral issues before making a decision. Student Affairs professionals serve as very important role models in the development of student leaders morality.

Conclusion

Moral development is fostered both in and out of the classroom. Student leaders are exposed to a plethora of opportunities that progress their moral and ethical development. Williams (1994) showed that transformational leaders display more citizenship behaviors such as altruism, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue, as well as imbue their subordinates with these same values (Bass, 1999, p.12). Student Leaders must know themselves, know other’s perspectives, and know their institution. Student leaders must practice self-
appraisal, take the time to identify and seek out different perspectives and values of others, and understand institutional integrity by evaluating the policies that guide students. Leaders must hear those who are able to speak out when most remain silent, who will speak when it seems a decision has already been made, and who will remind us of the inconvenient truths that may have been forgotten but must be considered (Liddell et al., 2010, p.17).
References


