The Fluidity of Moral Development:
A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective on How Individuals Continue to Construct Their Morality Through Young Adulthood

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The young adult age group is one known for constant transitioning and the generation of liminal spaces. This study follows the research of Piaget and Kohlberg and their stages of moral development involving child subjects. Expanding the age pool to college students, these stages were tested along with the influence of stereotypes and reference groups on morality. Though some students fell into the defined stages of development, some generated a new category focused on altruism. Stereotypes were proven to be influential, and it was discovered that it is not reference groups but various situations that help to challenge one’s ethical reasoning.
The Fluidity of Moral Development

This past summer I spent my time interning at a child advocacy and abuse center. Mary Abbott Children’s House is an accredited agency that does both forensic interviews and medical exams for abused children, with the hopes that their recorded interviews will stand in court so the child does not have to testify. The interview process is rigorous, with a particular emphasis upon establishing a sense of morality with the child. In order for the interview to be credible, the child must be able to state and display that they can tell the difference between truth and lie, and then promise to only tell the truth. Though this seems like a degrading process for the child, it is mandatory for many states, including Oklahoma. I was asked to research this truth and lies paradigm and help generate a new process for establishing morality with a child. This research raised many questions for me, such as when does a child develop a sense of right and wrong? Are there better ways to establish a sense of morality other than the differences between truth and lies? Is morality set at a certain age, or does it change with time?

Morality is considered to be essential to the human condition. The ability to distinguish between right and wrong, truth and lie, is depicted as being an essential driving force in society, separating humanity from other species. However, moral issues hardly ever fall into simplistic dichotomies, nor is moral ideology ingrained in one as part of one’s biology. Morality and the feelings associated with doing right and wrong (i.e. guilt, shame, pride) are taught and imbedded through social interactions. Since birth, families, religious institutions, and educational systems teach one what is considered to be “right” or “truth” in order to help one establish an inner conscience. One’s culture and
society therefore defines one’s sense of morality, and applies various sanctions and laws to persuade and mold one’s thinking. Through a sense of conscience one takes these social ideologies and pressures to form a more internal moral compass that is constantly in a state of change as one changes reference groups and ideologies.

This study centers on the moral development of children through adolescence to the college age level by focusing and expanding upon the literature of Piaget and Kohlberg. From their previous research, inferences were made on how the current moral development of those in their early twenties mirrors those childhood stages. Morality is fluid, shaped and developed via various social interactions and pressures, extending further than Piaget and Kohlberg’s developmental stages, which coincides with the symbolic interactionist framework. Two focus groups, totaling fourteen students, were analyzed through the lens of the symbolic interactionist perspective. This study will attempt to discover if morality continues to develop with age or ends with cognitive growth, if stereotypes influence how one views the ideal moral individual, and which social interactions and reference/peer groups are the most influential in establishing morality.

**Definitions:**

In order to follow this research accurately, certain definitions have to be mapped out, as many terms have multiple definitions involving theory. Following the symbolic interactionist approach, *socialization* shall be defined according to the work of Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine in their text *Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality* which states that socialization is “An ongoing process of interaction through which we develop identities and acquire culture” (106). Socialization has both a primary and secondary
phase. In the primary phase the familial unit introduces one to various beliefs, ideologies, and moral codes. The secondary phase of socialization occurs when one begins to integrate one’s taught beliefs with that of other institutions and reference groups such as the educational system, religious institutions, peers, etc.

For the purpose of this study moralization will be defined along the lines of Lawrence Kohlberg, “…moralization [is] a process of internalizing culturally given external rules through rewards, punishments, or identification” (8). This definition will be expanded upon by Piaget’s stages of moral development of pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional levels that will be explained in the literary review. Emphasis on this definition is based on the assumption that the structure of morality is interwoven between the self and society.

As stated earlier, this research will be from a symbolic interactionist perspective in which the self is seen as constantly growing and changing throughout one’s lifetime. Symbolic interactionism can most simplistically be defined as the belief that “people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them, and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation” (Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction). The individual and the society decide upon the significance of various symbols, such as language, establishing a negotiated meaning that is constantly renegotiated by further interactions. In the case of morality the self then negotiates a situation by deciding whether to follow the society’s laws and sanctions or the principles of morality in and of itself.

Based upon the symbolic interactionist perspective the self is viewed as post modern instead of as a core (or modern self). The core self can be defined as the belief
that aspects of the self remain the same throughout one’s lifetime. The concept of who one is may change on the surface, but the internal core of ethical, religious, and even political ideologies remain ossified. A post modern self contradicts this belief in stating that the self constantly changes day to day as it is influences by society, and though various identities may harden over time there is no core identity. Thus the self is based upon interaction, “For… the self is first and foremost a reflexive process of social interaction. The reflexive process refers to the uniquely human capacity to become an object to one's self, to be both subject and object” (Callero, 119).

For the purposes of this research stereotypes shall be defined as, “… false or misleading generalizations about groups held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence. In doing so, stereotypes powerfully shape the stereotyper's perception of stereotyped groups, seeing the stereotypic characteristics when they are not present, failing to see the contrary of those characteristics when they are, and generally homogenizing the group” (Blum, 251). This definition applies stereotypes as used in a negative sense. However, this paper will follow the positive stereotypical traits given to those who are seen as moral individuals. Taken from Stanford’s dictionary of philosophy, the following traits will be coded as stereotypical: virtuous, just, wise, courage, taking appropriate action, happiness, having the appropriate motivation for action, and honesty.

**Literary Review:**

This study tests and expands upon the works of Piaget and Kohlberg in order to formulate a new perspective on moral development. Both researchers studied the moral and cognitive development of children, discovering an association between cognitive
development and ethical understanding and reasoning as well as giving the assumption that once one stops growing cognitively, one’s ethical viewpoint becomes ossified. Modern theorists tend to accept this association, though little work has been done in studying adolescent, young adult, and adult morality. My research attempts to build a bridge between respected past theory and new research by analyzing a small group of young adults about their moral shifts from adolescence to young adulthood, beginning with an analysis of Piaget’s works.

**Piaget:**

Jean Piaget generated one of the first studies on childhood moral development and established three stages that demonstrate how children grow morally throughout their cognitive development. These stages display how children’s structure of thought changes, rather than an increasing understanding of how culture influences our ideas of right and wrong. Piaget argued against Durkheim’s theory that children cannot develop morality without an adult role model. Though Piaget believed that cognitive and moral development went hand in hand he also stated that, “children’s moral judgments do not exist in a social or cultural vacuum…they are very much subject to direct and indirect social influences both in their rate of development and…in the shape they take in adulthood” (Rich and DeVitis, 46-47). This seems to indicate the symbolic interactionist perspective in which development is directly linked to society, and leads to the belief that morality changes overtime- extending beyond adolescence. However, for his three stages of development, Piaget studied young boys and followed the cognitive model:

In the first, or pre-conventional stage, “…the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but interprets these labels either in terms of
the physical or the hedonistic consequences of actions” (Kohlberg and Hersh, 54). Thus children perceive that the outcome of an action decides whether that action is good or bad. This belief is labeled as heteronomous morality, “…in which the very young child bases his moral judgment on unilateral respect for authority figures” (Rich and DeVitis, 48). By nature children avoid punishment and therefore obey authority out of fear, and not an underlying sense of morality. In this stage reciprocity is seen in a pragmatic way, not as a sense of loyalty or justice (Kohlberg and Hersh, 55). Children are focused upon their internal “me” rather than their societal “I” as defined by Cooley’s theory of the looking glass self, in that they are cognitively at a level of selfhood by active appropriation “…or behaviors in which we lay claim to, or strive to possess, things as our own” (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine, 82).

In the second stage of moral development, entitled the conventional level, children begin the process of socialization. Instead of looking to adult figures children begin to place more dependence upon their peer group. However, a sense of loyalty is established between the child and authority, “…maintaining the expectations of the individual’s family, group, or nation…” (Kohlberg and Hersh, 55). Though this is often seen as conforming to societal pressures, the child is able to understand the basic abstract concept of justice and desires to actively maintain the societal system. Good or right behavior consists of doing what is morally correct, one’s duty to society, and maintaining social order for it’s own sake (Kohlberg and Hersh, 55). Finally, in this stage there is a development of “interpersonal concordance”, or that good behavior pleases others and is perceived by intention- this is also displayed as the “good boy-nice girl” orientation (Kohlberg and Hersh, 55). Because the child now has an established peer group
autonomous morality develops “…in which the young person…begins to develop a more subjective sense of autonomy and reciprocity” and relies upon the peer group for cooperative, egalitarian growth (Rich and DeVitis, 49).

At the post-conventional level definitions start to be erected on what an individual’s moral values are, apart from those who hold positions of power, and how the individual sees themselves in relation to authoritative powers. Morality is then decided and examined by the whole society in terms of individual rights and standards, defined as legalistic orientation (Kohlberg and Hersh, 55). Great emphasis is given to the legality of morals, but also the idea that we have the power to change laws as a unified society. This belief is much more fluid than the previous stage, in which the understanding is that fixed laws maintain social order. As the post-conventional level states, “Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with the self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency”(Kohlberg and Hersh, 55). This is defined as the universal ethical principal. By cognitively maturing beyond the point of egocentrism the adolescent can now see the world from multiple perspectives, and thus make moral judgments beyond consequences to the self.

According to Piaget, as one moves through the stages of moral development one is better able to comprehend abstract ideas of justice and establish a sense of conscience. One goes from only being able to understand that doing wrong is only wrong because it is punishable, to the ability to generate social change in the belief that laws do not always reflect the moral desires of a people. However, there is no furthering of the theory. Once one reaches the post-conventional stage of moral development there is no higher ethical standard to achieve. This tends to imply that moral discussions should only occur through
adolescence, since by adulthood one has already established a somewhat fixed conscience. Though, “at heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons,” Piaget’s emphasis is on the qualitative transformation of the child and does not show how society influences this change of thinking (Kohlberg and Hersh, 55).

**Kohlberg:**

Continuing the research of Piaget’s developmental stages of morality Kohlberg extends the perspective to six separate phases of growth, stating that moral maturity occurs along side of a child’s cognitive development. As with Piaget these stages end after adolescence, implying that ethical change does not occur past this final stage. Mirroring Piaget, Kohlberg’s theory contains three definite levels: the pre-moral level, morality of conventional role-conformity, and morality of self-accepted moral principles. Level one contains two stages, punishment and obedience orientation, and naïve instrumental hedonism. At this level children do not have a conceptual definition of morality, only that bad actions are punished. As Kohlberg states the child has no real conception of a right, and simply realizes that they must obey authority. This goes on to the second part of the level where the child believes that “…everyone has a right to do what they want to with themselves and their possessions, even though this conflicts with rights of others” (Kohlberg, 10). The child has yet to see himself or herself as a social agent, and thus has a very egocentric idea of self that focuses on rewards and punishments instead of why these consequences occur. Egocentrism is defined as “…the confusion of one’s own perspective with that of others, lead[ing] to an inability to see moral value as relative to various persons or ends” (Kohlberg, 12). Children cannot
therefore see that their actions extend beyond themselves and have yet to develop a conscience.

At the second level children develop a desire for approval and thus want to maintain positive relationships with those in positions of authority. Kohlberg takes directly from Piaget in calling this stage the “good boy morality” or that no one should choose to do evil (Kohlberg, 9). This mentality is influenced by the socialization of the child in that egocentrism is challenged, and feelings of guilt emerge after receiving condemnation from others. Children begin to gain a respect for authority and it “…leads to an autonomous regard for the rules as products of group agreement and as instruments of cooperative purposes” (Kohlberg, 12). An expectation of behavior from others also begins to influence the ideology that maintaining the social order is a universalized duty for the child. “Pre-adolescents attempt to make decisions and define what is good for themselves by anticipating possible disapproval in thought and imagination and by holding up approval as a final internal goal” (Kohlberg, 16).

The ability to understand and construct abstract thinking on ethics occurs in the third level of development. This level is composed of the fifth and sixth stages of development. In the fifth stage the adolescent is able to realize that “…moral conflicts are conflicts between community standards and egotistic impulses” (Kohlberg, 17). Cognitively at this stage the adolescent is able to think rationally and decide if the belief in the law and basic moral principles (such as the golden rule) are going to hold weight in their social reality. Much influence is placed on law-abiding behavior and that certain actions reap various consequences, even if one does not agree with said law. In the sixth and final stage the individual develops a conscience, and is strengthened by self-judging
function rather than a sense of guilt or shame. In this stage “it is recognized that laws are in a sense arbitrary, that there are many possible laws and that laws are sometimes unjust” (Kohlberg, 18). As a society one is able to decide what laws should be changed collectively, but the law in general upholds a universal agreement on ethics. Some conflict occurs internally in the sixth stage between what is right for the individual versus what is right for the society as a whole. However, the adolescent is reflexively able to see themselves as a social role and an individual, and therefore has an ability to generate one’s own morality based both upon the decisions of the society and their own internal conscience. What this theory lacks, as does Piaget, is what occurs after this stage. In order to better comprehend moral development through adulthood modern theory is needed in relation to adolescents.

Modern Theory- Adolescence and Beyond:

Modern theory on moral development expands upon the works of Piaget and Kohlberg to better understand how one’s moral ideology develops past childhood and into adulthood. Some argue that morality is not so much a culturally engrained and social phenomenon, but instead naturalistic. The naturalistic view reflects upon Kohlberg’s belief that moral development is deeply linked with cognitive development. However, this research seems lacking. As Hardy and Carlo state in their research on moral identity, “Moral reasoning is only a modest predictor of moral action... [For] highly moral people do not necessarily have unusually sophisticated moral reasoning capabilities” (212). In the period of adolescence and into the college years, conceptions of identity shift, and along with that shift a greater sense of ethical values beyond obedience to authority is generated. Though this coincides with the cognitive ability to think abstractly, studies
have also shown that how one perceives the ideal moral individual that changes over time. In a study on adolescent moral maturity researchers found that adolescents place their concerns about morality in terms of honesty and integrity while adults emphasized care, going against the cognitive-development perspective that emphasizes a need for justice and rights (Hardy, Walker, Olsen, Skalski, and Basinger, 580-581). Our age, socialization, and sense of identity all interplay into how one develops morally and negotiate what it means to be a moral individual.

For the symbolic interactionist perspective negotiation is the key, for even though one has individualistic beliefs and values that determine our perception of a moral individual one shares agreed upon views of what morality is and is not. As Hardy and Carlo argue:

Throughout childhood and adolescence, developments in moral understanding and identity pave the way for further integration of morality and identity. Moral identity becomes more interpersonal and ideological (Moshman, 2005). Thus, adolescents are more sensitive than children to the expectations, attitudes, and needs of others (Carlo, 2006). Additionally, adolescents are more principled, and less focused on external factors like punishment and reciprocity. In terms of identity, maturation involves the self’s becoming understood more in terms of social interactions and ideologies (214). Though one’s reference groups’ change as one ages, and especially as one leaves home to attend college, the perception of the ideal moral individual is renegotiated via social interaction. Morality is not fixed during the time of adolescence, but remains fluid into the college years and beyond. Though ossification of identity over time may occur the development of ethical and moral values remains dependent upon social interaction and ideology. As stated in a study on whether or not college courses on ethics changed morality sociologist Phillip Jacob states, “The principle effect of a college education is to
bring about a general acceptance of a shared body of attitudes and standards from the college experience…the overall effect is to socialize the student and redefine his or her values” (Jacob as quotes in Rich and DeVitis, 66). Through the process of socialization one’s ideology is challenged and the definition of morality is redefined.

**Experimental Procedures and Methodology:**

For this study I chose to form two focus groups, the first one totaling four members as a trial group, the second ten, for an overall total of fourteen students. A focus group is a type of group interview in which questions are asked in a seminar format so that all participants are heard, and may bounce ideas off of one another to generate consensus. All participants attended Luther College, a private liberal arts school in Decorah, IA. The population consisted of four juniors and ten seniors, spanning an age range of twenty to twenty-two. Only upperclassmen were chosen so the time differential from high school to college was at its peak and the students would be more engrained into the Luther College society. The groups consisted of eight females and six males, reflecting Luther’s population dynamic of a slightly higher percentage of females. I made the inference that this population group would show the most, if any, moral change due to the time spent with new reference groups and the number of classes they had taken at the institution.

Sampling was done in a snowball format in which certain participants were asked directly to be involved in the study and also to ask others to join. Incentive was given in the form of snacks. The focus groups lasted about forty-five minutes to an hour each, and consisted of both a written portion and seminar style focus group. For both focus groups I transcribed the conversations and collected the written portion. All written information
was kept anonymous and confidential. Students were made aware that their conversation was to be transcribed as well as their written portion collected, and all questions and methodology were pre approved by Luther College’s Human Rights and Review Board. From the transcription and written portion data was gathered and categorized under related groups of questions to be coded.

To begin, the focus group students were asked to respond to one of Kohlberg’s stories of moral questioning, taken directly from his 1969 experiment:

In Europe a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman’s husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow money, but he could only get together about $1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later, but the druggist said, “No, I discovered the drug and I’m going to make money from it.”

And were asked to respond if Heinz should steal the drug and why (228). Using this story as an ice breaking technique to get the group focused on moral reasoning, I then had each individual list and rate a top ten qualities of the ideal moral individual. These traits were discussed and voted upon in order to generate a combined list between both groups in order to see if certain stereotypes developed. Students were then asked about who influenced their morality the most and if the social institution of Luther College had any affect on their moral reasoning. The exact questions are given in the appendixes of this paper.

Symbolic interactionism states that the self is constantly changing, and that even though some parts of the self may ossify over time, there is no core to the self. From a
moral standpoint, ethics would also change as one’s references groups and position in society modify over time. Thus the process is constantly ongoing, even when one has stopped developing cognitively, proving that Kohlberg’s theory is limited. Applying my personal theory to morality I generated three hypotheses:

1) Since their high school years, students will have changed morally and will fall outside the realm of morality as designated by Piaget and Kohlberg.

2) Morality traits will follow the social stereotypes of the ideal moral individual, because these stereotypes are learned early on and supported by reference groups.

3) Changing reference groups shape morality, thus the college years are highly influential in changing ethics.

**Results-Kohlberg Moral Story:**

In order to analyze the data various coding procedures were used to generate categories for the responses given by the participants. For the Kohlberg moral story responses were placed into three categories: No: There must be some other solution to stealing, No: Law-based reasoning (sue the druggist, go to jail for stealing), and Yes: Saving a life is more valuable than making money- the druggist is being immoral for being exploitative. In this study 57.14% responded with yes, Heinz should steal the drug. 42.86% responded that Heinz should not steal the drug, 21.43% each falling into the other two categories. There was agreement that the druggist was being more immoral than Heinz for stealing, based upon the druggist’s complete disregard for the situation and focus upon greed. Though some of the reasoning reflected Kohlberg’s five stages of moral development, disproving my first hypothesis, a small sample’s reasoning seemed more complex. As stated in his article on college students, Rest found that,
“Dramatic and extensive changes occur in young adulthood in the basic problem solving strategies used to deal with ethical issues…These changes are linked to the fundamental re-conceptualizations in how the person understands society and his or her stake in it” (201). I found this to be true when the small sample of students were given this scenario of Kohlberg’s study.

Firstly, those who fell into the category of finding some other solution had the most highly developed moral reasoning because they could not be categorized by the standards of Kohlberg’s moral development stages. Based upon these stages the highest is that of developing individual principles of conscience. However, those who desired for Heinz to seek another solution did not fall into this category, in my opinion. This seems to infer that moral reasoning can obtain a higher level of complexity with age than was initially perceived with adolescents, unless the sixth stage could be expanded to include an emphasis on altruism. The main interpretation of these students’ decision was the concept of altruism, or that the druggist should be focused upon saving the woman rather than monetary gain. As one student said, “The druggist is too concerned with revenue and profits to care about the world around him. Though stealing is legally wrong, Heinz’s decision to steal the drug would compromise the integrity of the situation.” Though this statement reflects aspects of stage six in Kohlberg’s terms, or that an act may be seen as individually just but legally wrong, it goes beyond the distinction of a person versus their role in society- though these are usually fused into moral stereotypes in lower stages (Kohlberg, 18). It is the concern for the other, not for the upholding of a law-based society, which makes this reasoning complex. These individuals are trying to generate a space between spaces, where judgments can be based on the situation rather than a
specific standard of legality. Those who fell into this group took the longest time in trying to resolve an issue that they saw as irresolvable - for how can one find a way to work within the boundaries of society when those boundaries need to be redefined?

Secondly, those who found themselves focusing on the legal aspects of the situation seemed to mirror stage five of Kohlberg’s theory, or the orientation of social contract legalism. As Kohlberg states, “Type 5 relies heavily on the law for definitions of right and wrong, it recognizes the possibility of conflict between what is rationally “right” for the individual actor, and what is legally or rationally right for society” (18). The reasoning for these students was imbedded in the consequences of the theft from a legal standpoint - that Heinz would go to prison for his actions, and therefore not be able to help his wife anyway. There was also a consensus that, “Just because the druggist is being immoral doesn’t mean the husband should.” From a symbolic interactionist standpoint these students appear to have a strong connection to social authority and role obligation. As a member of society one is expected to follow the norms and expectations of society, since Heinz’s actions would be non-conformist the actions are therefore deviant and frowned upon, even though Heinz’s intentions are just. These students agreed that the right course of action would be for Heinz to sue the druggist for his exploitative practices, hoping that the action would either pressure the druggist into lowering the cost, or to allow Heinz the legality to obtain the drug. All agreed that they would not feel bad for the druggist if the drug was stolen, but stealing was still depicted as inherently wrong, no matter the circumstance.

Lastly, those who said Heinz should steal the drug did so on the basic notion that human life is worth more than monetary gain or the consequences of societal negative
sanctions. Reasoning seemed to be based upon conscience, as reflected in Kohlberg’s stage six of moral development. As one student said, “I would rather become a thief than let my wife die knowing I could have done something to save her”. The thought process is focused upon moral principles, such as the golden rule, instead of moral rules as defined by society. In this developmental stage these students would be focusing on the ideology behind making moral decisions rather than the socially prescribed legal sanctions of the situation. It is almost as if that these individuals are trying to generate a liminal space, or a space between ideology and reality, for Heinz’s stealing to be justified based upon his situation, much like those who fell outside the stages of development. However, those who fell outside the stages did not focus on the benefits of the individual versus the benefits of society. Those in this group were focused on their position in society, not that the position should perhaps be redefined or negotiated.

In this scenario it is difficult to judge whether or not the hypothesis that those in college would differentiate in enough of a way to prove that Kohlberg’s theory of developmental stages is lacking. Students fell within both the fifth and six stages of development. However, a small group of students went beyond the definitions Kohlberg gave that stemmed from a dependency on legality or conscience. These students appeared to try and generate a new social reality that based the ethics of a specific case in terms of situation rather than law based ideology. They accepted that though it was inherently immoral to steal, stealing in certain circumstances is justified, bending the law. The argument was that one could know one’s place in society and choose to reject one’s position for the sake of another. Though Heinz’s social integrity is at stake it is altruism that wins over societal obligation.
Results-Moral Traits:

For the second part of this study students were asked to list their top ten traits of the ideal moral individual. They were then asked to share their top three traits with the group in order to generate a discussion upon agreed attributes of the ideal moral person. Though there was a consensus on only a few traits, one aspect was deemed essential: activism. Examples including Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were given in saying that one who is moral does not sit on their throne of morality, but instead helps others challenge the status quo for the benefit of all. The table below depicts the traits given by the students. Similar traits, such as loving and kind for example, were combined into one unit in order to make the list less repetitive. Traits that did not have more than two votes were excluded from the list. All traits are taken out of a possible fourteen votes.

Morality Traits Table

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empathetic/Sympathetic</th>
<th>8/14</th>
<th>Trustworthy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>7/14</td>
<td>Respectful</td>
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<td>Disciplined</td>
<td>3/14</td>
<td>Wise</td>
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<td>Honest</td>
<td>8/14</td>
<td>Kind/Loving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>3/14</td>
<td>Generous</td>
<td>3/14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of activism</td>
<td>14/14</td>
<td>Just</td>
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These traits appear to follow the stereotypical view of a moral individual as defined by Stanford’s dictionary of philosophy. The top traits of honesty, wisdom, kindness, just, and altruistic are all also non-physical traits of an ideal individual. Stereotypes are taught early on by various social institutions such as the family, school,
and religion. Even though in the college years reference groups shift, when it comes to the ideal individual, society still has very specific beliefs and how one should act in society. As stated earlier no one trait was agreed upon that would define the epitome of morality, for even honesty was seen as something that should be based upon the situation. This was explained by saying, “What if telling the truth hurt someone else? I don’t believe a moral person always has to be honest- they just need to be looking out for someone else’s interests rather than their own”. Yet, all agreed that a moral person acts on their morals. All also agreed that anyone can be moral, they just have to conform to society’s depiction of high morality.

When asked where such characteristics of morality were learned students said that early beliefs were entirely family taught. As the first social institution and reference group it was said that the family, “Gives you a core identity to what it is to be moral. Your family teaches you how to behave, and then this behavior is even more drilled in by school”. As time goes by, however, reference and other peer groups have a higher importance to the ethical decisions students make. “Yeah,” one student said, “you have in the back of your head what your mom taught you about right and wrong. But is it always that simple? Usually not. That’s where class and friends come in.” Stereotypes are learned at an early age, perpetuated throughout the adolescent years, and then tested in the college setting. However, it appears that these early teachings do still influence thinking. Based on these findings my second hypothesis was proven true in that in terms of various traits individuals follow taught stereotypes in defining the ideal moral individual. However, the universally approved concept of activism in relation to these stereotypes is something that further research needs to look into.
Results-Reference Groups:

For the final part of the focus groups students were asked about specific individuals from various reference groups and courses at Luther College that they felt helped them to change or develop their morality. For as Rest stated in his research, based on in depth interviews of students and their life experiences, interests, and attitudes, “The people who develop in moral judgment are those who love to learn, who seek new challenges, who enjoy intellectually stimulating environments, who are reflective…receive support and encouragement…[and] are stimulated by their social milieu…” (209). Based upon theory a change in reference groups from the high school age to the end of college should cause a different view of morality. Students stated that it was more the change in environment than the actual individuals that allowed them to think about ethical situations without a parental input or fear of judgment. As one student said, “Being away from my family allowed for expansion. I became more moral over time- I was too immature to care before. Once you understand the importance of morality, and its effect, it has a higher value. It’s not so much a change in it overall, but a change in how much it is visible, what it means- uncovering its ability to change lives.” In Buddhism there is an analogy of wiping the dust off the mirror, that the self is buried underneath and you just have to discover it. In this example the self, whether the student believed it to be a core self or a postmodern self, is something to be discovered and acted upon. Morality is seen as a desirable trait, a trait that develops as it is brought to the surface through interactions of various peer groups and new situations. One sociology student involved in a focus even said quite adamantly, “It’s all situational!” Thus my third hypothesis was proven false. It is not the reference groups themselves that cause an
ever-changing sense of morality, but the situations these groups put individuals in and various scenarios they bring to the surface for students.

The college environment as a space is what most students referred to as the most significant change since their high school years. In high school the focus is upon a specific curriculum, test preparation, and accumulating basic skills to prepare one for college. If morality is brought up in any way it is usually when cheating or a violation of a copyright law are involved. Each student in both focus groups was able to pinpoint a specific course at Luther College that had ethical issues raised, which in turn made them re-evaluate their personal stance. All agreed that, “An education is all about exposure, and liberal arts interdisciplinary work is important to education. It is important to expand yourself without the fear of judgment. Courses like Paideia II gave me a space and opportunity to explore.” By being able to have seminar style classes, students were able to see their own reflexivity, or their ability to go back and forth between their subjective stream of consciousness (thoughts, perceptions, and feelings) and concept of self as a physical, social, and emotional being (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine, 113). To reiterate the final point, it is not so much a specific individual or group that allows for moral change and development throughout time, it is the ability to have a space in which one can question one’s own stance and adapt to various situations. Whether one finds this space based on the environment, or creates it with a group of peers, if a space is always available then moral development can occur throughout one’s lifetime - not just as one cognitively develops.
Concluding Thoughts:

This study raised questions about the direct influence of college upon an individual. Further research needs to be done on the difference between a liberal arts education versus a state college education in terms of ethical questions being raised. How stereotypes are perpetuated is also a topic lacking in research. If it is discovered that certain types of educational methods are more useful in terms of developing ethical reasoning, a curriculum reform might be necessary in public institutions. This study has shown that morality is a complex subject, and more research needs to be done on how adults of all ages adjust to various ethical dilemmas and what this means for society as a whole.

Morality is not a black and white field of dichotomies separating society into various labels. If anything, it is every tint of gray. An individual, in response to their earliest reference groups, defines and redefines what is moral and how various situations have caused them to rethink the legal status quo. Piaget and Kohlberg’s stages of moral development proved that throughout time humanity can still fall into the same categories defined decades ago. Like the children in the literature discussed, students too were focused on the legal ramifications and how the conscience leads one through an ethical dilemma in the case of Heinz. However, some students generated a new category of moral thinking that extends to a focus on the other, opposed the self and the self’s position in society. It was seen that stereotypical traits of the ideal moral individual follow one throughout one’s life, for it is more the taught principles than the separate traits that have the most effect in defining what it is to be moral. Everything is situational, for an ethical dilemma is what brings up moral issues, not so much the
reference groups that change over time. College is a space that raises such situations, and therefore has a highly influential dynamic in helping to shape an ethically questioning population. One constantly changes throughout one’s lifetime due to the influence of society upon one’s self and how one changes society. One just needs to generate the space to do so.
Appendix One: Focus Group Agreement Form

The purpose of this study is to take a look at how our moral views alter over time. Morality is considered to be the principles concerning the difference between right and wrong, or good and bad behavior. This study is going to analyze how the individuals in our lives influence our personal definitions of right and wrong, and if certain people become more or less influential to us over time. For the purpose of the focus group you will be asked to reflect upon your senior year of high school and how you feel your morality has or has not changed since then. If it has changed we will explore, as a group, some hypothetical reasons why.

A focus group is a research method in which a group of people is asked about their opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions to a certain concept. Questions will be asked in a seminar fashion, where you are free to talk to other group members. The purpose is to bounce ideas off one another to reach a kind of group consensus. Though we will not always agree, it is important that everyone’s opinion is heard and respected. Know that you will be taped recorded during this group, all of your information will be kept confidential, and all information will be destroyed after the duration of the study.

Student Agreement:

Participating in this research requires that you complete one paper and pencil questionnaire and that you engage in the focus group that may take a maximum of 45-60 minutes. Your names will not be attached to these questionnaires and at no time are you required to answer any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering. By taking this survey and participating in this focus group, you consent to participate in the study and agree that the purpose of this research has been satisfactorily explained to you. You understand you are free to discontinue participation at any time if you so choose, and that the researcher will gladly answer any questions that may arise during the course of the research.

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Luther College has a Standing Committee, the HSRB, to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported to The Dean's Office, Luther College, 563-387-1285 if they arise.
Appendix Two: Focus Group Respondent Answer Sheet

Demographic Questions:

1) What is your current year in college?

2) What is your current age?

3) With which gender do you identify?

4) In which state do you live while not attending Luther?

Kohlberg Moral Story Warm Up:

In Europe a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman’s husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow money, but he could only get together about $1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later, but the druggist said, “No, I discovered the drug and I’m going to make money from it.”

Should Heinz steal the drug? Why or why not?

In the space below please write down ten characteristics or traits of a highly moral person. In other words, list the words to describe what a highly moral person is like. After you have finished please rank each trait according to how well it describes a highly moral person on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being the most valued trait). I will ask you to share your top three traits with the group to be discussed. We will then vote on our shared top three traits.

1) 

2) 

3) 

4) 

5) 

6) 

7) 

8) 

9) 

10)
Appendix Three: Focus Group Leader Asked Questions

1) What are your top three traits? Why did you pick these traits?

Reference Group Related Questions:

2) Do you believe that the people closest to you have influenced your moral values?
3) Who are they?
4) Why do you think these people are important in defining your moral values?
5) Do you have a specific person in mind when you think of someone highly moral?
6) What category does this person fit into? (i.e. familial, religious, mentor, etc)

School Socialization Questions:

7) Do you believe you have changed morally or ethically since your senior year of high school?
8) In what ways?
9) Do you believe that courses at Luther helped you develop a higher sense of morality, if so which courses?
10) Do you believe that the change in environment you’ve experienced by becoming a student at Luther has had any effect on your morality?
11) If yes, how so?
Appendix Four: Debriefing Statement

The purpose of this study was to look at how one’s personal set of ethics and morality has shifted or remained ossified from the time of high school graduation to the present day. Current studies on morality suggest that this moral identity fully develops as one develops cognitively. However, my hypothesis is that morality is fluid and changes as one is influenced by new reference groups, peers, and authority figures throughout one’s lifetime. In order to prove this hypothesis I conducted a focus group to discover if the morality of Luther juniors and seniors had at all shifted from high school into the late college years. If it has then morality relates to the postmodern self, constantly in flux, and is not ossified.
Sources


