

Moral Education: A Review of Constructivist Theory and Research

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The term, *moral development*, encompasses the notion that our moral selves evolve with time and experience. In fact, it is now taken for granted that we develop morally in ways that affect both thought and action, though there are many views about the mechanisms, components, and processes involved in this development (e. g. from the psychoanalytic tradition, Freud, 1961, from the behaviorist tradition, Aaronfreed, 1968, 1976, Bandura, 1991, from the social constructivist tradition, Dobert, 1990, Durkheim, 1973, Gewirtz, J. & Peláez-Nogueras, M., 1991, Simpson, 1974, Weinrich-Haste, 1984, and from the constructivist school, Dewey, 1916, 1990, Gilligan, 1980, Kohlberg, L., 1969, Mead, 1934, Piaget, 1965, Turiel, 1983). This paper presents a review of constructivist moral developmental theory and research and its impact on moral education. Four areas of inquiry are of particular interest: (1) Structural-developmental theories of development, principally Kohlberg's theory of justice reasoning and Piaget's theory of cognitive development; (2) the relative contributions of moral reasoning and other factors to moral action; (3) the developmental effects of different moral environments; and (4) recent theory and research on the effects of educational interventions that have been guided by structural developmental theory and research.

Before beginning a discussion of moral developmental theory, it may be helpful to clarify what is meant by morality. According to Frankena (1973) and Armon (1984, 1993), moral values can be divided into five categories, the deontic, teleological, aretaic, intrinsic, and extrinsic. Deontic values are concerned with the moral right—issues of justice, fairness, rights, and responsibilities. Most educational institutions have structures in place that explicitly address issues that

involve the moral right, at least in terms of the obligations and rights of students, faculty, and staff. Teleological values relate to issues of moral good, or concern over the welfare of others. These are often not explicitly addressed within American schools, though services such as school lunch programs, student counseling, and immunization drives are expressions of the moral good. Aretaic values involve judgments about the moral worth of individuals and institutions. They include motives and character qualities such as generosity, empathy, and loyalty and are often characterized as motivators for moral action. Historically, educators have emphasized the development of moral character. Intrinsic values are those ends valued for their inherent nonmoral good. They include such qualities as autonomy, consciousness, intelligence, and knowledge. Their advancement is viewed as the advancement of persons. Finally, extrinsic values are those means that have the potential to produce good, such as money, art, education, and travel, though they embody no inherent good.

The areas of moral value of primary interest to this review are the deontic and teleological. Kohlberg, who is generally regarded as one of the most prominent theorists and researchers in the field of moral development, focused his research in the area of deontic value or moral right. He and his colleagues identified a developmental sequence of qualitative changes in reasoning about the moral right (Kohlberg, 1969, 1971, 1981, 1984a). Additionally, they examined how this development is influenced by particular social interactions as well as the larger moral environment (e. g., Commons, 1991, Higgins, 1984, Kohlberg, 1969, 1987, and Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989, Scharf, 1973). Several researchers have moved beyond an examination of reasoning about justice and rights and have used the constructivist framework to expand our knowledge of other aspects of social development. Examples include Armon (1984), who has looked at the development of reasoning about the moral good, Selman (1980), who has researched the development of perspective-taking, Fowler and Vergote (1980), who have investigated reasoning about religion and faith, and Turiel (1983), who

has differentiated reasoning in the personal, conventional, & moral domains.

A Constructivist Model of Moral Development

Moral Judgment

Building upon the work of Baldwin, Mead, Piaget, and Vygotsky, among others, Kohlberg (1969, 1979, 1981, 1987) examined the development of reasoning about justice issues. Following Piaget, he found that distinct, qualitative, developmental changes in moral thought could be identified using structured clinical interviews. Kohlberg's stages have several specific characteristics.

- (1) Stages imply distinct or qualitative differences in...modes of thinking or of solving the same problem at different [developmental levels].
- (2) These different modes of thought form an invariant sequence, order, or succession in individual development. While cultural factors may speed up, slow down, or stop development, they do not change its sequence.
- (3) Each of these different modes of thought form a "structured whole." A given stage-response to a task...represents an underlying thought-organization...which determines responses to tasks which are not manifestly similar.
- (4) Cognitive stages are hierarchical integrations. Stages form an order of increasingly differentiated and integrated structures to fulfill a common function...[Each stage] includes all the structural features of [the previous stage] but at a new level of organization ...However, there is a hierarchical preference within the individual, i.e., a disposition, to prefer a solution at the highest level available to him (Kohlberg, 1969, pp. 352–353).

Kohlberg (1971) makes an additional, and controversial, claim about the hierarchical nature of moral reasoning stages. He asserts, as does Piaget (1985) in

the logico-mathematical realm, that reasoning using the more complex structures available at the higher stages is superior to reasoning at lower stages due to the increasing integration and differentiation of thought structures. This claim led to Kohlberg's and Mayer's (1972) assertion that development is the appropriate aim of moral education, and to a succession of educational interventions. Some of these will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

In Kohlberg's scheme, individuals are scored at a particular stage when they consistently construct arguments at that stage level on standardized dilemmas (Colby, Kohlberg, Speicher, Hower, Candee, Gibbs, & Power, 1987a, 1987b). The main stage at which an individual reasons under these circumstances is called her "modal" stage. Research has demonstrated that individuals commonly comprehend and prefer moral reasoning one half to one stage higher than their modal stage (Rest, 1973, Turiel, 1966). This is known as the "plus 1" phenomenon. Research results also indicate that individuals can understand and reconstruct reasoning at stages lower than their own, but can neither reason spontaneously nor reconstruct reasoning more than 1½ stage beyond their own (Sprinthall & Sprinthall, 1987). Though hierarchical integration is supported by these findings, they bring up questions about the claim for structured wholeness that are beyond the scope of this paper.

It is important to keep in mind that the qualitative changes of this developmental model are structural, and do not necessarily predict the specific content of reasoning. Structural theory describes how we reason, and makes limited predictions about the content of reason (Kohlberg, 1969, 1984a, Colby et.al., 1987a, 1987b). Kohlberg has been criticized for neglecting the analysis of content, and other researchers have focused on the content of moral interviews, with particular attention to context-specific features (e.g. Day, 1991, Edelstein, Keller, and Whalen, 1984, Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1994).

Other critics of Kohlberg's theory challenge his claim that the stages of development are universal, and accuse him of cultural and gender bias. This is of

concern because cultural and gender bias both have obvious implications for educational applications. Gilligan (1980) and Noddings (1984) are particularly vocal in their criticisms, claiming that Kohlberg's model does not adequately represent the moral thought of women. Numerous studies have been conducted that examine gender differences using Kohlberg's measurement system, but few of these have found significant gender differences in the structure of reasoning once age and education are taken into account, and the differences that have been found do not systematically favor one sex over the other (for reviews, see Braebeck, 1982, Colby & Damon, 1983, Walker, 1984).

Kohlberg and others working within the structural developmental paradigm are also accused of cultural bias (e.g. Garbarino & Bronfenbrenner, 1976, Schweder, 1986, Weinrich-Haste, 1984). These accusations continue despite several cross-cultural studies that demonstrate universality of structure, sequence, and acquisition of moral reasoning stages across cultures (for a review, see Snarey, 1985). This ongoing debate is fuelled by Kohlberg's claim that reasoning at the highest stages is more adequate morally than reasoning at the lower stages in combination with the finding that the higher stages are not frequently represented in tribal or agrarian communities. For discussions of the debate between social contextualists and structural-developmentalists, see Turiel (1989, Turiel & Wainryb, 1994).

The Stages

The following descriptions include both Kohlberg's moral judgment stages (1987) and Armon's good life reasoning stages (1984):

Stage 1 reasoners, commonly 4 to 7 year-olds, define doing right as following the rules that have been handed down by authority figures. The reason for obeying these rules is often fear of punishment or an unquestioning regard for authority. Children at this stage also define the right as avoiding physical harm to objects or others. The good life is feeling good or engaging in activities that

produce good feelings.

In stage 2, which is the stage of reasoning used most commonly by older elementary school students, the individual determines what is right exclusively in terms of her own or another's individual interests. Fairness is an issue at this level, but is understood only in instrumental, concrete terms. At stage 2 the individual can think about his own thoughts and feelings and understands that other people may have different thoughts and feelings, but he cannot "put himself in the other person's shoes." Consistent with the concrete instrumentalism of this stage, the good life is conceptualized as one in which the individual's needs, interests, and desires are served.

In stage 3, which is the most common stage of moral reasoning among adolescents, the individual becomes aware of the abstract inner processes of other persons, can infer what these might be, and can take them into account when making decisions about the right. Such decisions are often framed in terms of upholding conventional human relationships or of being a "nice" or "good" person. Taking the point-of-view of another is frequently mentioned when subjects reasoning at stage 3 explain their moral judgments. The good life is one in which a sense of happiness or fulfillment is maintained through satisfying personal relationships.

In stage 4, which occasionally appears in adolescence, reasoners go beyond taking the point of view of individual others and can apply the concept of a "generalized other." This conceptualization takes into consideration relatively complex systems of relations, and makes it possible for an individual reasoning at stage 4 to make moral judgments in terms of a group or society. However, reasoners at this stage cannot yet coordinate multiple systems. The good life consists of upholding the society or group while pursuing one's own self-chosen values and interests.

Finally, in stage 5, which develops in only a small percentage of adults, the reasoner can not only identify, analyze, and coordinate systems, but does so with

reference to a consistent set of self-chosen values, relying upon coordinated, formal thought mechanisms. The values of stage 5 reasoners are the criteria used in making judgments about moral issues. Doing right involves upholding the self-defined goods of society, including human rights, legal contracts, and humane services, even when doing so conflicts with the laws of society. The good life is one which is rationally constructed from self-chosen values that are generalizable and consistent.

The Components of Morality

It is important to stress, in any examination of moral reasoning, that judgment is not equivalent to action. In fact though a judgment is a necessary part of every moral action, and judgment and action are part of the same process (Kohlberg, 1984b), a judgment “need not be sufficient for evaluating the morality of an action or actor. Other factors of knowledge and motivation that are not distinctively moral may be required for assuring a good outcome” (Kohlberg, 1987, p. 272).

Several studies of moral reasoning and action have demonstrated that moral judgments alone cannot account for moral behavior, though subjects at more advanced stages are more likely to act in accord with their judgments than those at lower stages. For example, moral reasoning stages were determined for the subjects in Milgram’s famous experiment (1963) in order to assess the effect of stage of moral reasoning on moral action. Sprinthall and Sprinthall (1987) report, that, though only 13% of Milgram’s subjects who reasoned at stages 1-4 refused to administer shocks when ordered to continue by the experimenter, 75% of those who reasoned at stages 5 and 6 refused to continue. In an experiment by McNamee (1977), 75% of stage 5 subjects offered help to a stranger, while only 38% of stage 4 subjects, 27% of stage 3 subjects, and 9% of stage 2 subjects did so. Moreover, in his review of the judgment and action literature, Blasi (1980) found a strong relationship between higher stage reasoning and consistently

altruistic behavior. He also found that subjects at the higher stages had more resistance to following the crowd, an indication that at least one factor, social influence, is more salient at lower stages than at higher stages.

One of the most perplexing problems for moral developmentalists is the elaboration of models of moral development that account adequately for the various factors that influence moral behavior. Rest (1984, 1986), has proposed one useful model. It incorporates four components. These include (1) the subject's sensitivity to moral situations, including her ability to identify a moral problem, determine who the affected parties are, and identify alternative solutions; (2) the way in which the subject structures a moral judgment, (3) the weight that moral issues are given relative to other issues, such as personal considerations, and (4) the way in which the ego strength or moral character of a subject influence her persistence and courage in pursuing a moral end. Until recently, most research in the moral realm was concerned with the second component, moral judgment, though smaller bodies of work on perspective-taking (Selman, 1980, Selman & Lieberman, 1972), moral motivation (Bandura, 1991, Huston & Korte, 1976, Kohlberg, 1969, McNamee, 1977), affect (Hoffman, 1976, Lane & Schwartz, 1987, LeCapitaine, 1987, Rich, 1985), and ego development (Damon & Hart, 1988, Kegan, 1982, Loevinger, 1987) have expanded our understanding of some aspects of moral sensitivity, decision-making factors, and ego strength.

Even given the necessary-but-not-sufficient role of moral judgment in moral action (Kohlberg, 1987), programs that specifically promote the development of moral reasoning structures have been shown to significantly improve moral behavior. DeVries & Zan (1994) report that elementary school children in their constructivist programs show significant improvement in socio-moral behavior while children in control groups do not. Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg (1989) report improved race relations, dramatically reduced racial conflict, cheating, and drug use, and the complete cessation of theft in the Cluster School, a "Just Community" high school. In addition, Selman & Schultz (1990) report improved socio-moral

behavior in children who are taught one-on-one communication skills. The most successful of these interventions promote the development of moral reasoning by altering significant aspects of the social environment. To understand the salience of these adjustments in moral atmosphere to the subject of moral education, it is helpful to look more closely at research that examines environmental influences on moral development.

Environmental Influences on Moral Development

The *Standard Issue Scoring Manual* (Colby, et.al., 1987a, 1987b) and Rest's (1986) *Defining Issues Test*, which was developed from work done with Kohlberg's scoring system, have been used literally hundreds of times to measure the moral development of participants in a variety of moral education programs. Results from these studies overwhelmingly support the thesis that situations that create cognitive conflict around moral issues promote moral development (Rest, 1974, Walker, 1983). Environments that produce this kind of cognitive conflict include those that offer (1) exposure to moral reasoning just beyond the student's in structural complexity (e.g. Kohlberg, 1987); (2) participation in moral discussion, which includes discourse about hypothetical and real-life moral dilemmas (e.g. Arbutnot, 1984, Garrod, 1989, Gomburg & Fenton, 1982, Kohlberg, 1984b, Reis, 1980); (3) involvement in altruistic activities such as community service or peer tutoring (e.g. Benninga, 1988, 1991, Berman, 1990, Boyer, 1990, Brooks & Kann, 1993, Damon, 1988b, Damon & Phelps, 1989, Furcow, 1993, Sprinthall, 1993, Sprinthall, Hall, & Gerler, 1992, Sprinthall & Scott, 1989); and (4) participation in communities of cooperation characterized by democratic forms of conflict resolution and decision-making and an atmosphere of mutual caring and respect (e.g. Devries & Zan, 1994, Dror, 1993, Higgins, 1991, Higgins & Power, 1993, Johnson, Johnson, Houlbeck, & Roy, 1984, Kohlberg, 1978, 1987, Lickona, 1988, 1991, 1993, Power, Higgins, Kohlberg, 1989, Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972, Reis, 1980 Rowe, 1990, Schaps & Solomon, 1990).

Piaget proposed that disequilibrium, such as that produced by cognitive conflict, is the force that “causes the subject to go beyond his current state and strike out in new directions” (p. 10). Moral conflict is one source of this disequilibrium. To understand how the process of equilibration influences development, some understanding of Piaget’s theory is helpful.

According to Piaget, thought is organized into structures called schemes. Groups of these are further organized into subsystems, which are, in turn, part of a total system. Each scheme is composed of a set of associations. For example, infants develop, during the first few months of life, a reaching and grasping scheme that incorporates the set of acts required to reach for an object and hold on to it. During development, such schemes become more differentiated and are coordinated with one another in increasingly complex ways. For successful grasping to occur when the object of interest is in motion, the reaching scheme must be coordinated with the visual tracking scheme. Subsystems are composed of schemes that are organized and integrated at a new level of complexity. At the subsystem level the reaching and tracking schemes integrate to form a reaching-while-tracking-subsystem. All of these schemes and subsystems are part of the total cognitive system.

Schemes, subsystems, and the total system are organized knowledge systems. They are orderly systems with both dynamic and stationary qualities. Their openness or dynamism results from interactions with the environment; their closed or stationary quality results from the cyclic nature of their functions. When such systems experience external perturbation they must either adapt or they can no longer function. For Piaget, equilibration is the essential process of adaptation. It takes three forms. The first of these operates between objects or events in the environment and schemes or thought structures; the second involves interactions among schemes and subsystems; and the third involves interactions between schemes and subsystems and the total system. The two universal processes of equilibration, which work on all three of the above levels, are assimilation and

accomodation. In assimilation, the organism incorporates an object or event into an existing scheme, or coordinates existing schemes to perform a function (reciprocal assimilation). Accomodation occurs when the scheme or subsystem must be altered to integrate an object or event, or when multiple schemes or subsystems must be altered to perform a function (reciprocal accomodation).

The sources of disequilibria with which this paper is concerned primarily involve organism/environment interactions and result in reequilibration. According to Piaget, a primary source of such disequilibria is feedback. Positive and negative feedback are not regarded as entirely dichotomous. In fact, both can contribute to development, in that positive feedback is reinforcing and negative feedback is corrective. In other words, both positive and negative feedback can have positive or negative developmental consequences. For example, the negative consequences of failure can result in renewed efforts, and the positive consequences of success can result in complacency. In the moral realm, cognitive conflict often results from a balance of both positive and negative feedback. Take the child who must decide whether to share his candy or keep it all to himself. Both sharing and keeping involve positive and negative consequences. If the balance is right, the child may seek a solution that goes beyond his existing schemes in order to optimize positive consequences.

Because a learner has the option of assimilating new knowledge to old structures of thought rather than accommodating the knowledge by creating new structures, the mechanism of equilibration, in and of itself, does not explain development. For accommodation to occur, assimilation to old structures must be a disequilibrating solution to a particular equilibration problem. In the moral realm, one factor that appears to create enough disequilibrium to promote accommodation, and thus development, is exposure to moral thinking more structurally complex than one's own. In fact, as noted above, when presented with a moral dilemma such as the Heinz Dilemma (Table 1) and an assortment of solutions to the dilemma at various stages of structural complexity, most subjects

Table 1

The Heinz Dilemma

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 10 times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$400 for the radium and was charging \$4000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could get together only about \$2000, which was half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell the drug cheaper or let him pay later. The druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz got desperate and considered breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife (Colby, et. al., 1987).

neither comprehend nor express a preference for reasoning more than 1¹/₂ stages above their modal stage, but they do understand and prefer the solution that is 1/2 to 1 stage above their own modal stage, and understand but reject reasoning below their modal stage. This predisposition to prefer reasoning at a higher stage than one's modal stage suggested to several researchers that moral discussion in which subjects were exposed to reasoning about one stage beyond their modal stage should promote development. Interestingly, Vygotsky (1986) proposes a teaching technique that involves presenting knowledge at a level just beyond the one that the individual can articulate on her own. He calls this *scaffolding*. Research results demonstrate a positive relationship between scaffolded moral discussion and development (Arbuthnot, 1984, Garrod, 1989, Gomburg & Fenton, 1982, Kohlberg, 1984b, 1987, Reis, 1980).

Other research results suggest that moral discussion alone is not an adequate source of disequilibria (Higgins, 1984, Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1987, Sprinthall, 1993). According to these findings moral development is contingent upon both scaffolded or supported moral reflection *and* moral action. From the Piagetian point-of-view, moral activities could well be an important source of disequilibria. Feedback mechanisms should function more effectively when the individual engages in real human relationships rather than abstract moral

discussion, primarily because real-life interactions are more likely than hypothetical events to invoke perturbations such as reinforcement and correction. Another rationale for incorporating moral activity into educational interventions has to do with the role of social perspective in the definition of moral stages. As individuals move through Kohlberg's moral stages, their ability to take into account and coordinate multiple perspectives undergoes several qualitative transformations. Researchers have attempted to promote the development of perspective-taking ability through interactive social activities. Research into the effects of co-operative learning (Lickona, 1991, 1993) and community service programs (Benninga, 1988, 1991, Berman, 1990, Boyer, 1990, Brooks & Kann, 1993, Damon, 1988b, Damon & Phelps, 1989, Furcow, 1993) has revealed significant correlations between these interventions and moral development. Unfortunately, most of these studies do not look at the effects of moral activity in isolation from other variables. Group discussion and training are often a part of such programs, and it is not made clear what role these activities play in the developmental progress of subjects.

Sprinthall, in response to this lack, has demonstrated that moral activity, which he calls role-taking, does not produce significant changes in moral reasoning in the short term unless it is accompanied by supported reflection in the form of journal-writing, training, and/or group discussion (Paisley, Gerler, & Sprinthall, 1990, Sprinthall, 1993, Sprinthall, Hall, & Gerler, 1992, Sprinthall & Scott, 1989). He concludes that action without reflection does not effectively promote development. Commons, Straughn, Meaney, Johnstone, Weaver, & Lichtenbaum (1992) disagree; they argue that reflection is an automatic process that occurs with or without journal-writing, training, or discussion. For them, exposure to thought beyond subjects' modal stages in structure, as is bound to occur in the discussion groups, is key. Because individuals' own thoughts cannot stimulate adequate cognitive conflict, when left to their own reflections people will often downward assimilate their experience. Only when they are exposed to the

thought processes of others will they experience enough conflict to reevaluate their current thinking.

Moral Atmosphere and Moral Education

It seems logical to infer from the moral theory and research presented here that the kind of educational environment in which optimal moral development can occur must include a combination of moral activities and supported reflection. Moreover, research results suggest that the structure of activities as well as the structure of reflective exercises play an important role in development.

Indeed, the structure of the environment in which an individual studies, works, or lives is a good predictor of the moral reasoning stage she will attain (Arbuthnot, J., 1984, Armon, 1993, Commons, Krause, & Meaney, 1993, Rest & Narvaez, 1991). The moral environment imposes other restraints on thought and behavior. It has been demonstrated that even those individuals who have developed reasoning at a higher moral stage will adapt their reasoning in particular situations to fit in with the less developed moral structure of the institution in which they must function (Arbuthnot, 1984, Higgins, Power, & Kohlberg, 1984). These findings lead to the conclusion that the moral atmosphere of institutions not only plays a role in the development of moral reasoning, but can restrain individuals from functioning at their highest level. In a study of dental students (Bebeau, 1993) one student who had scored at stage 5 upon entrance into his dental program scored at stage 4 at the time of graduation several years later. He was sought out and re-interviewed by the researcher, to whom he explained that he had deliberately changed his way of thinking to fit in with the ethics of his new occupation. When asked why, he explained that he could not survive for long in dentistry if he allowed himself to be guided by principled reasoning. In dentistry, as in medicine, adhering to an accepted standard of practice is necessary to the maintenance of one's insurance and license, while acting autonomously can lead to the loss of both. It is easy to see how such constraints could discourage the use of one's highest stage.

Several researchers have attempted to map the moral complexity of institutions using a structuralist framework (Commons, Krause, & Meaney, 1993, Higgins & Gordon, 1985, Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). They conclude that every school has a moral atmosphere and, therefore, a moral impact on those who come into contact with it. Schools, in turn, are affected by the moral thought and action of students, faculty, staff, other institutions, and the society itself. Hence, to speak of moral atmosphere is no small matter. To limit the discussion, this paper will examine only three dimensions of moral atmosphere (developed from ideas in Higgins & Gordon, 1985). They are (1) the level of moral issues and conflicts to which students are exposed; (2) the level of perspective-taking or role-taking opportunities available to students; and (3) opportunities for students to participate in policy-making (Table 2).

As can be seen in Table 2, the type and quantity of moral issues and conflicts to which students are exposed is governed by the level of the moral atmosphere of their school environment. At level 1, few opportunities exist for students to participate in conflict resolution, while at level 4, opportunities to grapple with moral issues and conflicts are an integral part of the educational experience. Multiple exposure to situations increases the probability that perturbations will reach a level at which assimilation can no longer produce equilibrium—especially in an atmosphere in which issues are explored in supported discussion groups. The higher the level of moral atmosphere, the more likely it is that these conditions will be met. Note also, that at each consecutive level, the student is given greater responsibility in the moral realm. While, at level 1, the student is not allowed to act as an active moral agent at all, at level 4, she is expected to participate at every level of moral problem-solving and social cooperation within both the school and the larger community.

As we have seen, one way to stimulate cognitive conflict, and thus, moral development, is to encourage participation in perspective-taking or role-taking. Perspective-taking opportunities as well as the level of responsibility students are

Table 3

Moral Atmosphere of the Educational Environment			
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Moral Issues and Conflicts			
<p>Moral education is not considered to be part of the school's responsibility. When moral incidents that affect classroom management occur, they are dealt with by the teacher in an authoritarian manner. Moral incidents that do not affect classroom management are ignored. Punishment and reward are used to control behavior. Compliance is emphasized.</p>	<p>Students are involved in problem-solving around the moral issues and conflicts that occur in the immediate classroom. Children are expected to work out many interpersonal conflicts on their own. Teachers become involved when group behavioral norms are violated or children ask for help. Sanctions and rewards are used to "help children have a good day."</p>	<p>Students are involved in problem-solving around interpersonal and classroom moral issues and conflicts. There is an institutional effort to balance the interests of students, faculty, and staff. All students, faculty, and staff members are expected to respect the claims and interests of one another. Caring, helping, and community are emphasized.</p>	<p>Students work with faculty and administration to resolve conflicts that involve fairness and welfare issues within the classroom and the school as a whole. Moral issues become integral to the educational process. Active citizenship, critical thinking, trust, and collective responsibility are emphasized.</p>
Perspective Taking			
<p>Classroom opportunities for perspective-taking are rare, due, in part, to a lack of student interaction. When they do occur, they are resolved didactically by an adult who encourages little or no student involvement. The needs of students are pre-defined by teachers and administration.</p>	<p>Opportunities for student interaction occur, so perspective-taking opportunities are present, but they are usually restricted to individual student/student interactions. Faculty and staff are usually involved as authority figures with ultimate decision-making power.</p>	<p>Students have many opportunities for interpersonal perspective-taking within the school. Interpersonal conflicts between individual students and other students, teachers, and staff are resolved through conflict-resolution processes that involve students.</p>	<p>Perspective-taking is an essential part of the conflict-resolution process. All interested parties are involved in interactions in which they must take the perspective of the group relative to both the individual and to other groups.</p>
Participation in Policy-Making			
<p>Rules are made and enforced by teachers and administrators with no input from children, who are discouraged from raising issues of fairness and welfare.</p>	<p>Student involvement in policy-making, if it occurs at all, is restricted to interpersonal issues at the student level. Students are discouraged from questioning classroom or school policy. Though rules are made primarily by adults, children are given reasons for complying with rules that go beyond, "It's the rule."</p>	<p>Students participate in policy-making in institutionally defined and limited ways. Issues of fairness and welfare are processed through "proper channels" that have been established without student input. Open dialogue about school and classroom policy is discouraged.</p>	<p>Students are involved in policy-making at all levels. Policy-making takes place through formal discussion procedures that involve all affected parties. Issues of fairness and welfare are dealt with through open discussion.</p>

Adapted from an adaptation of C. Armon from Higgins A. & Gordon, F. (1985). Work climate and sociomoral development in two worker-owned companies. In M. Berkow & F. Oser, *Moral Education: Theory & Application*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Earlbaum.

expected to assume increase with the complexity of a school's moral atmosphere. At level 4 perspective-taking involves taking the perspective of the larger group as well as other individuals, an important developmental achievement.

Table 2 also looks at the moral atmosphere of schools in terms of opportunities for students to participate in policy-making around issues of fairness and welfare. Once again, the amount and quality of students' experience increases with the level of moral atmosphere. In addition, the level of openness and flexibility increases with each level. For example, at level one, not only policy-making but discussion about issues of fairness and welfare are discouraged, while at level 4 the student is expected to assume the role of an active agent in the policy-making process.

Using the levels of moral atmosphere presented in Table 2, a loose assessment of the moral environment of any school can be made. From such an analysis we might be able to get a sense of the developmental constraints a particular school imposes on students by virtue of its moral structure. Though it might be helpful to use such a table as an evaluative tool, it is not meant to be used as a guide for the construction of moral atmospheres. It would be a particular mistake to conclude from this analysis of moral atmosphere that schools should somehow adjust their moral structure to the average moral stage of their entering students. Though low level moral atmospheres should clearly be avoided because of the evidence that they limit development, there is no evidence that the level of moral atmosphere can be too high; on the contrary, as reported above, high level moral atmospheres predict high stage development. Furthermore, not only students, but teachers, staff, and administrators must function in the same moral environment, and their developmental attainments will influence how well they serve the children in their care (Ammon & Hutchinson, 1989, Ammon & Levin, 1993, Krovetz, 1993, Pianta, 1992, Power, 1991, Shaheen & Kuhrmerker, 1991). For these reasons, I propose that schools should cultivate the highest possible level of moral atmosphere regardless of the age group of students. Adjustments can

always be made to accommodate the developmental capabilities of students, but all of these adjustments must be evaluated on the basis of compatibility with the highest available standard. Just community high schools, described below, function at a very high level of moral complexity. Even elementary school programs function successfully—to the clear developmental advantage of their students—at high levels of moral complexity (Devries & Zan, 1994).

The Just Community Model of Moral Education

The most effective moral developmental programs not only have a high-level moral atmosphere, but they provide a variety of developmental opportunities. They expose individuals to moral models and higher stage reasoning, provide role-taking opportunities, encourage reflection upon one's and others' moral actions, and involve students in moral activities. According to Devries and Zan (1994), it is not enough that discussion occur, it should also be cooperative, democratic, and appropriately scaffolded. Moral activities should emerge from the real business of the classroom, school, and community rather than being developed as lesson plans. Teachers, in order to facilitate development, should encourage children to engage in problem-solving rather than offering prepackaged solutions to moral problems. In Table 4, several types of moral education programs are assessed on the basis of five criteria: whether they offer (1) exposure to moral models, (2) exposure to higher stage reasoning, (3) involvement in moral discussion, (4) participation in group decision-making, and (5) altruistic activity. The Just Community schools offer all five kinds of opportunities.

The first Just Community school was established in New York in the late seventies by Kohlberg and Higgins. At the time, Kohlberg was dissatisfied with developmental outcomes he and his colleagues had achieved by engaging groups in moral dilemma discussions. He reasoned that students would develop more rapidly, and that their judgments and actions would be more synchronous if they were actively engaged in moral processes involving both supported reflection and

real-life experience (Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg, 1989).

Most Just Community schools are composed of 60 to 100 junior high or high school students. In the United States, many have been established in troubled inner city areas as schools-within-schools or as therapeutic environments for troubled adolescents, but a few have also been established in middle- and upper-middle-class schools such as the Scarsdale Alternative School (Higgins & Power, 1993, Power, 1991, 1992, Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg, 1989). All Just Community schools are organized democratically and incorporate four essential institutions (Shown in Table 4). These include an Agenda Committee, an Advisory Group, a weekly Community Meeting, and a Fairness Committee.

As can be seen in Table 4, each institution is staffed by both students and teachers. These are selected through a process agreed upon by the full membership in a Community Meeting. At most Just Community schools, committee membership rotates at frequent intervals so that every student has an

Table 3
**Developmental Opportunities
 Available in Different Moral Education Programs**

Program Type	Exposure to Moral Models	Exposure to Higher Stage Reasoning	Moral Discussion	Group Decision-Making	Altruistic Activity
Character Education	3				
Moral Discussion					
Values Clarification			3		
Scaffolded Dilemma Discussion		3	3		
Community Service					
Alone					3
With Guided Reflection		3	3		3
Democratic Schools					
Free Schools			3	3	3
Just Community Schools	3	3	3	3	3

Table 4

The Essential Components of a Just Community Program¹

Institution	Meeting Frequency	Members	Tasks
Agenda Committee	Once a week	10-12 students and 2 teachers	Deciding on issues and putting together the agenda for the Community Meeting.
Advisory Group	Two to five times per week	1 teacher/ advisor and 15-25 students	Create an informal atmosphere for discussing personal problems, have moral discussion on the most important 1 or 2 agenda issues.
Community Meeting	Once a week	All students (50-100) and teachers (5-6)	Moral discussion, issue resolution, rule-making, appealing Fairness Comm. decisions.
Fairness Committee	Once a week	6-8 students and 2 teachers	Hears cases of rule violations, and inter-personal problems of disrespect. Gives positive, supportive sanctions.

¹Higgins, A. and Power, C. (1993). The Just Community Approach to High School Moral Education: Issues in Implementation and Evaluation. Workshop presented at The Association for Moral Education meeting,

opportunity to fill the role of committee member. Committees concern themselves with issues of justice, community, fairness, interpersonal relations, rule-making and rule-enforcing. Student participation in decisions about curriculum or educational standards varies by school and school district.

Teachers in all Just Community schools fulfill a strong mentoring role. They scaffold discussions when students do not spontaneously come up with higher stage reasoning, help students identify moral problems for discussion, and generally make themselves available to students both informally and through formal institutions such as the Advisory group. Students have the same teachers throughout high school, as well, which leads to the formation of strong bonds. Current research into the role of adults in children’s lives affirms the importance of this kind of relationship between teachers and their students (Pianta, 1992).

Table 5 lists some qualities of the desired moral atmosphere of Just Community schools. These are analogous to the qualities of level 4 moral atmosphere described in Table 2. Within the four primary institutions of the school,

students and teachers are equal partners in decision-making—everyone has only one vote—which places them in a position of great responsibility to one another as community members. Community for the sake of community is strongly valued; students are encouraged to take the point-of-view of the community when situations involving moral issues are discussed. In addition, students are encouraged to embrace such collective norms as trust, caring, participation, open communication, and collective responsibility.

Higgins (1991) reports that students in Just Community programs experience significantly more stage progress in moral judgment over one year than students in control groups. Just community students first demonstrate development with respect to community issues and then extend the new way of thinking to other situations. Students who have participated in a Just Community for one year are more likely to characterize other students in their program as sharing their positive values and motivations, while students in traditional programs characterize themselves in the same terms but are less positive about others. The same Just Community students also have higher behavioral expectations of themselves and others than students in traditional programs. Students, when asked

Table 5

The Moral Atmosphere of Just Community Schools¹

Ecology	Milieu	Social System	Culture
Student teacher ratio should be no greater than 1:20–1:25. Students and teachers should have ample opportunities to work together in small groups.	Teachers should have a commitment to student participation and should be at a higher stage of moral reasoning than their students. Heterogenous populations of students work well. Program effective from junior high through high school.	Direct participatory democracy—one person, one vote, including teachers. Rotating or other democratic selection procedures for special committees.	A. Community for the sake of community. B. Collective norms—trust, caring, participation, open communication, collective responsibility. C. Varying degrees of collectivization of norms, commitment to upholding norms, way of thinking about norms. Depends upon participants, the maturity of a program, & degree to which principles are implemented.

¹Power, C., Higgins, A., and Kohlberg, L. (1989). Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to moral education. New York: Longman.

“what they get from a Just Community program,..report that the...program helps them to role-take, feel efficacious and empowered, and to feel they know others in the school and are part of a human community” (Higgins, 1991, p. 135). As reported above, students in the Cluster School, another Just Community school, enjoyed improved race relations, dramatically reduced racial conflict, cheating, and drug use, and the complete cessation of theft. These dramatic results were achieved in a “school-within-a-school” right in the middle of an inner city school in which violence, racism, cheating, drug use, and theft are commonplace.

Conclusions

Structural developmental theory has proven to be a fruitful paradigm for investigators interested in moral development. Piaget’s theory of equilibration, the primary mechanism of developmental progress, has provided researchers with numerous testable hypotheses. Specifically, the search for sources of disequilibrium—essential to the process of development in the moral or any other domain—has resulted in the discovery and development of several effective interventions, such as scaffolded moral discussion, community service activities, and participation in democratic decision-making. The most effective interventions combine all of these, establishing complex and sophisticated moral environments, which through their complexity, can obscure the basic processes of developmental and behavioral change. For example, it is not uncommon for researchers to have difficulty seeing the connection between Just Community schools and Piagetian or Kohlbergian theory.

Though Kohlberg’s theory of moral development is not a theory of moral behavior *per se*, intervention programs based upon his theory, which is strongly grounded in the equilibration theory of Piaget, have promoted not only the development of moral reason, but also sometimes dramatic improvements in moral behavior. It is not clear why such behavior changes accompany stage change in these programs, though the changes in moral atmosphere characteristic of these

moral education programs may hold at least part of the answer. Perhaps higher level moral atmospheres, in addition to providing more opportunity for disequilibrating interactions at the level of rational judgment, also have an impact on moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character. If so, Piaget's theory of equilibration may provide explanations for these changes as well.

Moral Education is a vast area of research and practice which has only been touched upon here. The structural developmental approach, though conceptually and theoretically complex, has contributed much to our understanding of moral development, and has been particularly helpful in providing the theoretical and empirical foundation for educational programs such as the Just Community schools. In the future, researchers will undoubtedly find more adequate ways to (1) describe and develop measures of the components of moral behavior, (2) describe, measure, and manipulate moral atmosphere, and (3) assess the long term effects of participation in moral education programs such as Just Community schools. However, it would be remiss for educators to await the results of this inquiry before establishing moral education programs. Clearly, our current knowledge about moral development is adequate for the design and implementation of successful programs.

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