Kohlberg and Fowler: Two Models for Considering the Moral Progress of College Students

Tim Herrmann
Taylor University

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ABSTRACT

Fostering moral development has been an important goal of American higher education throughout its history. This goal has become especially prominent in light of recent developments related to crime, ethical indifference and deteriorating social structures. This topic is of particular relevance to faith-based institutions as the fostering of moral development is vitally related to their collective mission and purposes.

The literature of moral development contains a number of prominent and plausible theoretical approaches. However, two of the most prominent and highly developed are, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral judgment development and James Fowler's theory of faith development. Each of these approaches characterizes moral development in distinct ways. In keeping with the uniqueness of these approaches, each model yields distinctive insights and conceptual strengths.

Specifically this review attempts to identify the major conceptual elements of each theoretical perspective in order to consider the implications of using either as a basis for future research initiatives. Additional consideration is given to available methods of assessment and the theoretical fit of the two models with the specific interests of faith-based colleges. Finally, this review explores implications for future research and emerging research questions.

INTRODUCTION

Fostering moral development has been a goal of American higher education since its inception in the seventeenth century. While there was some movement away from this emphasis during the mid to late twentieth century, the issue is once again prompting significant attention within the higher educational community. This resurgence is due in large part to a public demand that colleges and universities do more to address unsettling societal developments related to crime, substance abuse, family structures, school violence, corporate ethics and moral indifference.

Mounting interest in morality and character development corresponds with the growth of enrollment in religious colleges. The increased student population of the 104 evangelical Christian institutions represented by the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities provides an example. Between 1990 and 1998 CCCU institutions

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Tim Herrmann is an Assistant Professor of Psychology/Coordinator of Academic Assessment at Taylor University and he holds a masters degree in counseling from Ohio State University.

increased their enrollment by a 36.9%. This compares to a 5.3% growth rate for all institutions of higher education and 15.6% for religious institutions in general (CCCU, 2002, ¶ 3). The individual member schools of the CCCU are characterized by a strong focus on a liberal arts core curricula, community identity, and emphasis on the moral and religious development of their students. Included in the mission of the Council is the goal of "help[ing] its institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth."(CCCU, 2003, ¶ 2) In the broadest sense, the emphasis on moral development reflected in this statement is the backdrop for this review.

In the literature, the phrase "moral development" is used interchangeably with the phrases "moral judgment development," and "moral reasoning development" all denoting a cognitive process. The most commonly used conceptualizations of this process attempt to describe the development of a system of beliefs, standards, and ethical values that provide guidance and direction for one's life. At its most basic level, "[m]oral judgment development is … a transformation of one's way of reasoning, expanding one's perspectives to include criteria for judgment that were not considered previously" (Good, 1998, p. 270). Though some theorists do not address the issue directly, implicit in a consideration of moral development is attention to the question of how one's developed belief systems and moral judgment capacities actually evidence themselves in moral behavior. Although those who have addressed this issue from a purely cognitive perspective have been tremendously helpful, their approach fails to address several very important questions. For instance, what part do emotions, belief systems, and faith play in the process of helping people to become decent and honorable?

Though there is a tremendous body of literature in this field, the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and James Fowler stands out. The comprehensive nature and originality of their work have encouraged great attention from others. However, despite many complementary ideas, each addresses the topic of moral development in a distinctively different manner. Kohlberg who stands preeminent in the field of moral development is of benefit because of his intense attention to the cognitive structures guiding the development of moral reasoning. While Kohlberg is helpful for this sharp focus, Fowler is beneficial because of the breadth of his approach. Fowler's attention to the construct of faith holds particular promise because it attempts to reach beyond the boundaries of cognition. Thus, these two theorists provide alternative models for considering human development in these realms.

Accordingly, the purpose of this review is limited to the following two purposes: To explore the ideas of Fowler and Kohlberg in order to identify the basic conceptual elements of each theoretical perspective; and to consider the implications of using either theory as a basis for future research initiatives?

KOHLBERG AND FOWLER: MAJOR CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS

As referenced in the previous section, Kohlberg and Fowler each hold a unique place in the literature of moral development. While admittedly both have borrowed from and built upon those preceding them in the discipline, their contributions are innovative and have generated substantial research and critical reflection. Kohlberg's theory of moral development is the theory of choice in the fields of moral education and moral psychology. Though not as broadly applied, perhaps because of assumed theological

underpinnings, Fowler's theory holds a similar stature in the closely related realm of faith development. For these reasons a deeper understanding of the key elements of each perspective, a comparison of conceptual similarities and differences, and an analysis of the implications of using either theory as a basis for future research initiatives will provide significant practical benefit. The following two sections describe Kohlberg's and Fowler's ideas regarding the psychology of moral and faith development respectively.

Lawrence Kohlberg

Kohlberg's work brings a sense of order to the concept of moral development that serves to promote systematic examination and exploration. Gary Sapp, in his introduction to the *Handbook of Moral Development* (1986) illustrates the prominence of this theory when he says,

> *...Lawrence Kohlberg['s] ...contributions in the area of moral philosophy, moral development, and moral education are qualitatively akin to the broader theoretical ruminations of Freud and Piaget. Indeed, Kohlberg's influence is now so pervasive that a sizable majority of all studies dealing with moral development consider concepts enunciated by him and his students (p. 3).*

Thus, regardless of perspective or critical evaluation, no legitimate study of moral development can ignore the ideas, or progress without an understanding of Kohlberg's theory.

Although Kohlberg's ideas are innovative, they are built upon the foundation of the work of many theorists who precede him. While the emphasis of this review relates to the psychology of moral development, it is important to note that Kohlberg's ideas are both philosophical and psychological in nature. To this point, the first volume of his primary work, *Essays on Moral Development* (Kohlberg, 1981), is devoted to presenting his philosophy of moral development.

As a staring point in this consideration it is helpful to understand where Kohlberg lies in relation to other major philosophical and theoretical perspectives. In his work he recognizes four major moral "orientations" or perspectives (Kohlberg, 1984). The first includes those whose focus is on rules and subservience to such. In this group he identifies thinkers such as Kant, Durkheim and Piaget. Kohlberg identifies a second category as those who evaluate moral judgment in light of its congruence with an "idealized moral self." Included here are Bradley, Royce, and Baldwin. His third category identifies those whose primary conceptions of morality consider how the consequences of actions impact others. In this realm he identifies the views of Mill and Dewey. Finally, Kohlberg places himself in a category of thinkers who conceptualize moral thinking in terms of a justice perspective.

To understand Kohlberg's views, one must acknowledge several core notions. First, in his conception, the development of morality is accomplished through a process of socialization, "that it is learning or internalization by the child or adolescent of the norms of family and culture" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 1). However, though he acknowledges the importance of socialization, he distinguishes his theory from the

psychoanalytic or social-learning perspectives. He labels his approach cognitive-developmental (1984) and shares the same assumptions as Piaget and others who envision development as discontinuous and progressive. This view holds that growth, or the altering and construction of necessary cognitive structures, occurs in stages and results from the interaction of the person with their environment (Kohlberg, 1984). A second key concept in understanding Kohlberg is to recognize that his theory, like other cognitive-developmental approaches, is a stage theory. Borrowing from Piaget he understands stages as representing qualitatively different ways of thinking and dealing with knowledge, and universal in their progression and hierarchy. The claim of universality is one issue that separates him from Fowler.

A final foundational concept of Kohlberg's work holds that it is the exposure to opportunities to engage in and contemplate moral problem solving that encourages moral development (Kohlberg, 1984). This idea has important potential ramifications for the design of curricular and co-curricular programs within higher education. Though Kohlberg believed that stimulation facilitated growth, it should not be understood as altering the construction or sequencing of stages (Rest, 1980). Nor is it proper to understand moral growth as simply a form of learning as might be true for instance in behavioral or social-learning theory.

Kohlberg is perhaps best known for the stages of moral development identified in his research. Though extensive coverage of these stages is not in keeping with the breadth of this review, a cursory explanation is necessary. These stages represent his attempt to both characterize and quantify moral reasoning capabilities. Kohlberg identified these stages by categorizing participants' responses to a series of ten fictitious moral dilemmas. His original research protocol was based on an interview in which a researcher rated participant responses to these ten dilemmas. Ratings were determined by a coding system that assigned value for various moral concepts that were observed. The elements serving as coding factors were assumed to be present in any culture. There are a total of seven coding categories described by 25 factors or "moral concepts." The seven categories consist of value, choice, sanctions and motives, rules, rights and authority, positive justice and punitive justice. Examples of factors are: considering motives in judging action; identification with actor or victims in judging action; limiting actor's responsibility…by shifting responsibility onto others; and punitive tendencies or expectations (Kohlberg, 1984, p.47-48). Based on the allotted ratings, a stage is assigned to the participant.

Kohlberg's original conception included six stages subsumed under three levels characterized by the basis on which moral judgments are made. Kohlberg's levels or stages are shown below:

I   *Preconventional Level*
     a   *Stage 1, Punishment and obedience orientation*
     b   *Stage 2, Instrumental relativist orientation*

II   *Conventional Level*
     a   *Stage 3, Interpersonal concordance or "good boy—nice girl orientation"*
     b   *Stage 4, "Law and order" orientation*

III *Postconventional, Autonomous, or Principled Level*
    a *Stage 5, Social-contract legalistic orientation*
    b *Stage 6, Universal ethical-principle orientation (Kohlberg, 1980, p. 91-92)*

These stages are understood as distinct, universal, progressive, and moving both from an external to an internal orientation, and from rule oriented to principle oriented. There is a tremendous body of research supporting these divisions or understandings. Additionally, cross-cultural research from Taiwan, Great Britain, Mexico, Turkey, support Kohlberg's contention that the first five of these stages are universal. However, after research in Turkey failed to identify any participants who reached stage 6 standards, he combined the last two stages to form one (Kohlberg, 1978).

Though the interview protocol originally designed by Kohlberg is still used, most current research is based on the Defining Issues Test (DIT). This paper and pencil test was developed by James Rest to fit his slight alterations of Kohlberg's theory and has the advantages of convenience as well as very acceptable levels of validity and reliability (Kohlberg, 1984). This instrument has been used extensively in higher education research over the past twenty years.

In summary, Kohlberg's theory helps us to understand the importance of cognition in the development of moral judgment. The ease of measurement, strong research base, and well-developed concepts make this theory an attractive alternative for consideration.

James Fowler

The conceptual shift from Lawrence Kohlberg to James Fowler is substantial. Not only are their theories different, but each also has a distinctively different focus. Fowler does not reject Kohlberg; in fact Kohlberg, Piaget, and Erikson are perhaps the three biggest influences on his work from the realm of psychology. However, while Kohlberg is interested in the development of moral judgment and how one reasons when making ethical decisions, Fowler focuses on the construct of faith development. Though slightly less well known than Kohlberg, Fowler is highly respected for his contribution to our understanding of moral development. "James Fowler and his associates were the first constructive developmentalists to call attention to the full scope and significance of this meaning-making interaction" (Parks, 1993, p. 218).

Though it would be helpful at this point to be able to introduce a straightforward, definition of faith, with Fowler it is not that simple. By faith development he is referring to a concept that is complex and dynamic. Fowler conceptualizes faith as universal, and independent of religion and belief in God (Fowler, 2000). An understanding of Fowler's underlying questions may be more illustrative than a concise definition. These questions ask:

    1 *How do people awaken to and begin to form (and be formed by) life stances of trust and loyalty, belief and commitment that carry them into the force fields of their lives?*
    2 *Are there predictable stages or revolutions in the life of meaning making?*
    3 *Must we, to become fully adult and fully human, have a deep-going*

and abiding trust in and loyalty to some cause or causes, greater in value and importance than ourselves (Fowler, 2000, p. 40)?

Despite the fact that Fowler's main interest is faith, one must sift carefully through his work in order to find a concise definition of this construct. Though somewhat perplexing, this descriptive approach to characterizing faith is consistent with the richness and complexity of his ideas. He portrays faith as a way of making meaning, relating to others, understanding reality, and connecting to one's world. In *Faithful Change*, Fowler (1996) offers the following synthesized definition:

> *Faith...may be characterized as an integral, centering process, underlying the formation of beliefs, values, and meanings, that (1) gives coherence and direction to persons' lives, (2) links them in shared trusts and loyalties with others, (3) grounds their personal stances and communal loyalties in a sense of relatedness to a larger frame of reference, and (4) enables them to face and deal with the limit conditions of human life, relying upon that which has the quality of ultimacy in their lives (p.56).*

In order to address these questions and explore the nuanced realm of faith development, Fowler and his research partners conducted structured interviews with more than six hundred people over a period of ten years. Those interviewed ranged in age from 3 ½ to 84 years old (Rich & DeVitis, 1994). Interviewees were asked about life histories, beliefs, convictions, and encounters with "existential life-issues with which faith must deal" (Fowler, 1980a, p. 27). Of particular interest to the interviewers was the consistency between a person's stated beliefs and their actions. Parenthetically, this interest corresponds closely with this author's stated introductory concern for understanding the connection between moral beliefs and moral action. Interviews are rated and yield information regarding both the content of the participants' faith and underlying structures used to organize beliefs. Based on this information, researchers place respondents in the most suitable of Fowler's seven stages.

Essentially, Fowler's stages explain the consistent ways that all people experience or are "in faith" (Fowler, 2000, p. 40) rather than describing the content of faith. Fowler "…[is] trying to identify and communicate differences in the styles, the operations of knowing and valuing, that constitute the action, the way of being, that is faith" (2000, p. 40). Paradoxically, this aspect of Fowler's theory may be once problematic and helpful. It is generic enough to consider all forms of faith experience yet it does not embrace any particular belief structure.

Unlike Kohlberg, Fowler does not claim that his stages of faith are universal. However, he does contend that they are unchanging, successive, and hierarchical. By very loosely associating age categories to his stages, he implicitly recognizes the contributions of physical and cognitive growth to faith development. However, he explains that age is not unalterably tied to faith development and that some adults function in ways characteristic of much lower levels of development. In other words, age does not assure movement through his stages. In a manner reminiscent of Piaget's (1954) theory of cognitive development, Fowler believes that the disequilibrium created by threats to one's ways of knowing energizes development (Fowler, 1980a).

His stages and brief descriptions follow:

I *Primal-Undifferentiated Faith*
> *During this period the infant develops a basic sense of trust and "pre-images" of God or the Holy.*

II *Intuitive-Projective Faith (Early Childhood)*
> *A time in which unchallenged imagination facilitates the creation of images of the divine. Images may be developed which persist throughout life.*

III *Mythic-Literal Faith (School Years)*
> *Child develops ways of dealing with the world and "making meaning." During this period the images formed previously may be reconsidered or altered. While symbols may be meaningful at this stage, they are understood in concrete ways. It is important to note that some adults never move beyond this stage.*

IV *Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence)*
> *With the advent of formal operational thinking, the adolescent develops deeper levels of understanding of abstract concepts and symbols. Identity formation impacts relationships and sense of faith identity. Values, images, and self are synthesized. Relationship to God is understood in ways similar to other relationships.*

V *Individuative-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood)*
> *This is a period of self-discovery that occurs when a person begins to understand themselves independent of relationships and the world in general. Authenticity and ideological commitments are important aspects of this stage.*

VI *Conjunctive Faith (Mid-Life and Beyond)*
> *Borders identified in previous stages are softened. Individuals begin to understand that many unconscious factors and forces impact behaviors and belief. Characterized by an intensified desire to relate to God and willingness to accept mystery. "Alive to paradox" including God's unapproachable-ness and closeness. Desire to relate to those who are different.*

VII *Universalizing Faith*
> *Few people reach this stage. Individuals reaching this stage have centered themselves in ultimate reality (Fowler, 1996, p. 57-67).*

Fowler's concern for issues of identity and existential questions concerning reality and the ultimate meaning of life is highly relevant to study of college age adults. Though his concepts are not simple, they do provide a possible vehicle for understanding this complex aspect of development.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

There are numerous points of convergence and divergence between Kohlberg and Fowler. However, the purpose of this brief discussion is to explore those most salient and significant in light of future research possibilities. For this reason, the discussion

will be limited to just two concerns: conceptual fit and instrumentation.

Both theories offer highly organized, empirically supported models for considering issues of moral development. Though each theorist respects the others' contributions and though they trace back to common roots, they employ very different models. Kohlberg's narrow focus on the construct of moral reasoning is closely related to Piaget's conception of cognitive development. While strains of Piaget are also apparent in Fowler's work the construct of faith is much more broad than the construct of moral reasoning. Fowler's model considers how one experiences faith, a concept which subsumes moral reasoning. Though it may be tempting, it would be inaccurate to characterize Fowler's work as simply an extension of moral reasoning. It is more appropriate to understand it as placing moral reasoning in a larger context. While Kohlberg limited his focus to moral judgment, Fowler has attempted to widen this perspective to include an integrated connection to faith, belief, emotion, and value (Fowler, 1980b, 1996).

Though Kohlberg's model has been the basis for a great deal of research conducted on religious campuses, Fowler's extended interpretation offers clear conceptual benefits. A concern for connecting faith and practice is foundational to the purposes of faith-based institutions. Thus, Fowler's model provides a more natural path to an exploration of the connection between faith and one's likelihood of behaving as a good and decent person (Fowler, 2000). While this concern is corollary to Kohlberg's work, it is the heart of Fowlers'.

Although Fowler offers a model that seems to more appropriately fit the desired focus, the broadness of his theory creates some difficulties regarding measurement. Though he has a strong empirical base of support (Fowler, 1980b), his interview protocol is very time consuming. While this method is sound and consistent with the complexity of understanding the nuances of faith, it does not offer the convenience of measures related to Kohlberg's theory. Thus practical, rather than theoretical or empirical, questions raise the greatest concerns regarding the use of this protocol.

The instrumentation used to make assessments associated with Kohlberg's theory is well developed. The Defining Issues Test has become the standard for measuring moral reasoning development and provides an attractive standardized measurement option (Rest, 1993). The DIT is an easily administered and scored, standardized, paper and pencil instrument that allows the researcher to conveniently gauge a respondent's level of moral reasoning. Ease of administration is more than a convenience consideration as it may determine the situations in which a particular procedure may be used to gather data. For instance, by using the DIT a researcher would have the potential to collect a great deal of data very quickly in a setting such as a new student orientation testing session. While Fowler's interview protocol is well developed and allows for a much richer exploration of issues of faith, it is clearly more cumbersome to employ. Research designs based on this protocol must carefully account for accompanying limitations.

Though some may criticize Kohlberg for the narrowness of his focus, it is clearly a result of empirical priorities. Kohlberg's relevance, well-developed theory, and disciplined approach account for the presence of the rich research base that has been established. While research based on Fowler's model is substantial, it does not begin to approach the level of inquiry related to Kohlberg's theory. The presence of this impressive body of knowledge is a key benefit recommending Kohlberg. Any final decision related to the use of either of these theories requires a reconciliation of the advantages

of the breadth and richness of Fowler's model against the measurement benefits and comprehensive research base of Kohlberg's. However, considering the well-established nature of both models, the congruence between the concept of faith development and the interests of Christian higher education would ultimately seem to support the use of Fowler for future investigations.

Needless to say, a number of questions warranting further consideration have emerged. These questions may be helpful in providing a guide for future research on this topic. First, it would be both interesting and useful to investigate the association between specific elements of the college experience and advanced levels of moral and or faith development. In other words, what are the experiences that one has in college that relate most positively to progress in moral development? Though we now understand that involvement has a strong impact on broader educational goals, it would be very beneficial to investigate the possible relationship between specific forms of involvement and advances in moral development. This consideration has significant philosophical and practical significance to faith-based institutions.

Another area of possible attention is an investigation into the connection between campus culture and moral development. While there have been investigations into the relationship between environment and character development (Kuh, 2000), further study related specifically to the construct of faith development would potentially yield helpful insights into the benefits of the various elements comprising culture.

A third issue raised in this review is the need to further consider differences in the advance in faith development between students in religious institutions as compared to students in secular institutions. The broadness of Fowler's model allows for its application in non-religious settings and with people who have no particular religious orientation. Such an investigation would help to determine the impact that various educational models have on helping students to develop meaningful and congruent belief systems independent of religious commitment. As mentioned in the introduction to this review, moral development, and in particular faith development, is an important priority for faith-based institutions, thus it would be highly beneficial to develop a more complete understanding of possible differences in progress between students from each of the two types of institutions.

This rich topic has tremendous relevance to positively impacting pressing societal needs as well as the broad goals of higher education. This review has attempted to address several foundational issues and raise potential avenues for expanded exploration.

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