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AUTHOR Leming, James S.
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ABSTRACT

Based upon the theory of moral stages devised by educational psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, this report examines the influence of the social situation on principled moral reasoning and on cheating. Research assessed the level of moral reasoning for 152 college juniors and seniors using Rest's Defining Issues Test (1976) in which levels of low, medium and high corresponded to Kohlberg's pre-conventional, conventional, and principled stages. Half the subjects took the Hartshorne and May Circles Test (in which they are given five tries to memorize the location of ten circles on a sheet of paper and then to write the numbers in the corresponding circles with their eyes closed) in a high-threat, high supervision situation. The other half took the test in a low-threat, low-supervision situation. Controls were established by administering the test to 67 blindfolded undergraduates, computing a mean score, and establishing a score categorized as cheating. Results indicate that lows cheated significantly more than either Mediums or Highs; however, a relationship was found between principled moral reasoning only in the high threat, high-supervision situation in which none of the ten Highs cheated. The conclusion is that variations in a moral conduct situation may influence the behavior of principled subjects, depending upon how the two different situations are perceived by the subjects. (KC)

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James S. Leming
Professional Education Experiences
Southern Illinois University
at Carbondale
Carbondale, IL 62901

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The Relationship Between Principled Moral Reasoning and Cheating Behavior Under Threat and Non-threat Situations

James S. Leming
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

During the last half century the study of cheating behavior in schools has repeatedly confirmed the findings of Hartshorne and May (1928-1930) that nearly everyone (depending upon the situation) cheats sometime, and that attempts at character education have no influence on producing a general moral character trait which results in individuals consistently resisting opportunities to cheat. Recent work by Kohlberg (1970) studying the development of structures of moral thought has offered new perspectives for understanding the nature of moral behavior and hence of cheating behavior. Kohlberg has argued that the higher stages of moral reasoning are "better" than the lower stages and hence the goal of moral education should be to move individuals to those higher stages.

Kohlberg has attempted to establish this claim of superiority for the higher stages in two ways. First, he has argued that the higher stages are more philosophically adequate ways of resolving moral conflict and represent cognitive advances over the lower stages (1971). Secondly, he has attempted to show that the higher stages provide clearer guides to action. He has attempted to substantiate this second claim by examining the relationships between principled moral thought and action. It is this claim that will provide the focus of this paper.

There are four major sources of data referred to by Kohlberg and his associates when presenting evidence for the relationship between principled moral thought and moral action. It should be noted that studies which have been done with school-age children are only of limited interest here, since the subjects' reasoning contains only a very small percentage of principled thought. The four pieces of data frequently referred to by Kohlberg to support this claim are: interviews with subjects involved in the Milgrim study on obedience to authority, (Kohlberg, 1970, Milgrim, 1974), the Berkley free speech movement study (Haan et al, 1968), a report on the soldier who disobeyed orders at the My Lai massacre (Kohlberg and Scharf, 1972) and the Schwartz, Feldman, Brown and Heingartner (1969) study on the correlates of conduct in situations of moral conflict. These studies provide only marginal support for this claim, since the studies have extremely small sample size, the data are presented informally, and the reported data is conflicting or ambiguous. The purpose of this paper will be to explore further this postulated relationship between principled moral thought and moral action as it relates to a case of cheating behavior among college undergraduates.

An additional area which will be examined in this research will center around the notion of the generality of moral behavior.

(1)

That is, is moral behavior a general character trait or is it situation-specific? The findings of the research on this question from Hartshorne and May (1928-1930) until the present have repeatedly revealed the situationally specific nature of moral conduct. The cognitive developmentalists have offered an alternative explanation. Kohlberg has argued that the higher stages, because of their greater integration, differentiation, and more universal characteristics offer more clear and consistent guides to action. Hence, the expectation is that principled moral thinkers, because of the universal characteristics of their principles, would show greater consistency of moral action than would individuals at lower stages.

The study was designed as follows. The level of principled moral reasoning for 152 college undergraduates was assessed using Rest's Defining Issues Test (1976). The subjects were then presented with a task where they had high incentive to cheat and where it was easy for them to do so. The task they were assigned was one which, unknown to the subjects, allowed for easy detection of cheating behavior. The task was presented under two conditions: one highly supervised and the other not supervised at all. The data were examined with a view to identifying the relationships between principled moral reasoning, situational influence, and cheating behavior.

Method

Subjects. A total of 152 upper level (junior and senior) undergraduates were recruited from two sections of an adolescent psychology class taught by the author at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. The subjects were evenly divided between morning and afternoon sections of the class.

Instrumentation and Procedure. Kohlberg has identified six levels of moral judgment according to a developmental scheme which has been demonstrated both longitudinally and with cross-cultural age groups. These stages are claimed to constitute an invariant developmental sequence.

 Insert figure 1 about here

In this research Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT) was used to assign stage of moral reasoning scores to each subject (1974). The DIT is an objective means of assessing stage of moral reasoning which has been found to be both a reliable and valid means of measuring the development of moral reasoning (1976a). In addition it has the advantage of being considerably easier to administer and score than the standard Kohlberg interview procedures.

The primary statistic of the DIT is the P score, which is defined as the principled morality score (stages 5 and 6). In this

research the P score is reported as the percentage of the subject's reasoning that is as the principled level. The possible range of P scores is, therefore, from 0 (no reasoning at the principled level) to 100 (all the subject's reasoning is at the principled level).

In order to achieve a relatively pure sample of principled moral reasoners for analysis and comparison, those subjects whose P score was one standard deviation above the P score mean of 46.9 were grouped together and labeled High. The mean P score for the Highs was 71.5. That this score represents highly principled subjects can be seen when it is compared with a score of 65.2 for Ph.D students in moral philosophy as reported by Rest (1976b). Those subjects in the sample whose P score was one standard deviation below the mean were labeled as Low. Those subjects within the first standard deviation were labeled as Medium. The numbers in each group are reported in Table 1. These levels of moral reasoning (Low, Medium, and High) correspond roughly to Kohlberg's Preconventional (Stages 1 and 2), Conventional (Stages 3 and 4), and Principled (Stages 5 and 6) levels.

The circles test of Hartshorne and May (3) was used in its original form as the instrument to measure the incidence of cheating. In this test subjects are asked to attempt to memorize the location of nine circles of varying size on a piece of paper and are then instructed to close their eyes and write the numbers 1 through 9 in the corresponding circles.

Insert figure 2 about here

After five trials the subjects are instructed to record their own number correct in the score box. This test was disguised by announcing that it was a test to measure the effect of incentive on psychomotor and spatial recall. Subjects were told that they could earn from one to three additional points toward their final grade in the course, depending on how well they did on the test. Competition for grades in the course and at the university is very high.

To establish a baseline for honesty on this test it was also given to 67 undergraduates enrolled in other education courses. These control subjects were tested individually and were blindfolded. The tester recorded the subjects' scores for them, thus eliminating any chance of cheating. The mean score for the controls was 11.40. Three standard deviations above this mean was set as the upper limit representing an honest response to the test. This score could be achieved by chance only one out of 1,000 times. Any subject achieving a score of 23 or above was categorized as having cheated. The final instructions to the subjects involved in the research was that a score of the 20's was an average score for college students.

The subjects took the circles test under two different situations. In the morning section, involving approximately half of the subjects, four faculty members were recruited to monitor the test. Very stern warnings were given about the inadvisability of cheating and the faculty members paced up and down the aisles, closely monitoring the

subject's actions. This situation was defined as the high threat-high supervision (HTHS) situation.

In the afternoon section, the author was the only faculty member present, the test was not accompanied by any warnings, and the author read a magazine at a desk in the front of the lecture hall without looking at the subjects while they took the test. This situation was defined as the low threat-low supervision (LTLS) situation.

Results. Among the total sample it was found that the Lows cheated significantly more than either the Mediums or the Highs. Thirty-eight percent of the Lows cheated, as compared with 16 percent of the Mediums and 19 percent of the Highs. This frequency distribution was found to be statistically significant beyond the .01 level using chi-square procedures.

Insert table 1 about here

A relationship was found between principled moral reasoning and noncheating behavior only in the HTHS situation, where none of the 10 Highs cheated ($p < .005$). In the LTLS situation the Highs were not significantly different from either the Mediums or the Lows with respect to the frequency of cheating behavior. In this study principled moral behavior was found to be situationally specific.

There was little difference between the Highs and Lows with respect to the pattern of cheating behavior. They both cheated more in the HTHS situation and less in the LTLS situation. Threat and risk of detection worked just as well to inhibit deviant responses among principled moral thinkers as it did with preconventional thinkers. The cheating behavior of the Mediums was constant across situation.

Discussion

Previous claims by Kohlberg for the superiority of the higher stages have been based in part on the findings that in specific situations principled moral reasoners engage in what is defined as moral conduct, whereas others reasoning at lower stages do not engage in what is defined as moral conduct in the same situations. This research suggests that variations in the moral conduct situation may influence the behavior of principled subjects. Threat of detection coupled with stern warnings appear to be strong situational influences which are equally influential in determining behavior in moral conflict situations of preconventional as well as principled thinkers. When threat and high supervision are not present in the situation the incidence of cheating behavior among the Highs is found to be not significantly different from the incidence of cheating among the Mediums and the Lows. In other words, in this research moral behavior (defined as noncheating behavior) was found to be situationally specific among principled thinkers.

Interpretation of the results of this research is limited by how the two different situations may have been perceived by the subjects. It is possible that due to the experimenter's casual approach in the LTLS situation the principled reasoners interpreted the situation as essentially a trivial one embodying no salient moral concerns. In the HTHS situation the principled subjects may have been sensitized to the moral dimensions of the situation. For the Lows, with their instrumental orientation, the threat itself and the resultant possibility of detection may have been enough to inhibit the deviant behavior. For the principled subjects the HTHS situation may have sensitized them to the fact that this was a case where misrepresenting the results of a questionnaire for personal gain was clearly defined as cheating and was not sanctioned within the situation, hence any principles against such misrepresentation may have become operational and worked to inhibit cheating behavior. Such conjectures point out a key problem in the interpretation of reasoning/behavior studies, that is, it is difficult to know if a behavior is influenced by moral reasons unless one monitors the reasoning "in situ" prior to the resultant behavior. Ethnographic studies appear to be more promising in this respect. Questions can always be raised in reasoning/behavior studies whether or not the subject's reasoning was in fact operational and a determinant factor in the behavior assessed.

This research points out the need for attention to nuances in the contexts of behavior in studies dealing with the relationships between moral reasoning and moral behavior. In addition to the influence of the social situation on moral behavior as demonstrated by this research, there is research which suggest that the contexts about which individuals reason is an important determinant of the level of moral reasoning. Haan (1975), Leming (1978), Freeman (1974), Levine (1976), Gilligan et. al. (1971) and Yussen (1976) have all found that in situations which involve affectively salient issues which are within individual's life space, individuals reason at a lower level than when they reason about more affectively neutral situations. In other words not only is there research to suggest that principled moral behavior may be situationally specific, research also suggests that moral reasoning too may be situationally specific. The social setting is an important consideration in any attempt to explain moral reasoning and behavior. An appreciation of each other's perspective by the social learning and the cognitive developmental theorists is at this time both called for and likely to lead to a more comprehensive and powerful understanding of moral reasoning and conduct.

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Figure 1. - Definition of Moral Stages

I. Preconventional Level

Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation. The physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences.

Stage 2: The instrumental relativist orientation. Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others.

II. Conventional Level

Stage 3. The interpersonal concordance or "good boy-nice girl" orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior.

Stage 4: The "Law and order" orientation. This orientation is toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

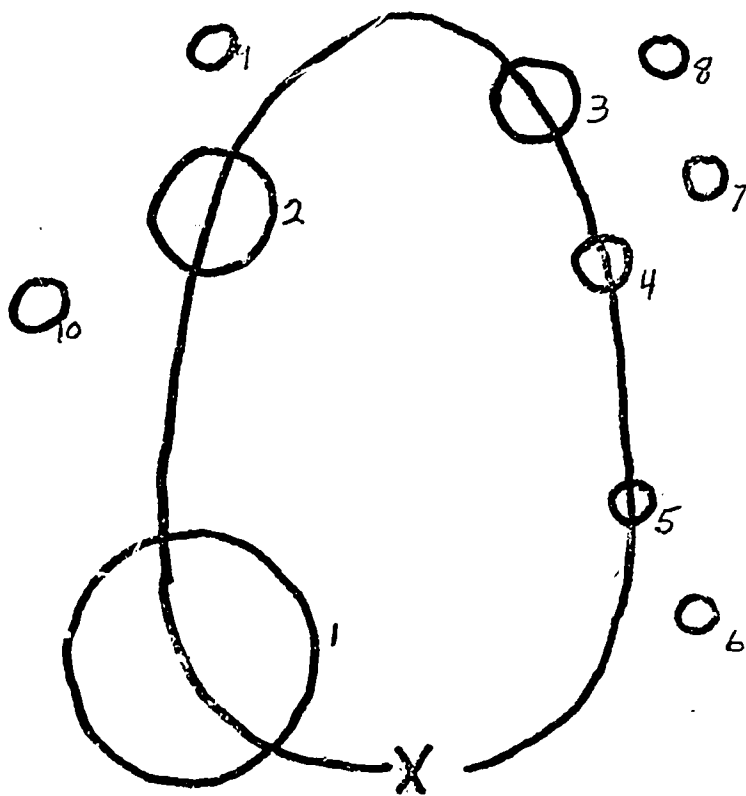
III. Postconventional, Autonomous, or Principled Level

Stage 5: The social-contract legalistic orientation. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights, and standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society (generally with utilitarian overtones). This is the "official" morality of the American government and constitution.

Stage 6: The universal ethical principle orientation. Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. 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.

Figure 2. - Spatial Recall Test

INSTRUCTIONS: Put the point of your pencil on the cross of the oval. Then shut your eyes and attempt to put the correct number in the corresponding circle (i.e., put a 1 in circle 1, a 2 in circle 2, and so on). Repeat the procedure five times. After each trial put a check mark in the score box under the number of each circle you succeeded in getting at least half of the number in the circle. Count the checks and enter the total in the column headed T at the right of the score box. After the last trial add up column T. Also add up the vertical columns and sum the row headed TOTAL. The sums of both columns should be the same, if not, please recheck your scores. The maximum score is 50. If it is necessary to erase some of your marks before subsequent trials to avoid confusion in your scoring, please do so.



Circles	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	T
Trial 1											
Trial 2											
Trial 3											
Trial 4											
Trial 5											
Total											

Table 1 - Relationship of Level of Moral Reasoning and Situation to Cheating Behavior

Testing Situation	Level of Moral Thought	N	Number of Subjects Who Cheated	Percentage of Subjects Who Cheated	Test of Significance
High Threat- High Supervision	High	10	0	0	χ^2 of 11.8 (df=2) $p < .005$
	Medium	56	9	16	
	Low	9	2	22	
	TOTAL	75	11	15	
Low Threat- Low Supervision	High	11	4	36	χ^2 of 2.01 (df=2) n.s.d.
	Medium	54	9	16	
	Low	12	6	50	
	TOTAL	77	19	24	
Both Situations	High	21	4	19	χ^2 of 10.4 (df=2) $p < .01$
	Medium	110	18	16	
	Low	21	8	38	
	TOTAL	152	30	20	