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Gilligan's theory of women's moral development: Implications for student affairs practitioners

Ivonne Arroyo Picard
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract

More and more educators are beginning to recognize the difference between the moral development of men and women. Rogers (1989) found patterns in recent research that revealed the nontraditional "feminine" characteristics of care, empowerment, cooperation and emphasis on relationships are starting to be valued, and that there is less emphasis on the traditional male oriented values of competition and independence. Rogers also suggested that the difference between the moral orientation of men and women is a controversial theme that calls for a redefinition of human nature. According to Rogers, "in the heart of this redefinition will be a realization of the validity and the worth of the values of the female ethos, which in the Western culture have long been unrecognized and unresearched" (p. 1).

GILLIGAN'S THEORY OF WOMEN'S MORAL DEVELOPMENT:

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS

A Research Paper

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and Counseling

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

Ivonne Arroyo Picard

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Florence Guido-DiBrito

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Date Approved   Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

July 17, 1992
Date Approved   Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

July 20, 1992
Date Received   Head, Department of Educational
                        Administration and Counseling

More and more educators are beginning to recognize the
difference between the moral development of men and women. Rogers
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of the values of the female ethos, which in the Western culture
have long been unrecognized and unresearched" (p. 1).

There is a strong trend among human development theorists
toward a better understanding of the female ethos. Perhaps this
is so because more than ever before women are entering all
disciplines of higher education with better chances for employment
in traditionally male-dominated career fields. In spite of this,
women's academic and career aspirations have decreased during
their academic years as undergraduates, and their self-esteem and
values have been impacted negatively (Astin & Kent, 1983). For
example, a recent nation-wide survey addressing the norms of
college freshmen showed that even though more women were entering
engineering and computing careers, the percentage of female
dropouts was higher than that of males (The American Freshman,

1987). Various studies have shown that college campuses are not responding to the developmental needs of women (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). Furthermore, colleges and universities still favor the white male, leaving women at a disadvantage later in life (Borman & Guido-DiBrito, 1986).

The female ethos has relevance to all areas of human performance. Since women have a different way of understanding the world, making decisions and relating to others (Gilligan, 1982), college and university personnel, especially student affairs practitioners, must be attentive to serving the needs of both genders. In order to do this, it is important to examine the research of Carol Gilligan (1982). Much of the inquiry on women's moral development refers to or confirms her theory.

Gilligan's (1982) revolutionary study focused on sex differences in moral reasoning. Contradicting other theorists, Gilligan found that females are not less mature than males, but rather that men and women follow different patterns of understanding, and perceive the world and their relationships with others in a different way.

This paper will examine the literature related to Gilligan's theory of women's moral development and relate it to college students. In addition, differences between the moral development of men and women will be discussed throughout. Finally, implications and recommendations for student affairs practitioners will be reviewed.

Moral Development of Women

Prior to Gilligan, the primary theorist who studied the moral development of young adults was Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg (1981) stated that moral development was centered around a moral understanding of justice. He identified six stages which revealed an individual's values when making a judgment.

Carol Gilligan, who was Kohlberg's student and partner in much of his research, examined moral development from a different perspective, which ultimately changed the understanding of women's development. Gilligan (1982) explored the moral and psychological development of women based on interviews with females and males of different ages. In addition, she observed that various theorists detected gender differences in their research. For example, Freud (1905/1965) found that women experienced ethics in a different way than men, and that women's experience was strongly influenced by feelings and emotions. Additionally, Piaget (1932/1965) identified differences in girls' and boys' games; girls were less structured than boys when setting game rules. Finally, Kohlberg (1958) revealed how women's feeling and caring strongly influenced their judgments.

Some researchers found that women's behavior is different; others found differences but did not know how to explain them. Some explained gender differences by categorizing women's development as incomplete in comparison to men's. Specifically,

Gilligan (1982) suggested that Kohlberg's (1958) findings reveal gender bias.

Differences Between Kohlberg's and Gilligan's Theories

These findings support Gilligan's (1982) theory of women's different concepts of self and morality. Nevertheless, Gilligan found weaknesses in these theories, especially Kohlberg's (1958). First, she found that Kohlberg's hypothetical dilemmas lacked the perspective that women expressed when interviewed to discuss real life situations. Second, Kohlberg's research used only men in the sample and was not necessarily applicable to women. Finally, Kohlberg did not consider variables of age and sex in relation to the type of decision and dilemma presented. This was crucial because according to Kohlberg's theory women were not able to grow to what he considered to be the highest level of values (postconvention stage).

In addition, Gilligan (1982) found that women and men take different paths to moral development and self-definition. Women's conception of morality is centered in caring, understanding and relating, while men's morality is centered in fairness. In the developmental process, men look for rights and rules in discovering their independence, while women search for understanding and relationships. For men, initial self-definition is based on autonomy and later they place value on relationships. For women, identity is sought through intimacy while autonomy is sought later. Men tend to organize social relationships in a

hierarchical order. They value autonomy, principles, rules, and subscribe to a morality of rights. Females value care, sensitivity, responsibility to others, and maintaining relationships and attachments even if self-sacrifice is necessary. Women avoid hurt and violence, identify their own "good" with the "good" of the group, need the trust of others, value cooperation, do not conceptualize the consequences of their actions, and seek belonging (Gilligan, 1982).

On the other hand, Kohlberg (1981) did not consider gender differences. He believed that his research applied across gender and culture. He assigned the female care orientation a lower rating on a moral scale than the male justice orientation. On the contrary, Gilligan (1982) identified different developmental stages for females, acknowledged gender differences, and claimed that one orientation was no better or worse than the other. Rather, each "voice" had its strengths and weaknesses in different situations though both were equally valid.

In addition, Gilligan (1977) identified women's understanding of reality and self perception and how these understandings influenced women's moral judgments. She found that women pass through all three levels of Kohlberg's (1981) moral developmental schema: (a) the egocentric, (b) the societal, and (c) the universal perspective. However, women's choices always appear to be strongly influenced by a concern for non-violence, and caring for others, which is why Kohlberg thought that women

were most likely to remain permanently in the societal level.
Contrary to the traditional view, women have a different rationale
when they face moral dilemmas, set goals or make decisions.

Gilligan's (1977) research, among others (Belenky, Clinchy,
Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Borman & Guido-DiBrito, 1986; Bradley,
1989; Terrell, 1991), raised a voice for women's understanding.
Leadership style, decision making, and relationships are some of
the areas that need to be reconsidered through the lens of the
female ethos. Understanding women's ethos must be taken into
consideration because it affects all areas of their performance.

Research Comparing Kohlberg's and Gilligan's Theories

Various other researchers also analyzed women's moral
development. DiMartino (1990) reviewed research related to
Gilligan's theory and confirmed her findings. Research by other
theorists (Bem, 1974; Erikson, 1964; Freud, 1965; Jung, 1959;
Kaplan, 1976) supported Gilligan's thesis that women and men
follow different paths in their moral development, yet none of
them recognized the real value of women's development.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) stated that
human development has been understood from a male premise and not
until recently have females been considered to posses different
and valuable characteristics, especially in the way they develop
cognitively and morally. They also explained that traditional
models of analyzing human development help to describe many

characteristics that men and women share, but they fail to recognize the differences.

Rothbart, Hanley, and Albert (1986) examined the pros and cons of Kohlberg's and Gilligan's theories. They conducted interviews with 50 female and male college students using three moral dilemmas. They found that both sexes use both moral orientations (justice and care). In addition, females are more inclined to care considerations than to justice considerations. The contrary was true for males, and in some responses both sexes care equally for justice. Finally, they found that when care and justice concepts are related to moral judgments that "neither framework dominates exclusively" (p. 652).

In addition, Rothbart, Hanley, and Albert (1986) explored how different contexts may affect moral judgment, finding limitations to Kohlberg's theory which is not context-bound. They confirmed Gilligan's thesis that moral orientations differ not only by gender, but also by situation. For example, Gilligan (1982) studied women who were contemplating abortion and facing a real moral decision, while Kohlberg's (1981) male subjects were asked to respond to hypothetical dilemmas according to what they thought was right.

On the whole, most of the psychological theories, from Freud to Kohlberg, tried to explain women from a masculine model, using "the male behavior as the norm" while explaining that "the female behavior is some kind of deviation from that norm" (McClelland

cited in Gilligan, 1982, p. 14). For centuries women have been stereotyped as deviants by society, family structure, mother's modeling, the education system, the bible, literature, grammar, and even children's tales (Gilligan, 1982).

Gilligan (1982) provides several reasons why a better understanding of the female ethos is important. First, it provides a better background knowledge of women's development for psychologists and other professionals, so that they may have a better understanding of women's conflicts related to identity formation and moral development. Second, it offers women a better understanding of their own thinking and moral development, so that they can recognize the value of their own ethos. Finally, with more knowledge of the female voice, it is anticipated that a better grounded comprehension of the male and female ethos will generate new theories for a more thorough understanding of the full range of human development.

Implications for Student Affairs

Through this review, we may conclude that there is not an adequate understanding of women's ethos, that the feminine characteristics have been judged under male standards, and that women have a different moral understanding than men. Intimacy, interdependence and caring, considered valuable in human development, are supported by extensive research (Gilligan, 1982). Rogers (1989) points out that female values influence leadership practice in Western culture. These findings lead us to examine if

colleges and universities, especially student affairs professionals, are meeting the needs of female students. If student affairs practitioners have a better understanding of gender differences related to moral development, they can offer better support to students who seek assistance in all areas of their lives.

Terrell (1991) and Astin and Kent (1983) observed how women experience higher education in a different way. Delworth and Seeman (1984) and Terrell (1991) acknowledged that Gilligan brought a different perspective to human development theory and that this view has implications for student affairs. For example, counseling, academic advising, and career planning must operate with the understanding that male and female development is different. These studies indicate that there are many programs to meet the developmental needs of both sexes, but most of them are attempts to mold students to the existing educational models.

Applying Gilligan's Theory to Career Development

Rogers (1989) and Borman and Guido-DiBrito (1986) observed that the way colleges and universities address the needs of the female population is going to impact the workplace and women's performance beyond the university. Some of the most common problems women face include: (a) a sense of guilt in dual career situations, (b) decisions based on responsibility for family, (c) preferences for work environments that are people-related, and (d) an orientation toward clerical jobs. These difficulties

affect how women set goals, perform academically and make career decisions.

Bradley (1989) examined career decision making from a moral perspective. He believed Gilligan's theory provides a good schema to support women's career decisions because: (a) it deals with identity and the way women relate to others, (b) it relates to a growing number of women who choose careers and their needs ought to be met, and (c) research has been conducted mainly with men as subjects or has not taken into consideration gender differences in moral decision making and self concept. Gilligan's moral decision making provides university career planning counselors with a useful tool to serve both sexes well.

Applying Gilligan's Theory to Counseling

One student affairs area where practitioners can apply Gilligan's theory is in counseling. If counselors are aware of female-male voices, they can lessen the pain and confusion that accompanies student growth and builds self confidence (Bradley, 1989). Hotelling and Forrest (1985) acknowledged that counselors need to understand the strengths and limitations of both the male and female ethos in order to help students through crisis, growth, decision making and to reach maturity. They also recommended that university counselors sensitize academic personnel to women's development and how this might affect their choice of an academic major.

Straub and Rodgers (1986) suggested that female college students, in their first years, need programs to manage the "Cinderella complex" and dependent relationships; while juniors, seniors, and returning women need programs to develop autonomy by decreasing the "hooks" and guilty feelings associated with family. Student affairs professionals need to help women students manage this "hook" and develop autonomy, especially women who are in the process of choosing a career.

Achievement motivation is another area where counselors need to understand and support women. Griffin-Pierson (1986) suggested that because women worry about preserving relationships, they struggle with choices when "others" are involved, and thus fear success because it may endanger relationships. Contrary to men, achievement for women usually does not include competition. Women also have a different motivation to achieve. From a women's prospective, achievement centers on successful performance and maintaining positive relationships.

Griffin-Pierson (1986) suggested that achieving motivation might be expressed in different, but equally valid ways. She added that the concept of achievement needs to be redefined. Achievement was traditionally understood as success-oriented activities, high-level jobs, and college degrees, instead of focusing on self satisfaction. Counselors, especially, need a framework that validates women's motivation and includes both male and female models.

Applying Gilligan's Theory to Residence Life

Student affairs practitioners in residence life must also understand the differences in moral development between male and female students in order to help them make better decisions about the issues they face. Schuh, Shipton, and Edman (1986) described the counseling problems faced by resident assistants (RAs) at Indiana University-Bloomington in a twelve-year study. They identified problems and trends faced by students to determine implications for staff training. The authors' study found significant differences between male and female problems encountered by RAs. They found that women face issues related to pregnancy or birth control, abortion, academic and health problems, emotional crisis, rape, suicide threat, and dating. An increased number of workshops, training activities, and health and wellness programs have all helped RAs to deal with concerns female students encounter. Through training, staff can serve as remedial, preventive, and developmental agents for helping female students with issues related to moral development.

Porterfield and Pressprich (1988) applied Gilligan's theory to RAs in order to promote more sensitivity to gender differences. They noted that in order to be effective, the work of RAs was traditionally carried out in a way that implied control, direction, and critique. The interactive process in the residence hall was evaluated from the standpoint of male and female voices. The authors believed that male and female voices impact conflict

resolution, hall environment, counseling and the overall performance of RAs. Student staff must understand their own development, as well as that of the opposite sex, and they must explain to students how self-reflection is a prerequisite when applying the care orientation articulated in Gilligan's theory. In addition, RAs must be encouraged to willingly integrate this theory into their own ethos.

Applying Gilligan's Theory to Student Leadership Development

Student affairs practitioners need to create models of leadership development which acknowledge and address gender differences. Developing women's leadership potential is important for student affairs professionals because women need to perform well when establishing themselves in a career or profession. Good performance at work traditionally called for leadership characteristics generally thought to be masculine: assertiveness, strength, the ability to remain cool, to control one's emotions, and to exemplify independence (Erickson, 1985). Administrators in the educational environment have an important role in developing student leadership and self-esteem, but advisors and student affairs professionals have greater responsibilities (Guido-DiBrito & Batchelor, 1988).

Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper enlighten women's understanding and have direct implications for higher education. Astin and Kent (1983) argue the necessity of this awareness for

women's success: "If women are to emerge from college feeling strong, independent, self-assured, and well prepared to take on whatever future roles they have chosen for themselves" . . .(p. 323), colleges and universities need to address the special needs of women related to their moral development. Student affairs practitioners need to have a better understanding of the female ethos, primarily to fulfill their mission of serving the needs of all students. Student affairs must adapt programs and facilities to be responsive to gender differences and address differences without gender bias. In addition, theory and practice need to be linked, and dynamics for student advisers need to be clarified.

Gilligan's (1982) findings bring a new understanding of women's ethos, in addition to providing a good schema to understand gender differences. Gilligan and many researchers believe that women's ethos is not sufficiently understood. The research conducted to date confirms Gilligan's theory, but there is a need for more empirical research.

As women assume more diverse roles, student affairs practitioners need to take a leadership role and focus more resources on developing a better understanding of women's moral development. This leadership role must include sensitivity to women's ethos by integrating into the environment cooperation, empowerment, nurturance, and caring for relationships. Now there is a new agenda for research and practice integrating the male-oriented justice and the female-oriented care. If this occurs, it

will be possible to realize the full human potential of all
students.

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