

Explanatory Limitations of Cognitive-Developmental Approaches to Morality

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In response to Gibbs' defense of neo-Kohlbergian models of morality, the authors question whether revisions in Kohlberg's model constitute a coherent refinement of the cognitive-developmental approach. The authors argue that neo-Kohlbergian measures of moral development assess an aspect of morality (the most sophisticated forms of moral reasoning available to people) that plays a relatively minor role in determining the moral judgments and behavioral decisions people make in their everyday lives. Attempts to conceptualize stages as schema and to redefine moral decision-making in terms of automaticity will not solve these problems. Flexibility is an important aspect of moral maturity. Observed relations between stages of moral development and various forms of social conduct do not establish that the structures of moral reasoning that define stages of moral development exert a significant causal impact on moral behavior. Although cognitive-developmental approaches are equipped to account for some aspects of morality, a more general framework that organizes the insights from other theoretical approaches is needed.

Keywords: moral judgment, moral behavior, cognitive-developmental theory, pragmatic approach

In our target article (Krebs & Denton, 2005), we explained why, after two decades of research, we decided to abandon Kohlberg's model of morality in favor of a more pragmatic approach. We did not, as Gibbs asserts, "equate Kohlberg's specific model with the entire cognitive-developmental approach." Revisions in Kohlberg's model have enhanced our understanding of moral development. The pragmatic framework we derived from our program of research is able to accommodate most of these revisions, as well as findings from other theoretical approaches. In this rejoinder, we argue that revisions in, and departures from, Kohlberg's model have not produced a coherent reconstruction of the cognitive-developmental approach to morality, and we question the explanatory power of key assumptions shared by some of those who wear the cognitive-developmental hat.

Are Revisions in Kohlberg's Model Logically Consistent?

Revisionists face a problem. They must ensure that the parts of the parent model that they change are consistent with the parts that they retain and with the revisions made by other members of their family. If you fiddle with the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, you must ensure that you end up producing a coherent picture. We question whether the revisions made by neo-Kohlbergian theorists are logically compatible. As examples, Gibbs (2003) dropped the two highest stages from Kohlberg's model¹, whereas Rest (1983) focused on the forms of principled reasoning defined by these stages.

Gibbs retained the essence of Kohlberg's Stage 1, but Turiel (1983) rejected it.

As explained in our target article, we believe that Kohlberg himself fell victim to the perils of the revisionist process. For example, in introducing the idea that performance factors may induce people to make low-stage moral judgments, Kohlberg compromised the claim that new stages transform and displace previous stages. Related to this issue, the extent to which one can stretch a model and remain consistent with the overriding approach is limited. For example, in the conclusion to a recent book with the subtitle "beyond the theories of Kohlberg and Hoffman," Gibbs (2003) advanced an account of near-death experiences that, in our view, crossed the boundaries of the cognitive-developmental perspective.

An Evaluation of Revisions in Kohlberg's Model

We were able to ferret out from Gibbs' comments only three references to refinements and improvements in Kohlberg's model: (a) eschewing the representation of moral stages in terms of moral philosophy, (b) explaining how structures of moral reasoning can be activated automatically, and (c) redefining stages as schema. We argue that the first refinement fails to go far enough, the second does not pertain to global structures of moral reasoning, and the third is ambiguous.

Philosophizing about morality. Gibbs misinterpreted our use of the term *philosophize*. We used it in the way Kohlberg meant it when he characterized the child as a moral philosopher. When

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¹ Dropping Stages 5 and 6 entails an enormous departure from Kohlberg's model. It entails accepting forms of moral reasoning that Kohlberg viewed as inadequate as the end points of moral development. Kohlberg argued that his stage sequence was defined by Stages 5 and 6.

people philosophize about morality, they reflect on hypothetical moral issues and attempt to explicate ideal moral principles. We adduced evidence that measures of moral development based on people's ability to philosophize about morality—to engage in their most sophisticated forms of moral reasoning about hypothetical dilemmas in academic contexts—assesses an aspect of moral judgment that plays a relatively minor role in real-life moral decision-making. Revising Kohlberg's methods by using abstract, in principle, questions (e.g., "In general, how important is it for people to tell the truth?") does not solve this problem, because such questions still elicit sophisticated forms of moral philosophizing that are different from the judgments people customarily invoke in their everyday lives.

Automatic processing. We have no quarrel with the idea that thinking about moral issues a great deal may enable people to respond to them in automatic ways (Bargh, 1996). Even if automatic reactions were mediated by different cognitive processes from the processes that produce considered decisions, the former can still be considered a product of moral reasoning. However, we are not aware of any research demonstrating that the global structures of moral reasoning assessed by cognitive-developmental tests can be activated automatically. As exemplified in the articles cited by Gibbs, research on automaticity pertains to far more specific types of judgments and behaviors.

Stages as schemas. We question whether the validity of cognitive-developmental stages can be salvaged by redefining structures of moral reasoning as schemas. The concept of schema has been defined in many ways (cf. Gibbs, 2003). Schema is sometimes used to characterize relatively particular cognitive processes (e.g., a schema for independence; a party schema, or script), and sometimes it is used to characterize very general cognitive processes (e.g., a self schema). If you use people's moral judgments to assign them to a stage, then, operationally, you must expect their judgments to be organized in terms of the global structure that defines their stage. Although one might call this structure a schema, we question that it would add any explanatory power to the theory, because we question whether global structures of moral development are activated when people consider particular moral issues. As demonstrated by evidence reviewed in our target article and other research on social cognition, people make different kinds of judgments—different schemas are activated—when they are in different frames of mind, when they are in different affective states, when they evaluate different moral issues, when they are in different contexts, when they address different audiences, and so on.

Cognitive-developmental assumptions about the way the human mind is organized—in terms of generic structures of moral reasoning—seem naïve when compared with the models of mental processing advanced by cognitive scientists such as Anderson et al. (in press). To account for the ways in which people process moral information, theorists must explain what kinds of mental units (nodes, schemas) people acquire, how they acquire them, how they are linked to one another, how they are activated, how they are strengthened, how they change, and so on.

With respect to stages, we recognize that age-related trends exist in the types of moral judgments people make, and we acknowledge that cognitive development plays a role in determining them. However, because the evidence suggests that different aspects of moral cognition may change in different ways, that people do not

relinquish their old ways of thinking when they acquire new forms of thought, and that different forms of thought can be activated by different experiences, we (with Piaget, 1932/1965) believe characterizing these phases as stages is misleading.

Moral Maturity and Moral Flexibility

Gibbs misrepresents our position on moral maturity. We do not attempt to "replace" the cognitive-developmental conception of moral maturity with a conception based on flexibility; we attempt to integrate the two ideas. We accept the idea that people tend to acquire increasingly sophisticated structures of moral reasoning as they develop. However, we argue that sophisticated forms of moral reasoning are not necessary to solve most of the moral problems that people encounter in their everyday lives. People retain their old forms of moral reasoning and invoke them to solve the problems that they are equipped to solve. Simple problems can be solved perfectly adequately with simple forms of thought. You do not need a Stage 6 milling machine to cut a simple two-by-four in half; a Stage 2 chop saw will do just fine. One of the products of moral maturity is flexibility. The more tools people have in their moral tool-boxes—that is, the more morally mature they are—the better equipped they are to select the one that will enable them to solve the (moral) problems they encounter in the most effective manner. Morally immature people have no difficulty solving the relatively simple problems necessary to uphold relatively simple forms of cooperation, but they are at a disadvantage when faced with complex problems such as those in Kohlbergian moral dilemmas that involve conflicts between moral norms.

Related to this issue, Gibbs implicitly attributes to us a position on commitment that we do not advance. In our article, we adduce evidence that societies contain different systems of cooperation, upheld by different structures of moral judgment. Systems of concrete reciprocity are upheld by Stage 2 moral judgments; systems based on commitments are upheld by Stage 3 moral judgments. We argue that Stage 2 forms of exchange are perfectly fair in appropriate contexts. Making a deal with your neighbor to take turns picking the kids up from school is not morally deficient. What is morally deficient is invoking Stage 2 moral judgments to uphold Stage 3 systems of cooperation, as exemplified by the examples cited by Gibbs. For example, offering to pay a friend for comforting you when you were down would be inappropriate. However, insisting that someone with whom you made a mutually beneficial tit-for-tat deal should give you more than your share out of brotherly love would be equally inappropriate.

Relations Between Moral Judgment and Moral Behavior

Gibbs says that the evidence warrants the conclusion that "moral judgment stages do substantially influence social behavior." We say that they "play a relatively minor role." Several questions are relevant to this debate. First, do statistically significant relations exist between measures of moral development and measures of moral behavior? Second, how much of the variance is accounted for by the observed relations? Third, do the structures of moral reasoning that define stages of moral development exert a causal impact on moral behavior? Finally, what are the psychological processes that intervene between the capacity to make high-stage moral judgments and the tendency to behave in moral ways?

We agree with Gibbs that many studies have found statistically significant relations between stages of moral development and measures of moral behavior. Gibbs agrees with us that these relations account for only a small portion of the variance. Our main source of disagreement pertains to the third, causal, question. We do not believe that the studies cited by Gibbs were designed in ways that permit causal conclusions. Correlations between stages of moral development and measures of moral or immoral behavior may be produced by third factors, such as participation in a delinquent subculture. Moreover, engaging in moral (or immoral) behavior may cause people to justify their acts by making moral (or immoral) judgments. In addition, the observed relations may be produced by the ability of tests of moral development to assess such aspects of social cognition as egocentrism and perspective-taking ability, which might affect social behaviors without activating moral reasoning.

The central challenge for theorists who posit a causal relation between stage of moral judgment and moral behavior is to explain the mental processes that mediate the link. A person makes moral judgments in response to questions on cognitive-developmental tests that pull for high-stage responses and behaves in moral or immoral ways in real-life contexts. The question is: What, if any, role do the mental processes assessed by cognitive-developmental tests play in determining the real-life behaviors? We find Gibbs' answer to this question ("substantial") to be implausible for several reasons.

First, to give rise to moral behaviors, structures of moral judgment must be activated. Although they are activated by the questions on cognitive-developmental tests, these structures may not be activated in many real-life contexts. Second, real-life moral problems may activate different structures of moral reasoning than the hypothetical questions on tests of moral development activate. As acknowledged by Kohlberg (1984) and supported by our research, people frequently fail to perform at their level of competence in situations that are not conducive to high-stage moral reasoning. Third, cognitive-developmental theorists acknowledge that deontic choices ("should" judgments), which they assume are most directly related to behavior, need not covary with stage. Fourth, Gibbs and Kohlberg acknowledge that certain types of people (e.g., moral "Type B") make highly moral choices even though they are in low stages of moral development. Finally, cognitive-developmental theorists acknowledge that deriving a decision about the most moral course of action is not sufficient to induce people to behave in the most moral ways.

Moral Development and Delinquency

The main evidence cited by Gibbs in support of the relationship between stage of moral development and moral (or "social") behavior stems from studies on delinquents. These studies focus on the relationship between low stages and delinquent status, not on high stages and moral behaviors. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the Heinz dilemma on Kohlberg's test, illegal acts do not equate to immoral behaviors. We do not know whether the nondelinquent control subjects in the studies in question behaved in moral or immoral ways. Even if we equate delinquent acts and immoral behavior, the nondelinquents may have committed illegal acts without getting caught or charged.

As acknowledged by the authors of all the reviews cited by Gibbs, studies investigating the moral development of delinquents suffer from serious conceptual and methodologic limitations.² Expecting stage of moral development to be related to all forms of delinquency in the same way seems unreasonable. If a relationship were to exist between global stages and behavior, we would expect it to pertain to global measures of (delinquent) lifestyle patterns of behavior, not to specific acts. One of the lessons learned from decades of research on the relationship between attitudes and behaviors is that general attitudes, which are significantly less global than are structures of moral reasoning, do not predict specific behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974). To predict specific behaviors, researchers must assess specific attitudes about intentions to behave in specific ways.

In addition, the tendency for the mean stage scores of delinquents to vary across studies—as much as one full stage in some studies—is problematic for the cognitive-developmental approach. Why do not delinquents who have achieved a Stage 3 level of moral development behave differently from delinquents who score at Stage 2? In a similar vein, the reported difference between delinquents' and nondelinquents' stage of moral development is usually less than one stage, and sometimes as small as one fifth stage, raising the question, why are people who are slightly less advanced than others in the *same* stage of moral development more likely to commit delinquent acts, or at least be classified as delinquents, than those who are slightly more advanced?

The Case Study

As a way of summarizing many of the points we have made, consider the case study cited by Gibbs. Why did the White youth intervene to help the Black youth? Attributing the White youth's behavior to the structures of reasoning that define his stage of moral development seems gratuitous, because we have no information about the boy's stage of moral development or whether he engaged in any kind of moral reasoning in the situation in question. Indeed, most notable about the incident is that the youth behaved in a manner that was inconsistent with his previous thinking and behavior. How could the boy be in one stage when he joined his friends in taunting the Black victim then suddenly change stages before he rescued the youth?

Revisiting Automaticity

In interpreting this incident, Gibbs cites criticisms published by Pizarro and Bloom (2003) and Saltzstein and Kasachkoff (2004) of Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model of morality that postulates that moral judgments may stem from evolved intuitions and that moral reasoning may be invoked post hoc to justify them. Haidt

² For example, Smetana (1990) acknowledged that, "There is. . . considerable conceptual confusion in the findings" (p. 169), and that "these findings still leave a number of unanswered questions. Primary among these is a developmental explanation for why these deficits occur. . . . Those who focus on the moral reasoning of delinquents need to remember that juvenile delinquency is multiply determined and that immaturities in moral reasoning are only one variable influencing behavioral disordered children's behavior. . . . Research on delinquents' moral reasoning needs to be incorporated in more multidimensional models." (p. 177).

(2003, 2004) has published insightful rejoinders to these criticisms that correct misconceptions and find common ground. All parties to the debate agree that people may derive moral judgments from specific forms of moral reasoning in some circumstances, and all parties agree that moral deliberation—thinking about particular moral issues and discussing them with others—may affect moral judgments. However, none of the parties argues that the kinds of global structures of moral reasoning that define cognitive-developmental stages of moral development are a significant source of moral judgment or moral behavior. Our pragmatic approach would lead us to hypothesize that the behavior of the White rescuer might have been determined by such processes as fear of reprisal (the situation was shaping up as very serious), empathy, sympathy, moral intuitions, and judgments of responsibility.

Toward a More Pragmatic Approach

In this rejoinder, we have said relatively little about the pragmatic approach we outlined in our target article, because Gibbs did not question any of the propositions on which it is based. Although Gibbs asserted that this approach “provokes some serious concerns,” we found only one concern (relating to flexibility), which was based on a misconception of our position. In closing, we want to clarify that the approach we outlined does not laud self-interest or applaud instrumental manipulation, though it recognizes that people may behave in self-interested and manipulative ways. In arguing for a *more* pragmatic approach to morality, we are arguing for an approach equipped to explain the types of moral judgments and moral behaviors people make in their everyday lives. Our goal is to outline an overarching framework able to accommodate the insights derived by cognitive-developmental theorists and by theorists from other theoretical orientations. To understand morality, we need to understand how the mental mechanisms that give rise to moral judgments, moral emotions, and moral behaviors evolved, how they change with development, and how they are activated in real-life contexts. We need to understand how the cognitive and affective components of the mediating processes interact. This understanding will not be achieved by any one approach, and it will not be fostered by knocking down straw-man misrepresentations of approaches advanced by others (Haidt, 2004; Krebs, 2004). It will be promoted by integrating the insights of different theoretical approaches, as we tried to do in our target article and in other articles (e.g., Krebs & Van Hesteren, 1994; Krebs, 2005), and by engaging in informed debate, as we tried to do in this rejoinder.

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