Kohlberg and Gilligan: duet or duel?

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Most moral psychologists have come to accept two types of moral reasoning: Kohlberg’s *justice* and Gilligan’s *care*, but there still seem to be some unresolved issues. By analysing and comparing Kohlberg’s statement on some theoretical issues with some of Gilligan’s statements in an interview in April 2003, I will look at some key issues in the so-called ‘Kohlberg–Gilligan conflict’. Some of the questions raised in this paper are: (1) Does Gilligan reject the idea of developmental morality? (2) Does Gilligan support Kohlberg’s stage theory and his claim of universality? (3) Did Kohlberg reject Gilligan’s proposal to expand his understanding of moral reasoning? (4) Was Gilligan’s theory a critique of or an expansion to Kohlberg’s theory? The findings of this analysis suggest that the first question be answered negatively, the second positively, the third negatively and the fourth that Gilligan’s theory is an expansion rather than a critique.

Introduction

Although over the years the moral psychology community has come to accept that there are two types of moral reasoning, namely Kohlberg’s *justice* and Gilligan’s *care*, there still seem to be some unresolved issues. Suffice it to say that Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau and Thoma (1999) and Reed (1997) seem to reflect the debates in the 1970s and 1980s and subsequently. Rest *et al.* (1999) and Reed (1997) come to diametrically opposite conclusions about the viability of Gilligan’s theory, but both want to modify Kohlberg’s theory. One of the reasons these two books have been selected as a reference point for this study is that both give a comprehensive account of Kohlberg’s theory – a retrospective account of it. Reed (1997) seems to argue that Kohlberg, in his ‘just-community’ project, is far closer to Gilligan than he had been before. Rest *et al.* (1999) do not seem to have found anything of interest in Gilligan’s theory except the fact that she appeared to be one of Kohlberg’s strongest critics.

There still seems to be some tension in the moral development community concerning the conflict between Kohlberg’s view of morality and Gilligan’s. Could it be that the two were much closer than it seems, or are their views really irreconcilable? Did Gilligan reject developmental morality and Kohlberg’s claim of universality and invariant sequence of stages? Did Kohlberg reject Gilligan’s

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proposal to expand his understanding of moral reasoning? This article is an attempt to address these issues.

As a starting point I should like to review briefly the two above mentioned important contributions in the vast field of literature in this area. Both were published towards the end of the 1990s, namely *Postconventional Moral Thinking – a Neo-Kohlbergian Approach* (Rest et al., 1999) and *Following Kohlberg – Liberalism and the Practice of Democratic Community* (Reed, 1997).

The focal point of this article is how Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan relate scientifically in the area of cognitive moral theory, and it is with this in mind that the review of the two books is undertaken here. Despite my implicit critique of these books in this review, I would like to make it clear that I do have great appreciation of the quality of these two works and have myself gained much from reading them.

Rest et al. (1999) base their neo-Kohlbergian approach to moral development on their Defining Issues Test (DIT) and an analysis of a large amount of data collected on the DIT over some 25 years. A factor analysis led them to conclude that it is meaningful to talk about a postconventional factor corresponding to Stage 5 and 6 on Kohlberg’s scale, a maintaining norms factor loading on Stage 4 items, and a personal interest factor that, surprisingly, merges test items on Stage 2 and 3. Their neo-Kohlbergian approach is a more complex model of stage development in that they do not attempt to weed out all content or define all stages in terms of justice operations. They also think that their test method, recognising moral arguments, is better than the verbal expressiveness elicited in Kohlberg’s own Moral Judgment Interview (MJI).

The neo-Kohlbergian approach to moral reasoning, as proposed by Rest et al. (1999), represents a different stage layout, as mentioned above. They claim that ‘there is no such thing as “instrument-free” assessment of cognitive structure; and that the interview excerpts quoted in many research reports are highly selected for stating the theorist’s interpretation of cognitive process’ (p. 21). They point out that ‘when Kohlberg reported interview data, the subjects sound like the moral philosopher, John Rawls …; when Gilligan reported interviews, the subjects sound like gender feminists …’ (p. 21). In other words, it is important to pay attention to validity issues in scientific reports. However, there seems to be a gap between their concern for non-biased reporting by other researchers and the validity of their own arguments based on the DIT findings. Keep in mind that Rest developed the DIT as a paper-and-pencil test on moral development. Doing so, he used Kohlberg’s theory of cognitive moral development. He did not include any items for Stage 1, and the test has not been found appropriate for people under 12 years of age because of the reading level. Is there a strong argument for the validity of the research findings that allows Rest et al. (1999) to draw the conclusion that Stage 2 and 3 merge into one personal interest factor, seemingly across Level I and II in Kohlberg’s stage description (since Stage 2 is on Level I and Stage 3 on Level II)?

Factor analysis is said to be an excellent tool, but a poor master. Nevertheless, Rest et al. (1999) seem to use the intrinsic nature of the ‘tool’ as an argument to revise the theory from whence the test instrument originated. Now, if there are no Stage 1 items in the DIT, there are only two possibilities: the Stage 2 items either
have to show up as a factor on its own or they might correlate to one of the other factors. Since those who have taken the DIT are all more than 12 years old, many college or university students and professors, as well as other adults, it is not likely that many would be typical Stage 2 thinkers. Some may still be in transition to Stage 3, or it might also be that some Stage 3 thinkers still favour some Stage 2 arguments. Stage 2 items might therefore not have a strong enough intercorrelation to show up as a distinct factor. Even if there was a bias in Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s test and report methods, Rest et al. (1999) themselves do not seem to have resolved all issues concerning the DIT and its validity if they were aiming to revise Kohlberg’s theory. In developing their neo-Kohlbergian Approach to moral reasoning, based on their conclusions from the factor analysis of the DIT results, it seems evident that their take on moral reasoning is based on Kohlberg’s theory, but not designed to alter it.

On the other hand, over the years the research results from the DIT have built up an ever stronger argument for the fact that there are moral developmental stages and that people tend to develop through a certain sequence of these stages according to age and education. Although Rest et al. subscribe to more complex stages, their findings represent a strong corroboration of Kohlberg’s stage theory, at least Stage 3 to 5. And, as is suggested in the title of their book, their findings support the idea of post-conventional morality.

Rest et al. (1999) make several references to Gilligan’s works in their chapter on ‘Psychological and philosophical challenges to Kohlberg’s approach’. They refer to Gilligan’s statement that ‘Kohlberg’s theory (dealing with moral judgment) is too cerebral, that it misses the “heart” of morality”’ (p. 10). Furthermore, they recognise that ‘Kohlberg seems to have regarded his six stages as applicable to all kinds of moral problems, but, in his debate with Gilligan (1982), he changed his position’ (p. 13). Gilligan and others are also referenced in a critique of Kohlberg’s principled approach failing to take the context into account (pp. 29, 31).

That does not, however, mean that they agree with Gilligan:

By our agreeing that there is more to moral thinking than justice issues, we are not suggesting (as, e.g., Gilligan, 1982, suggested) that ‘care’ and ‘justice’ are alternative sequences that develop along different pathways with different endpoints … Rather, we are saying that although justice issues are a large part of any totally comprehensive set of moral problems and must be part of any totally comprehensive set of moral problems and must be part of any comprehensive theory of morality, they do not cover the gamut of moral issues. (Rest et al., 1999, p. 14)

In other words, Rest et al. (1999) seem, in common with Gilligan, to have a more complex understanding of morality, but at the same time they make strong reservations concerning her main argument, namely that there is a difference between men and women in moral reasoning and that justice and care are two different types of moral reasoning that take different developmental pathways. In their section on ‘Gender differences’ (pp. 115–117) they simply dismiss the whole issue on the basis of several studies showing almost no difference between men and women on DIT results. They find that education is by far a more powerful indicator of moral stage level than gender. However, they do not establish a rationale as to
whether the DIT is an adequate tool to test any other type of moral reasoning than
the Kohlbergian justice type, which, I presume, is at the core of their more complex
stages. They are more concerned about the fate of macromorality if their conception
of Gilligan’s ideas were to be true:

The whole realm of macromorality is dismissed when one contends that morality only
concerns unswerving loyalty to friends and kin, that people are interrelated only by
bonds of affection, and that moral virtue consists solely of dedication to special face-to-
face personal relationships. (Rest et al., 1999, p. 116)

From the context of this quote it is obvious that they here argue against Gilligan’s
views of moral reasoning, after having dismissed her claim that there is a difference
between men and women concerning moral thinking.

Rest et al. (1999) not only portray a duel between Gilligan and Kohlberg, they
themselves seem to challenge both Kohlberg and Gilligan. A question of interest in
this study is whether Gilligan really was opposing Kohlberg’s theory, as Rest et al.
(1999) indicate.

Reed (1997) ended up on a totally different note concerning the relationship
between Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s theories. He makes it plain in the preface of his
book that he intends to ‘discuss the so-called Kohlberg-Gilligan debate, arguing that
Gilligan was never quite as critical as commonly supposed and that Kohlberg, through
the just community work, was drawn to a conception of justice which Gilligan’s work
helped inform’ (p. xiv). He concludes that the real issue between Kohlberg and
Gilligan in the end was not about sex-bias, class-bias or geographic-region-bias:

The real issue is rather the adequacy of one’s eventual, refined definition and
operationalization of moral maturity. On this point, Gilligan et al. and Kohlberg et al.
(in their final statement of Stage 6) are almost indistinguishable. (Reed, 1997, p. 232)

As Reed interprets Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s different arguments, he sees a harmony
and argues that the justice and care voices ‘are related but independent melodies,
capable of resonance on their own as plainsong voices but also accompanying each
other … to form a harmonic whole’ (p. 241). Where others have perceived a bitter
strife, Reed hears a duet. Reed explains that Kohlberg must have been ‘tone-deaf’ and
was not hearing what Gilligan could hear about voices. And this was her ‘central and,
in important respects, her only point of contention’ (p. 229). Reed makes it plain that
Gilligan is ‘neither Kohlberg’s harshest nor his most fundamental critic’ (p. 221). In his
final chapter, Reed (1997) states that ‘Gilligan and Kohlberg and their colleagues now
offer conceptions of moral maturity that are for all practical purposes indistinguishable’
(p. 254). He argues that both the ‘deep structures and the practical imports of moral
maturity on their accounts appear to have converged completely’ (p. 255).

One of Reed’s (1997) arguments is that Kohlberg changes the perspective of his
theory as he launches the just-community project to show an empirical application of
this theory. It seems to me that, in order to make his point, Reed portrays a worst-
case version of Kohlberg in his theoretical project and then re-interprets him to be
softer and more open to a complex understanding of morality in his just-community
project. Reed (1997, p. 13) argues that there is a tension between Kohlberg’s two
projects, theory development and the just community.
Reed (1997) argues that in the end Kohlberg seems to have come to terms with Plato’s version of Socrates in the *Republic*. If I have understood Reed correctly, he argues that Kohlberg, in his just community project, seems to accept some indoctrinatory features in moral education – similar to Plato’s hierarchy – but did not do that in his liberal individualistic stage theory. Although Reed (1997) argues this point well, I am still left with an inkling that the roles have been mixed in his account. Maybe he himself is the ‘Plato’ that has re-interpreted ‘Socrates’ (=Kohlberg) like the real Plato did? Or to state it more plainly: What if Kohlberg’s stages never were as hard as his critics perceived them to be? What if Kohlberg’s early notion of *justice* never was as hard, detached, and lonely as Reed and others presumed? What if Kohlberg did not interpret his Stage 6 in *communal* rather than *individualistic* terms in his later years, as Reed (1997) says, but rather held the idea that liberal individualism would inevitably lead to a communitarian society? I have reason to believe that the notion of *indoctrinating democracy*, which Reed (1997, pp. 195–196) ascribes to Kohlberg in his later years, would be quite disagreeable to Kohlberg. More on these issues later.

As we have seen in this short review of the two selected books, there are divergent views of the contributions of both Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s theories and the relationship between them. I will attempt to address some of these issues while realising full well that this paper will not be the final argument on these topics. For the purpose of this study, I have formulated these research questions, pinpointing some of the issues at stake:

1. Does Gilligan reject the idea of developmental morality?
2. Does Gilligan support Kohlberg’s stage theory and his claim of universality?
3. Did Kohlberg reject Gilligan’s proposal to expand his understanding of moral reasoning?
4. Was Gilligan’s theory a critique of or an expansion to Kohlberg’s theory?

**Method**

In this paper, the main analysis is undertaken on two documents to make a comparison between Kohlberg’s approach to cognitive moral development and Gilligan’s approach. Kohlberg’s views are represented by a chapter (Kohlberg, 1986) with the title ‘A current statement on some theoretical issues’. This chapter was published shortly before Kohlberg’s death, and it is presumed that the content is representative of Kohlberg’s views of his theory as it matured over the years. Kohlberg wrote this document as a response to some of the critiques of his theory as expressed by various authors in the first 29 chapters of the book *Lawrence Kohlberg: consensus and controversy*, edited by Modgil and Modgil (1986). It is therefore assumed that this document is suitable for an analysis of Kohlberg’s views and attitudes towards some of the questions raised in this paper.

Gilligan’s perspective on the topic is primarily drawn from a research interview with me on 15 April 2003, which was recorded and later transcribed. Gilligan signed a Statement of Consent form, allowing me to use the interview in my dissertation as
well as in published documents. In this interview I had the opportunity to frame questions to elicit comments on some of the questions raised in this paper. In the quotations from the interview, my questions or comments are indicated by the initials ‘GJ’ and Carol Gilligan’s statements are indicated by ‘CG’.

The two documents mentioned above were analysed and coded on three levels to allow for a logical ordering of statements and to promote computer searches. One segment of the text could have more than one thread of coding, for example:

Gilligan – Feminism – Voice

as well as:

Gilligan – Voice – [Assumption, Mismatch, Paradigm]

As indicated in the last example, it is possible to extend the third level using more than one code keyword. The same could be done also on the second level.

The time references used in the citations from the interview transcript are in this format: (CG: 0:41:02–0:44:31). The ‘CG’ indicates that the quote is from the Carol Gilligan interview, and the time references are in the format ‘hours: minutes: seconds’. The times given refer to where the statements are found in the sound recording. A citation with a time reference as in the example above is then to be found between 41 minutes and 2 seconds and 44 minutes and 31 seconds in the sound recording.

The findings of the analysis are presented as a comparison of Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s views of various aspects of cognitive moral reasoning.

Findings

The qualitative analysis of the two documents chosen for this study, one by Kohlberg and the transcript from an interview with Gilligan, are reported under headings that reflect some of the issues in those documents. This analysis does not exhaust the content of the two documents.

About developmental moral psychology

Reed (1997) argued that there was a tension between Kohlberg’s structural stage theory and his just-community project in schools, and that he was much closer to Gilligan’s views as he applied his theory in a practical setting. Reed argued that Kohlberg’s ‘structural stage model had become more or less inessential to the development of the larger project’ (1997, p. 13). If that is true, I presume that Kohlberg’s explanation of his theoretical standpoint would be substantially modified as he wrote his ‘A current statement on some theoretical issues’ (1986).

That does not seem to be the case. His summary of the stage theory in 1986 seems very consistent with the stage description in his doctoral dissertation of 1958. He even claims that his research programme entailed ‘making a clearer distinction between structure or form and content’ as well as ‘a clearer distinction between
It is hard to see that this is much different from the summary in his dissertation:

A Zulu and a Frenchman might do very different things and yet their choices are equally moral in terms of our criteria, criteria of internality, universality, etc. For the sake of labelling we said our criteria were those of form as opposed to those of content. (Kohlberg, 1958, p. 337)

Kohlberg’s theoretical claims seem to have developed and become clearer, but have not changed in any substantial way. If Reed’s (1997) claim that the ‘structural stage model had become more or less inessential to the development of the larger project’ (p. 13), Kohlberg cannot have discovered that himself for two reasons. Firstly, the just-community project, as Reed (1997) points out, grew out of his theoretical work and was supposed to be a practical application of his theory. But although Kohlberg attempted to describe his stages as content-free, it is not possible to apply moral principles without adding content – which he knew all along. Secondly, Kohlberg (1986) seems quite open to Gilligan’s critique of his theory development, as well as other aspects of morality, while at the same time he also seems quite comfortable with his structural stage theory, quite the opposite of Reed’s claim. Kohlberg (1986, p. 511) states that Gilligan’s thesis of the ‘gender relativism of our justice stages’, as expressed in *In a Different Voice* (1982), does not falsify Kohlberg’s thesis of universality of his moral stages and moral categories.

So, if Reed (1997) is correct in his evaluation of the alleged tension between Kohlberg’s two projects, Kohlberg must have been unaware of it himself – which I find highly unlikely. He seems to be able to entertain both the notion of psychological development through Piagetian stages alongside more relativistic elements of roles, rules, values, self-image etc., which are all part of the moral domain but are not strictly ‘moral’ in the Kohlbergian sense of the word. (I will come back to what Kohlberg thought was the strictly *moral* element in morality later.)

Gilligan (1977, 1982) pointed to some irregularities in Kohlberg’s data: that girls were not scored adequately in Kohlberg’s scoring system of the Moral Judgment Interview. This led her to focus on giving more attention to women’s ‘voices’, and some people in the field seem to have the notion that Gilligan therefore no longer interests herself in developmental psychology. In fact, she said something to that effect in her speech to the Association for Moral Education convention in Atlanta in 1997 (Gilligan, 1998). In my interview with her I addressed this issue:

GJ: At the AME convention in Atlanta in November 1997 you said something to the effect that you for a period of your life had been working within developmental psychology. In the past tense.

CG: Uhum.

GJ: Is it correct to conclude that your focus has been on voice, rather than on developmental stages?

CG: Well, I criticized developmental stages. I mean, I really ... You know, these stage theories, whether it was Erikson’s and Kohlberg’s, that said this is (sic) the stages of human development, and then here is how women develop. I mean, this is ... you know ...
GJ: But you also have some sort of stages.

CG: In *In a different voice* I had stages. I was still bound to that paradigm. I have never written about stages since then. Now, if you say to me, do I think a baby is different than a two-year-old? Of course I do. And I am really interested in the line of development, or the lines of development. But that ... Freudian stage theory and Eriksonian stag ... I mean ... and ... I think it's, in my mind, it's been very effectively challenged. It's very ... you know ... narrowly framed within ... a ... certain set of cultural assumptions, which, as I said, Kohlberg made explicit.

GJ: But ... but ... but I'd like to pull you into this if I may ...

CG: Uhuh.

GJ: ... you know ... developmental, meaning that you have to be at a certain age or whatever to be able to think like that, you know ... in a Piagetian ...

CG: Yeah, I mean, adolescents think ... Well, it's Piagetian in a way, but it's much broader than Piagetian.

GJ: Yes, exactly. But ... but is it similar to that kind of reasoning, but in a different line ... the voices or ...

CG: Look, I mean, my thinking about development is closer to Erikson's thinking.

GJ: OK.

CG: That at different points in life you have an individually different ... you know ... psychological capacities (sic) was different, biological and physiological experiences, a walking child is not a lying down child, an adolescent, you know, has access to a range of emotions and a capacity to think ... ah ... in ... in ... in ... beyond their own experience and to ... that the younger child doesn't have. Ah... Now, at each of these stages there is a different kind of encounter between the person and the society or culture. But I'm very much with Erikson, I mean, a statement of Erikson's that I took with me was, you can't take a life out of history. You can't talk about development apart from culture and history. And you could see all of my work as, what happens when you put a woman's life, or women's lives, into a history that hasn't carried those lives, and how it changes ... It affects the lives when you have no resonance coming back that reflects your experience. But it also changes history at the point that those voices become part of the conversation. And then I'd say, not only women, but also people of colour, people of all those cultures that we call, quote, different, and people of all those sexualities that we call different. And it suddenly became very clear, it certainly became very clear to me, that what was being called development, was a very particular slice through ... you know ... development. And that this was being held up as the ideal. (CG: 0:41:02–0:44:31)

In other words, Gilligan has not abandoned developmental psychology and does not reject the idea that moral development goes through certain stages. She is, however, interested in a paradigm where people, including women, are seen and heard within the context of their own histories. And she found more of what she sought in Erikson’s stage model rather than in a Piagetian or Kohlbergian stage model. She was seeking a paradigm of developmental psychology which contained more than structures of cognitive development, for instance the conflicts and issues that present themselves at various stages of life, as described in Erikson’s stages. Gilligan thinks that Kohlberg’s stage description reflects Western education and culture, but that ‘if you go on that path, you can go through the path of his [Kohlberg’s] stages, and it’s quite a brilliant line’ (CG: 0:11:4–0:12:03). In other words, Gilligan thinks that Kohlberg’s stages are logical within Kohlberg’s paradigm:
There’s an inexorable logic to Larry’s stages, and if you buy into that logic it’s like getting on a train. It goes one station, one, one, and you can see how the logic unfolds. And you can certainly follow the evolution of that logic in children. (CG: 0:11:11–0:11:31)

As a preliminary conclusion, one could say that the main difference between Gilligan and Kohlberg is that Gilligan was interested in more of the content of moral reasoning and the context in which moral language was used, whereas Kohlberg was particularly interested in that ‘very particular slice through … development’, as Gilligan called it. I would like to argue that those two perspectives were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Stages, principles and universality

Kohlberg (1978) makes a distinction between moral judgement and moral behaviour. He does not hold that moral judgement is the only factor in moral behaviour, but he argues that it is ‘the only distinctively moral [sic] factor in moral behavior’ (p. 40). In other words, there is much more to morality than the ‘slice through development’ his theory focuses on. However, he argues that cognitive moral judgement, developing through an invariant sequence of stages, is the single most important or influential factor yet discovered for moral behaviour, hence the need to focus so much on it. The ‘will’ becomes moral only when informed by moral judgement. When confronted with higher stage thinking, a person may increase in moral maturity, and this change is long-range or irreversible. Moral behaviour, on the other hand, is considered situational and may be reversible in new situations.

Kohlberg never seems to have relinquished his idea of ‘hard’ stages of cognitive moral development. But his own understanding of ‘hard’ may be far softer than some of his critics seem to perceive it. Kohlberg (1986, pp. 499–500) writes that the ‘restricted range of the moral domain’ he and his team employ for their research program, does not imply that these restrictions should be imposed on all research in moral psychology. He refers to Rest (1984), who made a broad review of moral development research including content and structure, affect and cognition, ‘soft’ or complex stage models, and ‘hard’ or simple stages. Although Kohlberg holds that cognitive moral judgement is the only factor that makes behaviour moral, as cited above, at the same time he seems quite comfortable with the idea that there is much more to morality than his stage theory. It seems that Kohlberg’s understanding of ‘hard stages’ is that the stages are simple rather than complex. In line with this, Kohlberg (1986, p. 500) argues that Gilligan, in her work on care and response, contrasted her construct ‘with the justice construct in order to enlarge the social cognitive domain rather than rejecting the distinctive definition of the justice domain.’ It seems that Kohlberg did not reject Gilligan’s work, but felt that her research, as well as that of others, enlarged the social cognitive domain, and could exist alongside his justice domain.

In my interview with Gilligan in April 2003, she did not always seem to perceive Kohlberg quite as open minded as I have interpreted him to be in his 1986 chapter:
Evidently, Gilligan had perceived times when Kohlberg had resisted any changes to his perspective on moral reasoning. She had argued from a more Eriksonian perspective, if I have interpreted her correctly, that there was more to moral reasoning than the justice type. She also argued that, while both men and women were using both justice and care types of reasoning, women were more prone to caring and men to justice. It is, however, important to notice here that her definition of care probably is more contextual and content-filled than the simple or ‘hard’ stage definitions Kohlberg was striving for. This might be the reason for Kohlberg’s resistance and why he seemed to talk more about benevolence rather than caring, simply to avoid confusion between his own structural definition and Gilligan’s contextual definition. Kohlberg writes (1986, p. 497) that there may be one or several general principles at Stage 6, and suggests that one set of principles may include justice, respect, fairness and liberty, while another set of principles may include benevolence, welfare, care and agape. Kohlberg argues that these principles may be expressed either in the language of human rights or in the language of care and responsibility. Not only does Kohlberg here acknowledge caring, under the umbrella of benevolence, as one of several general principles at Stage 6, but he also seems to think of a general principle, like the justice principle, as a cluster of principles within the domain of morality.

As quoted above, Carol Gilligan thought of the stages as defined by culture, therefore not universal. She added:

If it’s part of the surrounding culture, it seems culture-free and value-free. So, what you have to do is to get out of the culture, and then you see it is a culture. (CG: 0:14:17–0:14:25)

It seems evident that Gilligan is right about this in the sense that when measures of moral maturity are applied around the world, individuals in many cultures do not seem to measure up to the higher stages on the scale. On the other hand, the stages might still be universal, as has been shown in several studies (for a summary, see Rest et al., 1999, pp. 127–131), but not all people around the world receive the same stimulus for growth necessary to reach the highest stages. In other words, what is universal is the propensity for growth, not culture or the level of education.
Kohlberg also talked about universality from a different perspective. The paradox is that as you become more individual, i.e. approaching Stage 6 and capable of principled thinking, you at the same time develop the ability to be more connected to others on a universal level, to be more community-oriented. Kohlberg wrote:

Procedural justice, which involves a special set of considerations at lower stages, becomes a solution to substantive justice problems of distribution and correction at Stage 6, where universalizability and reversibility constitute self-conscious validity checks on one’s reasoning. (1986, p. 490)

The way Kohlberg describes universality here is quite similar to the description Gilligan (1982) uses to describe how caring at the principled level ‘becomes universal in its condemnation of exploitation and hurt’ (p. 74). Kohlberg used the expression ‘universalizability and reversibility constitute self-conscious validity checks’. Gilligan expressed herself in a similar fashion as she talked about visions of being treated as of equal worth where everyone is responded to and included:

These disparate visions in their tension reflect the paradoxical truths of human experience – that we know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationship only insofar as we differentiate other from self. (1982, p. 63)

Having said that, it is also necessary to qualify it by quoting from the interview with Gilligan again. I said to her that everyone now seems to talk about both care and justice, not only justice. She answered:

Yeah, but care and justice is the abstraction of my work. And if they’re talking about voice and listening and resonance, then they’re closer to me. (CG: 0:48:12–0:48:30)

Gilligan is mostly concerned with relationships, with resonance, letting people be heard for who they are, listening for moral language in dilemmas that were embedded in their real lives. In other words, she avoids the level of abstraction necessary for description of the hard and simple stages as Kohlberg tries to do. But it was in connection with Kohlberg’s work she came to see this clearly:

What Larry’s work did for me is that it exposed a value system that was embedded within psychology and nobody had seen it as a value system. That is the assumption of separateness, the value on ... you know ... self-sufficiency, on, kind of, going through life by divorcing reason from emotion, kind of solving problems in your own head rather than in a relationship. (CG: 0:20:19–0:20:42)

Although there is a great merit to Gilligan’s contribution to our understanding of moral reasoning, I would argue again that this does not mean that her solution to relational morality and Kohlberg’s more formalistic approach are mutually exclusive. There may be times when it is necessary to become detached from emotions and apply reason in a specific case, as men more typically seem to do. And there may be times when it is necessary to focus less on matters of rights and fairness and more on connecting to another human being, as women often seem to be more able to do. But normally these two approaches will play together in a seamless stream of moral reasoning in real-life dilemmas. Gilligan also warns that the argument she wants to make is not really about differences between the genders:
The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development. But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to present a generalization about either sex. (1982, p. 2)

Although the moral psychology community over the years has come to accept that there are two types of moral reasoning, namely Kohlberg's justice and Gilligan's care, there still seem to be some unresolved issues. Based on a report by Gilligan and Lyons, where they describe a young woman's struggle to try to understand the perspective of other people and how she feels her understanding is not 'fair' enough because she needs to expand her 'compassion', Kohlberg (1986, p. 526) agrees that a fair or right response in this case 'requires an “empathic” or “compassionate” component'. He also seems to accept some sort of integration of his 'justice stages and the levels of care suggested by Gilligan and her colleagues' (p. 541). Gilligan's work evidently has helped Kohlberg to broaden his definition of his justice principle. That does not mean to say that he has ever entertained a 'cold' version of justice before, only that he obviously has been influenced to articulate an integration of the 'cold justice' and the 'emphatic' or 'compassionate' components, to define his justice principle in a broader way.

However, even this broadened perspective on justice and care does not seem to satisfy Gilligan. In the interview with her, I pointed out that Kohlberg in fact did attempt to integrate justice and care, and she responded:

Yeah, but that is the Kohlberg argument, that's the argument I left. I wasn't interested in that. I mean, to talk about care in the way I would talk about care, just as you can talk about what is just and what is unjust. I would talk about what is careful and what is careless. (CG: 0:48:37–0:48:57)

While Gilligan has great admiration and respect for Kohlberg and his perspective, she has a different paradigm, a different approach to morality. A mere assimilation of caring into Kohlberg's theory was not all she was after. Her interest is not in philosophically oriented theorising about moral judgement, she is not a partaker of that discussion, hers is a different path, but on the same mountain or in the same symphony.

What emerges from this limited analysis, I think, is a duet between Kohlberg and Gilligan rather than a duel.

The unnecessary conflict

After Kohlberg's untimely death in 1987, Walsh (2000, online) reported that 'some of Kohlberg's colleagues questioned whether his agenda had died with him … Others insisted – and still insist – that Kohlberg's legacy lives on at the School in programs such as Risk and Prevention.' I think one could also add that his legacy lives on, to a certain extent, in the ethics of care line of research due to the fact that Gilligan was inspired by Kohlberg. Nevertheless, something stopped around the time of Kohlberg's death. As we have seen, Gilligan was no longer engaged
in developmental psychology, and Kohlberg died. We find unresolved issues in the area of cognitive moral development, but some of them, it seems, need not be unresolved.

As I have pointed out in my brief literature review, Rest et al. (1999) do not seem to see much of importance in Gilligan’s argument about gender differences in morality. Their own measuring instrument was crafted on Kohlberg’s theory and was not designed to capture the difference between justice on one side and caring on the other. It is therefore not surprising that their enormous data pool does not show a clear difference between men and women with regard to moral judgement. (One could still argue that there should be a difference if the DIT is measuring the justice orientation, but I will return to this later.) Although Kohlberg never engaged himself much in gender studies with regard to moral judgement, he at least acknowledged the distinction made between justice and care, as I have shown in the previous section. But ten years after his death, Rest et al. (1999) do not seem to have picked up on this. Their comment on Gilligan’s work may therefore seem somewhat misplaced or unnecessary. Within the DIT paradigm, they are not really engaged in research on justice and care. And without a purposive research in the area, it is difficult to settle these important issues.

The tendency to perceive Kohlberg as one who advocates ‘hard’ stages and ‘cold’ justice did not originate with Reed (1997). Kohlberg himself never seems to have been harbouring all the ideas that his critics seem to have attributed to him. Kohlberg clearly did not see structural stages as the only aspect of morality. However, the structural stages were seen as, perhaps, the most important part of the moral domain and therefore the main focus of his research. As mentioned before, Kohlberg (1978) saw cognitive moral judgement as the element that made reasoning and behaviour moral. To create a conflict between Kohlberg and Gilligan because of their different focus, or paradigm, as both Reed (1997) and Rest et al. (1999) have done, seems entirely unnecessary. As Kohlberg moved his structural stage theory into practice, he obviously would have to take into account much more than the moral stages, like emotions, values and perhaps even the ‘bag of virtues’. In so doing he did approach Gilligan’s more complex paradigm of morality where there is engagement with personal histories and the context of moral language. The idea was that a just community would allow all to develop in an optimal way, and the more the members of a community developed, the better the community would be to live in. Kohlberg was able to apply his structural stage theory in a practical setting without throwing it overboard. He was still focusing on his stages.

Although most of the time Gilligan communicated well with Kohlberg on a personal level, she seems to have experienced an unbridgeable difference with the group around Kohlberg in the 1970s to 1980s. She said in her interview with me:

And, you know, I have background in literature, I have background in music, I have background in languages, actually, I mean I’m a different … hmm … I’m a different creature from the Kohlberg group. … I mean, I am! And they didn’t understand that, and they didn’t … they weren’t interested in that. I mean, they didn’t try to go out and understand who is she, where does she come from … (CG: 0:47:44–0:48:12)
Although it is not the intent here to put the whole blame for this chasm on the Kohlberg group, suffice it to say that there did not seem to be the right chemistry between them and Gilligan so that they could enjoy a fruitful synergy. As she herself put it, she was a ‘different creature’ from them. Kohlberg was, of course, part of his own group, and the conversation between Kohlberg and Gilligan was not always smooth. This becomes quite clear from my conversation with her:

GJ: OK. In 1982 you called Kohlberg a good teacher and friend …
CG: Uhum.
GJ: … in … in …
CG: Yeah, in my book *In a Different Voice*, in my acknowledgements, yeah.
GJ: Exactly. In 1993, in your new introduction to the book … ehm … I have the paper-back version …
CG: Yeah.
GJ: … you recall that you find Kohlberg’s argument very powerful …
CG: Yeah.
GJ: … that’s the words you used. You also argued that his objective position was blind to the different voices.
CG: Yeah.
GJ: In 1997 you say Kohlberg was one of two who drew you back to psychology, and you said that Larry’s work brought moral questions to the centre of human sciences.
CG: Yeah.
GJ: Then you go on to describe how you continue your conversations until his death, but that your two roads had diverged, and your conversations became stressed. You felt you were not being heard.
CG: Right.
GJ: Ehmm … And then …
CG: Larry wanted me to write with him still at that point.
GJ: Yes …
CG: Yeah.
GJ: Then you say, And ‘Kohlberg’, in quotes, you don’t say Kohlberg as a name, but ‘Kohlberg’ in quotes …
CG: Right.
GJ: … created the character called ‘Gilligan’, in quotes.
CG: Right.
GJ: What on earth do you mean by that?
CG: That there were no longer two people, two human beings who were friends, who found each other interesting to talk to, who would go on Thursdays for a glass of wine after school. But these were like … you know … two creatures in battle with each other, that had very little relationship to the friendship, the relationship … I mean, that they would … was going on on two levels. And that camp around Kohlberg …
GJ: [Interrupting] You had a close friendship, as I understand it, from when you met in ’69 and …
CG: Yeah, yeah.
GJ: … and until he died in ’87 …
CG: Absolutely, yeah.
GJ: But at the same time, professionally, that’s where the stress was. Not on the personal level?
CG: No.
GJ: So, the ‘Kohlberg’, in quotes, is the professional Kohlberg?
CG: It’s the ‘Kohlberg’ of The Clan.
(CG: 0:24:32–0:26:32)

Later in the interview she adds:

So, it was the Larry that wasn’t, sort of, embedded in that stage theory, that was the Larry who I was friendly with. And, you know, he was very drawn to that friendship, too. And we had both lived lives and, you know, we talked about life and love and, you know, complications of being human. And that whole other discussion, to me was so sterile. Really, that was … (CG: 0:50:37–0:51:03)

From Gilligan’s point of view, the Kohlberg group, ‘The Clan’, had an influence on Kohlberg that seemed to divert him from his friendship with her. Of course, it is also possible that Kohlberg had a kind of love/hate relationship with Gilligan of his own accord and that he had influenced The Clan in their relationship to her as much as they had influenced him. I lack the insight to determine which is the most correct interpretation of the situation.

Who is the critic?

It is not uncommon in the literature to find that Carol Gilligan is pointed out as Kohlberg’s strongest and most well-known critic. I asked her about that:

GJ: Kohlberg had many critics, as you have said, who do you think is the most important critic?
CG: … you know … It is funny, because you are taking me into a conversation, which I really left, and left for a very good reason.
GJ: I know.
CG: … so it doesn’t really interest me very much.
GJ: I’m kind of laughing inside myself, because when I look up … you know … sources about this, they quote you as his most important critic. Do you look upon yourself as …
CG: No!
GJ: … the most …
CG: No, I don’t!
(CG: 0:17:17–0:17:45)

And when I pressed the issue once more a little later she said:

GJ: But, but … you are saying that you are not one of his critics as such …
CG: I never saw myself as a critic, no.
(CG: 0:20:59–0:21:05)

No doubt, Kohlberg has many critics, but Gilligan emphatically denies that she is one of them. From the background in the previous section it is relatively easy to see why. Kohlberg saw her work as an enlargement to his theory rather than a correction to it, and he did not, as he said, perceive her thesis of gender relativism to falsify his thesis of the universality of moral stages and moral categories. Gilligan expresses great admiration for Kohlberg’s work, saw his stage theory as logical and claimed that children’s development could be followed through his stages. Her critique was mostly methodological, that also applied to other psychologists like Piaget, Freud and Erikson (Gilligan, 1982). She contended that there was a male bias in their
development of psychological theory as they drew conclusions based on their studies of males. She wanted to add another perspective to Kohlberg’s theory, namely the ethics of care, not to eradicate his theory. It seems to me that neither Kohlberg nor Gilligan herself saw Gilligan as a critic of Kohlberg’s theory.

**Discussion and conclusions**

In the previous section I presented the findings of my analysis of Kohlberg’s *A Current Statement on Some Theoretical Issues* (1986) and the qualitative research interview I had with Gilligan on 15 April 2003. However, I have not presented the findings in a structure derived from the research questions listed above. I have rather let the content flow somewhat naturally from within, whilst citing statements from Kohlberg and Gilligan that I have selected as relevant to the topic.

In this section I would like to address the four research questions that were formulated for this paper in a more structured manner. The first question was: Does Gilligan reject the idea of developmental morality? It seems evident that Gilligan never rejected developmental psychology or morality in any way. What she said to the AME conference in Atlanta in 1997 was that she used to work in the area of developmental psychology, but did not actively do so any more. To me she confirmed that she had not written on stages of moral development since she published *In a Different Voice* (1982), but that she was still interested in the topic. She also confirmed that, in her view, there are psychological changes as children grow into adolescence and adulthood. She even said about the logic in Kohlberg’s stages that ‘you can certainly follow the evolution of that logic in children’ (CG: 0:11:11–0:11:31). The answer to the first research question is therefore clearly, no. That does not mean, however, that Gilligan favoured Kohlberg’s description of those stages.

This leads us to the second research question: Does Gilligan support Kohlberg’s stage theory and his claim of universality? As we have seen, Gilligan was not comfortable with the bare bone structural stage descriptions of Kohlberg. She wanted a stage description that allowed people to be seen and heard in their own life context, a more complex or soft stage description. She still recognised that there is a logic to Kohlberg’s stage description and that, if you buy into that logic, it is like getting on a train that takes you through his stages. She does not say that this is wrong, only that it is not sufficient and not what she wanted to focus on. She wanted a different paradigm where she would listen for people’s moral language, their voice, in a real-life setting. Not in a theoretical fashion, as Kohlberg did. As pointed out by Reed (1997), however, Kohlberg approached Gilligan’s paradigm when he applied his theory to the ‘just community’ project. And evidently he was helped to greater clarity in the matter by Gilligan’s contribution. That does not mean that Kohlberg changed his position, as Reed argues. It seems he still held to his cognitive moral stage structure, describing the impulse that through cognitive reasoning makes a person moral. Gilligan did not contest this view, she only argued that this is not so important to her. Gilligan, however, had reservations about the claim of universality
since she thought Kohlberg’s stage description reflects Western education and culture. Gilligan does seem to support Kohlberg’s stage theory, at least as rational within its own framework and cultural limitations, but her interest took her in a different direction and wanted others to follow. Kohlberg did so only partly.

Here we seem to be at the heart of the so-called conflict between Kohlberg and Gilligan. Gilligan made this double switch: she pointed out that Kohlberg’s justice paradigm did not do full justice to the data they were working with, while at the same time she also moved over to a more applied paradigm of morality. Kohlberg seems to have been struggling to accommodate this double switch. He was drawn to Gilligan’s argumentation, and in his chapter on the status of his theory, he seems to have been able to juggle both balls at the same time. Gilligan did not. While she did not reject the structural stage theory, she moved her focus and interest away from it.

The third research question reads: Did Kohlberg reject Gilligan’s proposal to expand his understanding of moral reasoning? He did not. Evidently he continued his conversations with Gilligan towards the end of his life, and in the 1980s he would still invite Gilligan to lecture together with him. This is corroborated by the citations above from Kohlberg’s *A Current Statement on Some Theoretical Issues*, where he clearly supports the expansion to his justice orientation.

There is, however, a problem, as I see it, in connection with Gilligan’s perception of justice. Gilligan described Kohlberg’s justice orientation as focusing on separateness, self-sufficiency, and divorcing reason from emotion. I would like to add a citation from my interview with Gilligan here. We talked about whether stage theory was value-free, and she pointed out:

The value was on the autonomous individual, the value was on thinking that was divorced from emotion … (CG: 0:14:26–0:14:37)

In the book *In a Different Voice* she wrote:

This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 19)

It is true that Kohlberg (1986, p. 490) identified fairness as the best representation of his justice orientation. That does not mean that Kohlberg’s justice operations is tied to ‘rights’ and ‘rules’ as Gilligan indicates. Without going deeper into this in this paper, it seems to me that fairness is a somewhat different orientation than ‘rights’ and ‘rules’, which I perceive to be much closer to separation and autonomy than to justice. If my intuition here is correct, it might explain why there seems to be a difference between women and men on *caring* but not on the *justice* orientation, which is why Rest *et al.* (1999) did not find a difference between men and women on the DIT. So, although Kohlberg did not reject Gilligan’s expansion to his theory, he could not buy into Gilligan’s definition of his justice orientation, his original position. To keep a distinction between his own definition of justice and caring, Kohlberg prefers to talk about *justice* as fairness and *benevolence* as caring and agape.
We must, however, keep in mind that Kohlberg maintained a rather broad concept of justice. His ‘multiple principles of justice’ seemed to encompass ‘liberty’, ‘equity’ or ‘fairness’, ‘respect’, ‘human rights’ and ‘reciprocal duties’. In addition it seems that he talks about ‘benevolence’ including ‘care’, ‘agape’ and ‘responsibility’ as another set of principles (Kohlberg, 1986, p. 497).

The fourth and final research question read: Was Gilligan’s theory a critique or an expansion of Kohlberg's theory? Her critique, as found in In a Different Voice, is mainly concerned with the male bias in psychological theory development as found in Freud and Piaget as well as Kohlberg. It seems evident from the section ‘Who is the critic?’ in this paper that neither Gilligan nor Kohlberg seem to have perceived Gilligan as simply a critic of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development. Both of them saw Gilligan’s work as an expansion of Kohlberg’s theory.

Note

1. The scope of this paper is rather limited in the sense that the main focus is on the perspectives of Kohlberg and Gilligan on moral reasoning, how they differ and how they complement each other. A comprehensive approach to the topic is not sought, and only a selected representation of the vast literature in the area is used to identify some issues that need closer attention. The reason for this limited approach is the need for greater clarity in the relationship between Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s arguments in the area of moral reasoning and limitations on published paper length. The content of this paper is the starting point, or a point of reference, for a more comprehensive treatment of some of the issues in the area of cognitive moral reasoning in my dissertation.

References


