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Moral Judgment and Distributive Justice[1]

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Abstract. This research focused on the modes of distributive justice employed by individuals differing in the maturity of their moral judgments. Based upon a social exchange model, theoretical distinctions were made among five modes of distribution response: self-interest, parity, equity, social responsibility, and individual responsibility. Each of 44 male subjects aged 13–18 was led to believe that he was a member of a group of four students who were to be rewarded for their work. After being induced to work for 1 h, the subject was asked to distribute $ 5.60 among the group members. The inputs of the other (fictitious) members were arranged such that distributions adhering to each of the posited modes could be distinguished. A discriminant analysis of distribution response groups revealed that a subject's orientation in Kohlberg's hierarchy of moral stages was a significant predictor of distribution response, while age of subject was not. Relationships between specific stages and distribution responses were discussed, as were the implications of these results for a general theory of distributive justice.

For a number of years, researchers have been intrigued with the possibility that distributive justice might change systematically with development (*Benton,* 1971; *Handlon and Gross,* 1959; *Leventhal and Anderson,* 1970; *Leventhal and Lane,* 1970; *Piaget,* 1932). Such studies have frequently supported the general hypothesis that sharing increases with age, but have seldom produced more refined statements regarding the pattern of distributive justice development. In approaching this problem, we decided to take advantage of the theory of moral judgment development of *Kohlberg* (1963, 1971), since it makes a variety of specific predictions about distributive justice. In addition, we have derived our

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own analysis of distributive justice by integrating a variety of previous analyses in terms of social exchange theory. The present research was conducted to determine the extent to which variations in the distribution of valued resources might be attributable to developmental changes in moral reasoning.

Modes of Distributive Justice

Social interaction can be conceptualized as an act of exchange in which each group member invests certain inputs (time, effort, attention, expertise, etc.) in exchange for outcomes (money, enjoyment, humiliation, etc.). The relative proportion of the group's total outcomes afforded a particular member by the distributor can be seen, therefore, as a measure of the extent to which the distributor recognizes or appreciates the member's inputs to the group. The various modes of distribution reflect the distributor's attention to different kinds of inputs from group members.

In identifying the modes of distributive justice to be investigated in this study, we selected four modes that have received considerable attention in previous research, and in addition, posited a fifth mode on the basis of our own theoretical analysis. In the following discussions of these modes, we define each in terms of the inputs to which the distributor attends.

(1) *Self-interest* is the allocation of rewards to the self which are clearly in excess of rewards calculated on the basis of equal sharing or on the basis of members' relative inputs. This distribution rule requires that the distributor give special attention to his or her own inputs, while neglecting or discounting the inputs of others. The present definition is a variation on that proposed by *Lane and Messé* (1971), and is similar to the concepts of 'own equity' suggested by *Weick and Nessett* (1968) and 'personal contract' proposed by *Lerner* (1975).

(2) *Parity* is the allocation of rewards such that each member of the group shares equally in the outcome of their joint endeavor without regard to their differential inputs. This distribution tactic requires that the distributor attend only to group membership as the sole indicant of a member's contributions. Also termed 'equality', the parity distribution response has been demonstrated in studies by *Lerner* (1974) and *Morgan and Sawyer* (1967), and has been treated theoretically by *Sampson* (1975).

(3) *Equity* is the allocation of rewards in proportion to the *actual inputs* of each member; *intended inputs* are discounted or neglected in the allocation of reward. Thus, the equitable distributor does not attend to the possible internal or external constraints placed upon group members that might serve to limit the value of their actual inputs to the group. It should be noted that this is a rather narrow interpretation of the equity norm proposed by *Adams* (1965). More general interpretations advocated in recent extensions of equity theory by *Cohen* (1974) and *Leventhal and Michaels* (1971) suggest that equity is served through allocation to intended as well as actual inputs. These generalizations,

however, have a tendency to obscure some important distinctions between simple equity and other forms of justice.

(4) *Social responsibility* is the allocation of rewards to group members on the basis of both actual and intended inputs. Thus, members hampered by constraints are given rewards commensurate with their intended contribution. The outcomes of all other group members are reduced as a means of supplying the constrained member's requirements. In defining this mode, we have departed significantly from the original formulation of social responsibility given by *Berkowitz and Daniels* (1963). From their perspective, the socially responsible person is a powerful person (i.e., one controlling outcomes) who distributes rewards to a dependent person (i.e., one suffering poor outcomes through lack of control). It can be suggested, however, that the socially responsible individual is simply a reward distributor who infers the existence of intention on the part of group members who have not had the opportunity to produce actual inputs for the group. It appears to an observer that the distributor is allocating rewards on the basis of need since constrained members suffering reduced outcomes are rewarded on a par with unconstrained members. As such, this distribution mode resembles the Marxian 'justice of need' discussed by *Lerner* (1974, 1975).

Our definition of social responsibility departs from Berkowitz and Daniels' definition in one other way. In suggesting that the outcomes of all group members are reduced to supply constrained members with sufficient reward, we are allowing for an important differentiation between social responsibility and individual responsibility.

(5) *Individual responsibility* is the allocation of rewards to members on the basis of both actual and intended inputs, such that the distributor himself assumes responsibility to reward intended but unactualized inputs. While social responsibility requires that the entire group receive reduced outcomes to ensure that intended inputs of constrained members are rewarded, individual responsibility requires that the distributor reduce only his own outcomes to compensate constrained members. Thus, the individually responsible allocator does not assume that other group members ascribe intended inputs to the constrained members; instead, he recognizes the attribution of intention as a product of his own construal of group members, and therefore avoids penalizing unconstrained members in his individual pursuit of justice. (It should be noted that social and individual responsibility are indistinguishable in dyadic groups; the use of groups larger than dyads in the present research was one factor leading us to introduce this refinement.)

Moral Judgment and Distributive Justice

In discussing the development of moral judgment, *Piaget* (1932) made a number of observations regarding the developmental sequence of modes of distributive justice. He characterized early forms of justice as motivated by

obedience to authority, later forms of justice as fundamentally equalitarian, and mature justice as conforming to equity. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to suggest that this sequence is even an adequate characterization of distributive justice development. Although a variety of studies indicate that self-interest decreases with age (see *Bryan and London,* 1970, for a review), research contrasting more mature forms of justice such as parity and equity has repeatedly failed to produce systematic findings (see *Walster and Walster,* 1975, for a review). The option explored in the present study, therefore, was the analysis of distributive justice development as a function of moral judgment.

The stages of moral judgment originally proposed by *Kohlberg* (1963) have been revised quite extensively by *Kohlberg* (1971, 1973) and by *Rest* (1975). Basically, the six-stages grouped in three major levels have been expanded to include at least two transitional stages at the upper levels. Given the flux apparent in these theoretical formulations, we have limited our hypothesizing to relationships between distributive justice and major *levels* of moral judgment. These three major levels serve as a model for the progression from childhood to adult morality.

The *preconventional* level of morality (stages 1 and 2) is based upon attention to the physical consequences of moral acts (punishment, reward, exchange of favors, etc.) and attention to the physical power of those who enforce moral rules. Kohlberg's emphasis on the hedonistic orientation of this level leads us to predict that the preconventional individual would distribute rewards according to the dictates of self-interest, and occasionally, according to parity.

The second, *conventional* level of morality (stages 3, 4, and 4B) can be described as conformist. Here, maintaining the expectations and rules of the individual's family, group, or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right. Since transition to this level is marked by the ability to 'take the role of the other' (*Kohlberg,* 1971), we would expect that forms of distribution which include appreciation of others' inputs would become manifest. In particular, we expect parity responses early in this level, followed by equity and social responsibility responses among more mature conventional individuals. This prediction parallels *Kohlberg*'s (1971, p. 199) statement that conventional justice involves 'the exchange of reward for effort or merit'.

The third, *postconventional* level of moral judgment (stages 5A, 5B, and 6) is characterized by a major thrust toward autonomous moral principles. Such principles have validity and application apart from the authority of persons or groups who hold them and apart from the individual's identification with those persons or groups. *Kohlberg* (1971, p. 202) noted that 'For stage four, social injustice is the failure to reward work, and to punish demerit; for stage five it is failing to give equal opportunity to talent and interest'. Unlike the conventional individual, the postconventional individual is likely to consider unequal opportunity – constraints upon inputs – in distributing rewards. From our perspec-

tive, this interpretation suggests that social and individual responsibility should be the most frequent distribution responses at the postconventional level. We would also expect that individual responsibility would increase with movement to higher forms of thought within the postconventional level, since the more advanced stage within this level implies universalizable prescriptions. Judgments at this stage are held to be appropriate for all people at all times. Individual responsibility requires just such an orientation; while the socially responsible distributor assumes agreement among group members as to the desirability of rewarding intended inputs, the individually responsible distributor recognizes the right of unconstrained members to deny the responsibility for rewarding constrained members.

Although there is little basic disagreement between Kohlberg and Rest regarding the conceptualization of the major levels of moral judgment, theoretical differences become apparent when the assessment of an individual's developmental position within this system is undertaken. Kohlberg's method of assessment is a production task; the subject is asked to generate a solution to a moral dilemma spontaneously. Rest's method, the Defining Issues Test (*Rest*, 1975, 1976), is a recognition task; the subject is asked to evaluate a variety of moral considerations that are provided. According to *Rest* (1976), the DIT is likely to detect the higher forms of thinking in subjects earlier than Kohlberg's method because of the increased ease of recognition over production. Since the DIT was chosen as the assessment device for the present research, this distinction is especially important. Subjects assessed as members of a particular stage in the present study are those who comprehend and express preference for statements of that stage orientation.

Method

Overview

Male high school students in each of the moral judgment stages two through six served as subjects. Each subject was led to believe that he was a member of a four-person group working together on a task, and was induced to work for 1 h. Upon completion of his task, the subject was asked to distribute the group's reward ($ 5.60) among the (fictitious) members. He was given descriptions of the contributions made by group members (amount of time spent, constraints on performance, etc.) that were arranged such that allocations made according to each of the five modes of distribution would result in a different pattern of reward.

Subject Selection

The initial subject population was 136 Caucasian, Mexican-American, and Black males randomly selected from grades 9–12 in a public high school and asked to participate in a research project in exchange for money. The Defining Issues Test (*Rest*, 1974), an objective test assessing moral stage comprehension and preference, was administered to all subjects in

a group session. Subjects were ranked according to their score for each stage. Decisions on stage membership then depended upon a subject's relative stage score; individuals identified through this procedure as members of a particular stage were those who made more responses appropriate to that stage than did other subjects in the overall sample. A final sample of 44 subjects in stages two through six was selected. This rather drastic reduction in sample size was necessary to ensure that each of the subjects could be clearly identified as exhibiting the orientation of a dominant stage. In addition, 16 other subjects were excluded either because of incomplete protocols or because they were absent during the second experimental session. The final sample included 8 subjects in stage two, 6 in stage three, 8 in stage four (4 and 4A combined), 15 in stage five (5A and 5B combined), and 7 in stage six. They ranged from 13 to 18 years of age. It should be noted that the identification of stage five and six respondents within a high-school age sample is unusual in studies employing Kohlberg's assessment technique (*Kohlberg*, 1973), but is common in studies employing the DIT (*Rest*, 1976).

Distributive Justice Measurement

Over a period of 2 days, each of the subjects was taken to a small room in the school building and asked to spend 1 h completing a questionnaire. Each 15 min, a new subject was called to the experimental room. This arrangement prevented the subject from making hypotheses regarding the identities of the other members of his 'group'. After a subject had worked for 1 h, he was taken to another experimental room and told the following: 'While you were working, three other people were doing what you were doing. You were asked to work 1 h because we felt you could give us one hour's worth of valuable information based on the testing we did a couple of weeks ago. Two of the other three people in your group were also asked to work for 1 h for the same reason. The third, we felt, would only be able to work constructively for 25 min. The problem was, however, that one of the guys who was supposed to work for an hour got called back to class after only 25 min.'

At this point, the experimenter drew a diagram on a slip of paper labelling the subject as 'person A' and the other (fictitious) group members as 'person B', 'person C', and 'person D'. He then noted on the diagram that A (the subject) had worked 1 h, B had worked 1 h, C had worked 25 min because that was all he could contribute, and D had worked 25 min before being called back to class. To ensure his understanding, the subject was asked to reiterate the situation to the experimenter. The experimenter then gave the subject an envelope containing $ 5.60 (one dollar bill, eight quarters, sixteen dimes, and twenty nickels) and said, 'Here's five dollars and sixty cents for your group; please split it up as payment, using it all.' The subject's reward distribution was recorded and the subject was then paid, debriefed, and sworn to secrecy.

Distribution Coding Procedure

The money distributions made by subjects were classified according to the five modes of distributive justice-self-interest, parity, equity, social responsibility, and individual responsibility. With A, B, C, and D representing the sums of money awarded each member of the group, the coding scheme was as follows: (1) a *self-interest* distribution was one in which a subject allocated more money to himself than to any other group member (A > B = C = D); (2) a *parity* distribution was one in which money was allocated equally to all group members (A = B = C = D); (3) an *equity* distribution was one in which money was allocated on the basis of the actual input of time worked (A = B > C = D); (4) a *social responsibility* distribution was one in which the conditions of equity (above) were met, and in which additional money was allocated to the constrained individual (person D) from all other group members (A = B = D > C); (5) an *individual responsibility* distribution was one in

Table I. Sample size, mean age, and mean moral stage for distribution response groups

	Distribution response group			
	parity	equity	social responsibility	individual responsibility
Mean age	15.8	15.4	15.9	16.0
Mean stage	4.1	2.9	4.5	5.5
Sample size	10	7	22	4

which the conditions of equity (above) were met, and in which additional money was allocated to the constrained individual (person D) from the reward allocator (person A) alone ($C < A = D < B$).

Two trained coders independently categorized the distribution responses and achieved a 96 % rate of agreement. In sum, all the distribution responses obtained from our subjects were quite clearly codable in terms of the present system.

Results

A discriminant analysis was undertaken to determine the extent to which a subject's membership in a particular distribution response group could be predicted by his moral stage and chronological age. Since only one subject made a self-interested response, the self-interest distribution response could not be included in this analysis. The number of subjects making each of the other distribution responses and the mean age and stage of each distribution response group are shown in table I. Preliminary univariate analyses of variance indicated that the distribution response groups differed significantly in moral stage, $F(3, 39) = 5.10$, $p < 0.05$, but did not differ in age, $F(3, 39) < 1$. Using both age and stage as predictors of distribution response in discriminant analysis revealed one significant discriminant function, χ^2 (6) = 12.90, $p < 0.05$. The corresponding standardized discriminant function coefficients of 0.11 for age and 0.90 for stage indicate that moral stage was of far greater importance in the prediction of distribution response than was age. These results, in combination with the results of the univariate analyses of variance, indicate that age was of little predictive value for distribution response groups.

Although the small size of the sample observed in the present study prohibits more refined analyses of the statistical significance of relationships between moral stage and distribution response, we believe that a graphic representation of our data has considerable value for generating hypotheses. In line with this commitment, we have presented in figure 1 a graphic depiction of the percentage of subjects at each moral stage making a particular distribution response. And though the reader must be warned to view these data with circumspection, it should be noted that a variety of intuitively and theoretically reasonable relationships are evident.

The self-interest response, for example, appeared in only one stage two subject, after which it was replaced by other modes of justice. The parity response appeared in approximately 20 % of subjects at all stages, and therefore seems to be relatively independent of moral judgment stage. Equity appeared in stages two, three, and four, being dominant in

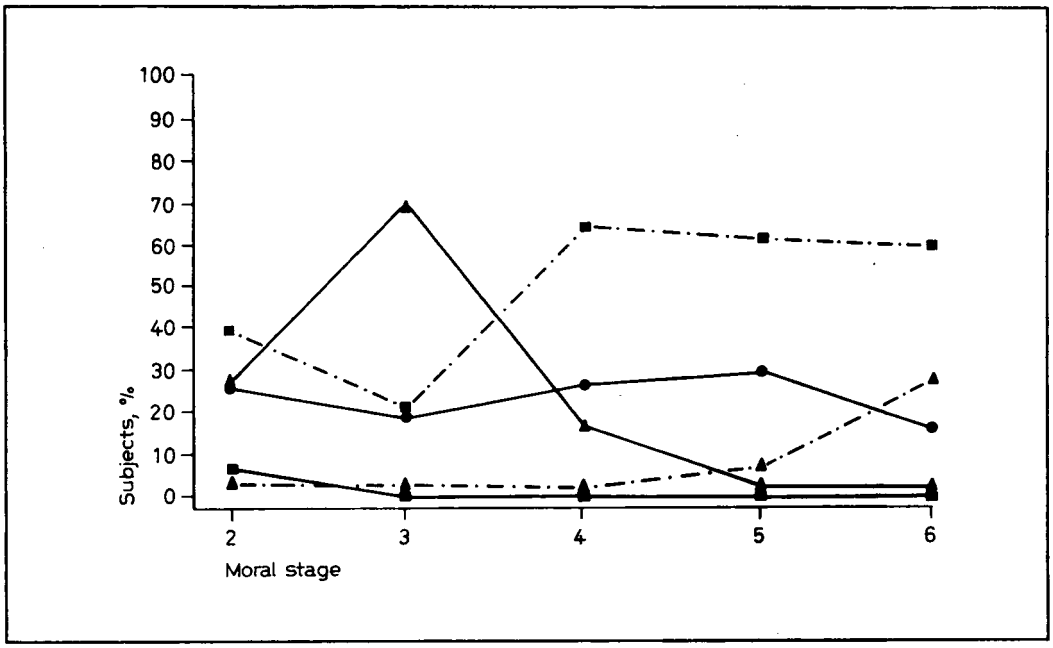

Fig. 1. Percentage of subjects at each moral stage exhibiting each type of distribution response. ■——■ = Self-interest; ●——● = parity; ▲——▲ = equity; ■·--·■ = social responsibility; ▲·--·▲ = individual responsibility.

stage three and disappearing completely in stages five and six. Social responsibility appeared across all stages and was the dominant mode of response in stages two, four, five, and six. Individual responsibility became evident only in postconventional (five and six) stages, with the greatest proportion in stage six. In sum, with the exception of the parity response, it seems that all the distribution responses are dependent to some extent upon the respondent's stage of moral judgment.

Discussion

Overall, the results suggest that moral judgment stage has a significant value in the prediction of distribution tactics. Since chronological age was not a significant predictor, one summary implication of these findings is that studies of the development of distribution response should focus more specifically upon changes in moral reasoning. Directions for such research can be derived from a detailed analysis of the present results. In discussing our observations, we will concentrate upon the changes in distribution tactics that accompany moral judgment development.

The distributions given by the stage two (preconventional) subjects do not yield readily to theoretical interpretation. Although the only self-interest response we observed appeared at this stage, we certainly cannot characterize the stage two individual as primarily self-interested. Instead, it should be noted that

none of the modes of distribution was strictly dominant among stage two individuals. Although further research is needed, we can submit a tentative interpretation. *Kohlberg* (1973) discusses an additional position in his developmental scale which he deems stage four and a half. He maintains that this stage is a transitional position, multidimensional in nature, and superficially similar in content to stage two. It is possible that Rest's measure, the DIT, is not as sensitive to this position as is Kohlberg's technique; it is possible that a number of our stage two subjects might be better characterized as stage four and a half. The heterogeneous distribution responses of the stage two subjects might be attributable to this difficulty.

Most of the stage three subjects distributed rewards according to equity. This result suggests that the onset of conventional morality is marked by special attention to the actual inputs of others. Consistent with *Kohlberg*'s (1971, 1973) theoretical statements, this finding also has some relevance to *Lerner*'s (1975) theory of distributive justice. In discussing the origins of the child's concept of justice, Lerner suggests that the child initially focuses on justice for himself (the 'personal contract'), and only later comes to recognize the existence of 'deserving' in others. Our finding indicates that this transition parallels the transition from preconventional to conventional morality.

Movement within the conventional level (from stage three to four) is marked by another distinct change in distribution mode. These more mature subjects exhibited predominant use of social responsibility distributions. Thus, it appears that attention to actual inputs is followed by attention to intended inputs. This transition follows logically from a number of theories of moral development that emphasize the child's decreasing dependence upon physical, objective criteria in judging moral situations (cf. *Wegner,* 1975). In addition, the abrupt nature of this transition (fig. 1) provides support for the distinction between equity and social responsibility suggested by our theoretical framework.

The postconventional subjects (stages five and six) most often allocated rewards in accord with social responsibility. In addition, the only distributions adhering to individual responsibility occurred at this level. At stage five, a small proportion of subjects made individually responsible distributions, whereas at stage six, individual responsibility was an allocation tactic second only to social responsibility. This set of findings sheds some light on the issues raised earlier in this report regarding moral stage assessment techniques. Since the appearance of individual responsibility at the postconventional level seems congruent with Kohlberg's conception of postconventional morality, it can be suggested that a recognition task such as the DIT does tap dispositions toward postconventional thought. But since the number of individual responsibility responses was still not overly large for our postconventional subjects, it must also be suggested that the identification of moral stage by means of a recognition task may produce overly liberal estimates of developmental level. In other words, our postconventional

subjects may well have been only conventional subjects beginning the transition to postconventional thought.

Two additional comments on these results deserve elaboration. First, the finding that parity was not related to any specific stage, but rather was used to some extent by subjects at each of the stages, is quite intriguing. We might conclude that parity, unlike the other modes we identified, is not dependent upon the individual allocator. This observation is consistent with *Lerner*'s (1974, 1975) theory of distributive justice, since Lerner suggests quite strongly that the different modes of justice arise as a function of the particular social situation. Yet, since allocation according to modes other than parity *did* vary with moral stage of the allocator in this research, it seems that a pure situational theory of distributive justice is inadequate. What we are suggesting, then, is that future theoretical treatments strive to explain the interaction between person and situation that produces certain distributions. This type of theory would posit not only that particular interpersonal settings lead to certain modes of allocation, but also that individuals differing in their level of moral thought would hold different conceptions of such situations. Their distribution responses would differ as a function of their ability to understand the characteristics of each situation.

Our concluding comment on these results is one that is only infrequently made in studies of moral judgment. Although some studies have shown a general relationship between moral judgment maturity and the maturity of moral action (see *Kohlberg*, 1969, for a review), few if any investigations have isolated specific behavioral concomitants of moral stage orientations. The present research was notably successful in this regard. Apparently, the specific stage orientation held by an individual does predispose him to behave in a specific manner; moreover, the content of this behavior is directly traceable to the cognitive structures characterizing the moral stage. In the face of demands for behavioral prediction, the moral judgment theorist's all too frequent reply has been that moral thought and action are not necessarily related. Perhaps these results signal a more optimistic approach to this issue.

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