Young Adults' Scores on the Defining Issues Test as a Function of a "Self" Versus "Other" Presentation Mode

John M. Rybash, Paul A. Roodin, and Edward Lonky

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One hundred college students were randomly divided into four groups and were administered the standard version (i.e., other-orientation) of the Defining Issues Test (DIT) and/or a Modified version (i.e., self-orientation) of the same instrument on two separate occasions. Subjects displayed greater amounts of principled moral reasoning when responding to the standard (other-orientation) rather than the modified (self-orientation) version of the DIT. Also, significant test-retest reliability was obtained for the standard, but not the modified, version of the DIT. The role of affective factors in the evaluation of moral problems involving the self versus hypothetical others was discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A number of investigators have reported that young children display more advanced levels of moral reasoning when they are asked to assume the role

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2 Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Mohawk Valley Community College. Received M.A. from the State University of New York at Oswego. Current research interests are moral development, social cognition across the life-span.
3 Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, State University of New York at Oswego. Received Ph.D. from Purdue University. Current research interests are children's cognitive development, eidetic imagery, and moral thinking.
4 Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, State University of New York at Oswego. Received Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Current research interests are logical concept development and moral and political development.
of a story's main character than when a story's main character takes the form of a hypothetical "other." Keasey (1977), for example, presented kindergarten and first-grade children with story pairs in which different levels of damage (high/low) and intent (good/bad) were systematically varied. Half the children at each grade level were instructed to pretend that they were the central characters in the story pairs, while the other half were told that the stories described the behavior of other children. Results indicated that the children receiving the self-orientation produced significantly more intention-based judgments than did those who received the other-orientation. The superiority of self-oriented reasoning was interpreted as a reflection of the children's role-taking abilities. Specifically, it was suggested that children develop the cognitive skills necessary to isolate the intentional nature of their own behavior before they develop the role-taking skills necessary to infer another's intentional framework. These data confirm Piaget's (1965) suggestion that a décalage exists between children's evaluations of concrete personal experiences and children's theoretical judgments of value. Piaget (1965) has stated that "the theoretical simply lags behind the practical moral judgment and shows in an adequate manner a stage that has been superseded on a plane of action" (p. 117).

Unfortunately, previous researchers have failed to investigate the role that a self-orientation or an other-orientation plays in the moral reasoning patterns of older subjects (e.g., adolescents and adults). Such an investigation is important when one considers that Kohlberg (1969, 1976), Rest (1974, 1976a, 1976b), and Rest et al. (1974) have assumed that an older subject's moral judgments, as measured by his/her responses to dilemmas involving hypothetical others, directly reflects the subject's (i.e., the self's) moral structure. Given the results obtained by Keasey (1977), it may be that Kohlberg's (1976) Moral Dilemma Interview and Rest et al's. (1974) Defining Issues Test (DIT) - because they directly assess the self's evaluation of hypothetical others - provide an inaccurate estimate of an individual's moral reasoning skills.

Kohlberg (1973) has maintained that two factors are responsible for the emergence of principled moral reasoning: (1) the consolidation of formal-operational thinking skills, and (2) and exposure to conflicting value statements within a context of identity formation, moratorium, and commitment. Kohlberg has also argued that these factors first exhibit themselves during young adulthood, but are especially operative for young adults who attend college. Consequently, college students are very likely to be making the transition from conventional reasoning to principled reasoning. This suggests that college students may apply principled reasoning skills to situations involving themselves before they are capable of applying these skills in their evaluations of others.

In the present investigation, college students' responses to the standard (i.e., other-orientation) version of the Defining Issues Test were compared to responses obtained from a modified (i.e., self-orientation) version of the DIT,