

## **Interpersonal Moral Conflicts Between Couples: Effects of Type of Dilemma, Role, and Partner's Judgments on Level of Moral Reasoning and Probability of Resolution**

**Dennis L. Krebs,<sup>1,2</sup> Kathy Denton,<sup>1</sup> Gillian Wark,<sup>1</sup> Rhonda Couch,<sup>1</sup> Timothy Racine,<sup>1</sup>  
and Danielle L. Krebs<sup>1</sup>**

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Forty-two male–female couples completed Kohlberg's test of moral development and made moral judgments about the most recent interpersonal moral conflict they had experienced in their everyday lives. Participants made lower stage moral judgments about their interpersonal moral conflicts than about the dilemmas on Kohlberg's test. The type of interpersonal moral conflict participants experienced and their role in the conflict were related to the types of moral judgments they made. Participants who reported philosophical conflicts made more mature moral judgments than participants who reported antisocial conflicts, especially if their role in the antisocial conflict was that of a transgressor. Conflicts were most likely to be resolved when partners' moral judgments about their conflict were similar in moral maturity. The implications of these findings for models of moral judgment are discussed.

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**KEY WORDS:** moral judgment; real-life; interpersonal conflicts; couples.

The overriding goal of this study was to compare the forms of moral judgment people make about the hypothetical dilemmas on Kohlberg's test to the forms of moral judgment partners make about their real-life moral conflicts, and to examine the implications of the findings for models of moral development. Models of moral development differ in the extent to which they emphasize the determining power of within-person cognitive structures of moral reasoning, on the one hand, and external contextual factors on the other. In his early writings, Kohlberg (1969) advanced a strongly constructivistic model based on the assumptions that moral judgments stem from internal structures of moral reasoning that

define stages of moral development and that newly acquired structures transform and displace their predecessors. In support of this model, Kohlberg and his colleagues (see Colby & Kohlberg, 1987) found that although there are differences between adults in their modal stage of moral development (i.e., their overall score on Kohlberg's test), individual adults tend to be consistent in their moral judgments across dilemmas on Kohlberg's test; that is to say, virtually all their moral judgments stem from the structures that define the same or an adjacent stage in Kohlberg's sequence of stages.

However, as investigators began to examine moral judgments to dilemmas other than those on Kohlberg's test, support for Kohlberg's strong constructivistic model (Kohlberg, 1969) diminished. For example, Hickey and Scharf (1980) found that prisoners confined to traditional prisons made significantly lower stage moral judgments about prison dilemmas

<sup>1</sup>Psychology Department, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.

<sup>2</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed at Psychology Department, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada V5A-1S6; e-mail: krebs@sfu.ca.

than they did about the dilemmas on Kohlberg's test. In a series of studies, Krebs and his colleagues found significant differences between participants' stages of moral judgment on Kohlbergian dilemmas and stages of moral judgment on other types of moral dilemma (see Krebs, Vermeulen, Carpendale, & Denton, 1991, for a review). For example, Denton and Krebs (1990) found that a dilemma involving impaired driving evoked Stage 2 moral judgments from almost all participants who responded to it.

Faced with evidence inconsistent with his early constructivistic position, Kohlberg revised his model, asserting that his test assessed the upper limits of people's moral reasoning—or moral competence—and acknowledging that people may fail to perform at their level of competence in strong situations (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). Building on this revision and the results of relevant studies, Krebs and his colleagues (Krebs, Denton, & Wark, 1997; Krebs, Vermeulen, et al., 1991; Wark & Krebs, 1996, 1997) advanced an interactional model based on the assumption that Kohlberg's test assesses people's capacity to engage in sophisticated moral reasoning, but that people perform at their level of competence only in ideal situations such as when they take Kohlberg's test. Krebs, Vermeulen, et al. (1991) suggested that structures of moral judgment are determined by an interaction between external performance factors, such as context (Denton & Krebs, 1990), audience (Carpendale & Krebs, 1992, 1995) and type of moral dilemma (Krebs, Vermeulen, et al., 1991; Walker, de Vries, & Trevethan, 1987), and internal performance factors such as coping and defending (Bartek, Krebs, & Taylor, 1993) and attributional biases (Krebs & Laird, 1998).

In the final analysis, models of moral development must account for the types of moral judgment people make in their everyday lives. Although some investigators have found that people construct hypothetical and real-life dilemmas in terms of the same stage (see Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995, for a review), other investigators have found that participants make lower stage judgments to some types of real-life dilemma. In particular, Armon (1995) found that participants made lower stage judgments to dilemmas involving interpersonal conflicts than they did to dilemmas involving conflicts between people and society. Within interpersonal types of dilemma, Wark and Krebs (1996, 1997) found that participants made lower stage judgments on dilemmas involving antisocial issues than they did on dilemmas involving prosocial or social pressure issues.

Real-life interpersonal dilemmas differ from Kohlbergian hypothetical dilemmas in several ways. Most important, perhaps, are differences in the functions served by the moral judgments they evoke. The primary function of moral judgment on Kohlberg's test is to solve academic, philosophical problems, in principle. When people communicate their conclusions, they display their reasoning abilities to an experimenter, much like a student does to a teacher. In contrast, in everyday life people often use moral judgments to serve more social functions, such as negotiation, persuasion, repairing damaged relationships, and justifying their behavior (Krebs et al., 1997).

Writers such as Haan (1985) and Haan, Aerts, and Cooper (1985) have criticized Kohlberg's model for neglecting the social functions of moral judgment, arguing that "moral decisions are created and jointly achieved in actual or imagined dialogues instead of being drawn out by single persons from principles or learned generalizations" (p. 30). The general expectation from Haan's position (Haan, 1985) is that the moral judgments made by each partner in an interpersonal moral conflict will affect the moral judgments of the other. To get at such influences, we need to assess the moral judgments made by both partners involved in interpersonal moral conflicts.

People involved in interpersonal moral conflicts often end up playing complementary roles. For example, one person may transgress against his or her partner, giving rise to transgressor and victim roles that put one partner on the offensive and the other on the defensive. It seemed possible to us that the roles partners play in the same types of real-life conflict (e.g., in an antisocial conflict or in a prosocial conflict) would exert differential effects on their moral judgments. For example, although an individual who transgresses against another experiences the "same" antisocial dilemma as his or her victim, transgressors might invoke Stage 2 hedonistic or instrumental moral judgments such as, "I had a right to do what was best for me," to justify behaviors they cannot undo, whereas victims may invoke more idealistic, Stage 3, "this is how you should have behaved" types of judgment. Perhaps a tendency noted by Wark and Krebs (1997) for participants who reported antisocial dilemmas involving temptation to invoke lower stage moral judgments than participants who reported antisocial dilemmas involving reacting to transgressions stemmed from differences between the roles participants played in the two types of dilemma.

If Kohlberg's test assesses the most advanced structures of moral reasoning available to people, there is only one way in which partners who differ in level of moral competence can influence each other's judgments about their interpersonal dilemmas—at least in the short-term—and that is by the lower stage partner pulling the higher stage partner down. In the same way in which cooperative people have been found to become reactively competitive in response to competitive partners (Kelley & Stahelski, 1970), we hypothesized that lower stage participants would exert a downward pull on the interpersonal moral judgments of their higher stage partners.

In this study, we asked partners involved in ongoing relationships to respond to two dilemmas from Kohlberg's test and to make judgments about the last real-life interpersonal moral conflict they had experienced or were experiencing. Guided by past research comparing moral judgments to real-life and hypothetical dilemmas (e.g., Walker et al., 1987; Wark & Krebs, 1996, 1997), we employed Colby and Kohlberg's scoring rules (Kohlberg, 1987) to stage-type prescriptive moral judgments elicited by (a) a written version of Kohlberg's test and (b) by a questionnaire we created to examine couples' real-life moral conflicts. We classified real-life moral conflicts by content into four types: antisocial (e.g., stealing objects from work), prosocial (e.g., deciding whether to provide help), social pressure (e.g., pressuring a date to have sex), or philosophical (e.g., arguing about abortion in the abstract; see Wark & Krebs, 1997). Finally, we classified participants' roles in the interpersonal conflicts as defenders (who committed moral transgressions), accusers (who were or could be negatively affected by their partners' moral transgressions), and third person observers (who disagreed with the ways in which their partners behaved toward others).

We hypothesized that moral judgment would be influenced by several factors. First, we expected most participants to make lower stage moral judgments about their real-life interpersonal moral conflicts than they made on Kohlberg's test. Second, within the real-life interpersonal dilemmas, we expected participants to make the lowest stage moral judgments to antisocial types of dilemma (cf. Wark & Krebs, 1996, 1997). Third, we expected the role participants played in their interpersonal conflicts to affect the types of moral judgment they made. In particular, we expected participants in third-party positions, including those who debated hypothetical moral issues such as euthanasia, abortion, or capital punishment, to invoke significantly higher stage moral judgments than par-

ticipants who debated issues with direct personal consequences for them. We expected participants who were in defensive roles to make more Stage 2 (individualistic and instrumental) moral judgments than participants playing more accusatory roles. Finally, we expected the partners of participants who displayed low levels of moral competence on Kohlberg's test to make low-stage moral judgments about their interpersonal conflicts, and for these judgments to induce higher stage partners to perform below their level of competence when making moral judgments about the interpersonal conflicts in question.

Assuming that an important social function of moral judgment is to help people resolve their moral conflicts, we expected partners who based their moral judgments about their interpersonal moral dilemmas on the same structures of moral reasoning to be more likely than couples who based their judgments on different structures to resolve their conflict.

## METHOD

### Participants

Fifty participants were recruited through a university-wide subject pool of undergraduate students to participate in a study involving moral conflicts. Each participant recruited an opposite-sex partner with whom they had an on-going relationship. All participants gave informed consent and received \$5.00 for their participation. Participants made moral judgments about the most recent interpersonal conflict they had experienced. The responses of eight couples were excluded from analyses because the partners failed to discuss the same interpersonal moral conflict. All other participants described and provided moral judgments about the same moral conflict as their partner. Male participants ranged in age from 18 to 38 years ( $M = 22.2$ ,  $SD = 4.9$ ). Female participants ranged in age from 18 to 34 years ( $M = 21.0$ ,  $SD = 6.7$ ).

### Materials

#### *Kohlberg's Measure of Moral Maturity*

Participants completed two dilemmas from the written version of Kohlberg's measure of moral judgment (Dilemmas III and III'). Kohlberg's measure describes hypothetical moral dilemmas faced by protagonists such as Heinz and Officer Brown (see Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). Each dilemma is followed by a

series of questions and probes to elicit prescriptive judgments.

Moral judgments were classified by a research assistant with extensive training in, and experience with, Colby and Kohlberg's scoring system (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). Two measures of moral maturity were produced: a Global Stage Score, which represents participants' modal stage of moral development (e.g., Stage 2, Stage 2/3, Stage 3), and a Moral Maturity Score (MMS), which is a weighted average stage score, multiplied by 100 to remove the decimal point. MMSs range from 100 (corresponding to Stage 1) to 500 (corresponding to Stage 5). A detailed description of Colby and Kohlberg's method of scoring for stage and moral maturity is provided in their 1987 manual (pp. 151–228).

#### *Interpersonal Moral Conflict Questionnaire (IMCQ)*

The IMCQ contained instructions for participants to write about the most recent moral conflict they had experienced with their partner in the study. The term moral conflict was not defined; participants could disclose any conflict they deemed moral in nature. After participants identified and described a conflict, they were asked several open-ended questions that probed for (a) their point of view, (b) their interpretation of their partner's point of view, (c) the moral issues they deemed to be involved in the conflict and their evaluations of the issues, (d) their prescriptive judgments about the moral issues on both sides of the conflict, (e) the options they considered in attempting to resolve the conflict, (f) their evaluation of each option—that is to say, whether it was moral, and if so why, (g) their evaluation of any input received from friends or relatives who were not directly involved in the conflict, (h) their assessment of the consequences of the conflict, (i) whether the conflict had been resolved, and (j) their evaluation of their own behavior and their partner's behavior. Prescriptive judgments elicited by the IMCQ were scored for stage of moral development by matching them structurally with criterion judgments in Colby and Kohlberg's scoring manual (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; also see Krebs, Vermeulen, et al., 1991; Walker et al., 1987, for descriptions and justifications of this procedure). As with the Kohlberg test, global stage scores and MMSs were calculated.

In addition to scoring moral judgments, responses to the IMCQ were scored for type of interpersonal conflict, role within the conflict, and conflict resolution. As in the Wark and Krebs

(1996, 1997) studies, participants' descriptions of their interpersonal moral conflicts were classified as antisocial, prosocial, social pressure, philosophical, or other. Each participant's role within each type of conflict was further classified as defender, accuser, or third-person observer. Finally, conflict resolution was assessed by having two raters read all responses to questions about whether the conflict was resolved. If both members of a couple described the conflict as resolved, it was coded as "resolved." If one or both members described the conflict as unresolved, it was coded as "unresolved."

#### **Interrater Reliability**

##### *Stage Scoring*

Twenty-five percent of the Kohlberg dilemmas and 25% of the IMCQs were randomly selected to be scored by a second research assistant to assess the interrater reliability of MMSs (scoring prescriptive judgments is labor-intensive; 25% is the customary portion selected for interrater reliability, see Krebs, Denton, Vermeulen, Corpendale, & Bush, 1991). There was 92% agreement (23/25) between raters within 25 moral maturity score points (1/4 stage) on Kohlberg's test, and 88% agreement on the IMCQ. The correlation between the MMSs of the two raters was .91 for Kohlberg's test and .88 for the IMCQ. Disagreements were resolved by the senior author.

##### *Type of Conflict, Role, and Conflict Resolution*

A second rater classified the responses of all participants according to type of conflict, role, and conflict resolution. Cohen's kappas were computed separately for each of these three variables. The results indicated high levels of interrater reliability ( $\kappa > .90$ ). Disagreements were resolved by the senior author.

#### **Procedure**

Participants were contacted by telephone and asked to come to a designated psychology lab to pick up a package of questionnaires for themselves and their partners. A consent form and a set of instructions were included in the package. Participants were asked to complete Kohlberg's test and the IMCQ in the order presented, which varied randomly.<sup>3</sup> Participants

<sup>3</sup>Preliminary analyses revealed no order effects.

were told their responses would be anonymous; they would be identified by number. Couples shared the same identification number. Within each couple, males were assigned the letter A, and females were assigned the letter B. Participants were clearly and repeatedly instructed not to discuss their responses with their partners until after they completed their packages and returned them to the psychology lab. When participants returned to the lab, they were debriefed and given a feedback sheet that described the purpose of the study and the theoretical context.

## RESULTS

### Overview

Results are presented in four sections. First, we examined whether participants' MMSs on Kohlberg's test differed from their MMSs on the interpersonal conflict. Second, we assessed the effects of (a) type of conflict and (b) participants' role in the conflict on moral maturity. Third, we examined relations between partners' MMSs on Kohlberg's measure and on the interpersonal conflict. Finally, we examined whether couples at the same level of moral maturity were more likely than couples who differed in moral maturity to resolve their conflicts.

### Variations in Level of Moral Maturity as a Function of Type of Dilemma: Kohlbergian vs. Interpersonal Moral Dilemmas

A  $2 \times 2$  (Gender  $\times$  Type of Dilemma: Kohlberg vs. Interpersonal) repeated measures ANOVA comparing mean MMSs across dilemmas revealed a significant main effect for type of dilemma,  $F(1, 82) = 88.33$ ,  $p < .001$ , unqualified by an interaction,  $F < 1$ . The main effect for gender was not statistically significant,  $F < 1$ . On average, participants scored a half stage higher on Kohlberg's test,  $M = 320$ ,  $SD = 42$  than on the interpersonal moral conflicts,  $M = 274$ ,  $SD = 42$ . The correlation between participants' MMSs on Kohlbergian and interpersonal dilemmas was  $.20$ ,  $p = .06$ . Only one-quarter (26%) of the participants scored at the same stage on the IMCQ as they did on Kohlberg's test. Almost three-quarters (70%) of the participants scored lower on the IMCQ, with almost a third (30%) of the participants scoring a full stage or more lower. Only three participants scored higher on the IMCQ.

None of the participants scored at Stage 2 on Kohlberg's dilemmas, 10 scored at Stage 2/3. In contrast, 20 participants scored at Stage 2 on the IMCQ, and 17 scored at Stage 2/3. Among the ten participants who scored at Stage 2/3 on Kohlberg's dilemmas, seven scored at Stage 2 or Stage 2/3 on their interpersonal conflicts. More than half of the participants (44) scored above Stage 3 on Kohlberg's test, compared to five on the IMCQ.

### Variations in Level of Moral Maturity as a Function of Type of Interpersonal Moral Conflict and Role

The Kohlbergian and the interpersonal conflict MMSs obtained in this study were strikingly similar to those obtained by Wark and Krebs (1996). The mean Kohlberg moral maturity score in the Wark and Krebs study was 323, compared to 320 in this study. The MMSs for types of real-life dilemma in the Wark and Krebs (1996) study and types of interpersonal conflicts in the present study were as follows: (a) antisocial, 268 and 262; (b) prosocial, 290 and 295; (c) social pressure, 278 and 283; (c) philosophical, 311 and 315, respectively.

As in the Wark and Krebs (1996) study, most participants reported antisocial types of moral conflict (see Table I). Because a relatively small number of participants in the present study reported prosocial

**Table I.** Level of Moral Maturity as a Function of Type of Interpersonal Moral Conflict and Role

Type of conflict role	<i>n</i>	% Females	M Kohlberg <sup>a</sup> MMS ( <i>SD</i> )	M IMCQ <sup>b</sup> MMS ( <i>SD</i> )
Antisocial	56	50	314 (29)	262 (43)
Defender	28	39	313 (33)	248 (43)
Accuser	20	43	316 (28)	266 (42)
3rd Person	8	18	315 (18)	297 (9)
Prosocial	6	50	323 (33)	295 (13)
Defender	3	0	326 (33)	289 (19)
Accuser	3	100	320 (41)	300 (0)
Social Pressure	8	50	328 (35)	283 (24)
Defender	4	50	347 (23)	287 (25)
Accuser	4	50	310 (37)	279 (25)
Philosophical	10	50	346 (30)	315 (21)
Males	5	0	350 (43)	320 (21)
(3rd Person)				
Female	5	100	341 (13)	310 (22)
(3rd Person)				
Other	4	50	332 (21)	275 (46)
Defender	2	100	344 (0)	275 (35)
Accuser	2	0	320 (28)	275 (71)

<sup>a</sup>M Kohlberg MMS: Mean Kohlberg moral maturity score.

<sup>b</sup>M IMCQ MMS: Mean IMCQ moral maturity score.

and social pressure types of interpersonal moral conflict and because the differences between participants' mean MMSs on these types of conflict were not statistically significant ( $ts(12) < 1$ ), we combined them for the sake of statistical analyses.

A  $2 \times 3$  (Gender  $\times$  Type of Interpersonal Conflict: Antisocial, Prosocial + Social Pressure, Philosophical) ANOVA on the Kohlberg MMSs produced a significant main effect for type of conflict,  $F(2, 80) = 4.90$ ,  $p < .01$ , unqualified by a significant interaction,  $F(2, 80) < 1$ . The effect for gender was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 80) < 1$ . Post hoc tests revealed that participants who reported experiencing philosophical conflicts with their partners had significantly higher Kohlberg MMSs ( $M = 346$ ,  $SD = 32$ ) than participants who reported experiencing antisocial conflicts ( $M = 314$ ,  $SD = 29$ ).

A comparable  $2 \times 3$  ANOVA on the interpersonal conflict MMSs revealed a significant main effect for type of conflict,  $F(2, 80) = 9.62$ ,  $p < .001$ , unqualified by an interaction,  $F(2, 80) < 1$ . The effect for gender was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 80) < 1$ . Post hoc tests revealed significant differences between mean MMSs for all three types of conflict. The MMSs for the philosophical conflicts ( $M = 315$ ,  $SD = 21$ ) were highest and the MMSs for the antisocial conflicts were lowest ( $M = 262$ ,  $SD = 43$ ). The prosocial/social pressure conflicts evoked MMSs that fell between these two extremes ( $M = 288$ ,  $SD = 20$ ).

A  $2 \times 3$  (Gender  $\times$  Role: Defender, Accuser, Third-person observer) ANOVA on the Kohlberg MMSs of the participants who reported antisocial conflicts with their partners failed to reveal any significant effects,  $F_s < 1$ . A comparable ANOVA on the interpersonal conflict MMSs of participants reporting antisocial conflicts revealed a significant main effect for role,  $F(2, 56) = 4.54$ ,  $p < .01$ . Post hoc tests revealed that defenders had significantly lower MMSs than third-person observers ( $M_s = 248$  vs.  $297$ , see Table I). Similar analyses were not conducted on social pressure and prosocial moral conflicts because the samples sizes were too small.

### Relations Between Partners' Level of Moral Maturity

The correlation between partners' MMSs on Kohlberg's test was not statistically significant,  $r(41) = .14$ . The correlation between partners' MMSs on the interpersonal conflicts was weak, but significant

**Table II.** Relations Between Partners' Major Stages on Kohlberg's Test and the Interpersonal Moral Conflict Questionnaire

Couples' stages on Kohlberg dilemmas	Couples' stages on the IMCQ			M MMS (SD)	n (pairs)
	2-2	2-3	3-3		
2-2	1	0	0	264 (4)	1
2-3	4	3	1	296 (32)	8
3-3	3	16	11	324 (21)	30
3-4	1	0	2	360 (45)	3
M MMS <sup>a</sup> (SD)	225 (29)	272 (37)	305 (14)		
n	9	19	14	42	

<sup>a</sup>M MMS = Mean moral maturity score.

with a one-tailed test,  $r(41) = .27$ ,  $p < .05$ . As shown in Table II, couples who shared the same major stage on Kohlberg's test were not more likely than couples who scored at different stages on Kohlberg's test to score at the same stage on their interpersonal conflicts. For example, only 11 of the 30 couples who both scored at Stage 3 on Kohlberg's test both scored at Stage 3 on the IMCQ. A more refined analysis employing transitional stages 2/3 and 3/4 produced similar results. These findings suggest a weak relation between couples' scores on Kohlberg's test and their scores on the IMCQ.

The data in Table II are consistent with the idea that participants who displayed relatively low-stage competence on Kohlberg's test exerted a downward pull on their partners' interpersonal conflict scores. Exploring this finding more extensively, we examined the MMSs of the eight<sup>4</sup> participants who scored at Stage 2/3 on Kohlberg's test and had partners who scored at Stage 3 or higher. The mean MMS of these eight participants were 269 on Kohlberg's test and 265 on the interpersonal dilemma ( $SD_s = 16$  and  $36$ , respectively). Their partners also scored at low levels on the interpersonal dilemma ( $M = 253$ ,  $SD = 40$ ), even though their mean moral maturity score on Kohlberg's test was relatively high:  $323$ ,  $SD = 15$ . Such relations notwithstanding, it is clear in Table II that having a partner at a relatively low stage of moral maturity is not the only factor that may constrain moral judgment in interpersonal moral conflicts. Most couples (19/30 or 63%) classified in Table II as scoring at Stage 3-3 on Kohlberg's dilemmas scored at Stages 2-2 or 2-3 on the interpersonal dilemmas.

<sup>4</sup>Two other participants also scored at Stage 2/3 on Kohlberg's test, but were excluded from this analysis because their partners also scored low on Kohlberg's test.

### Variations in Conflict Resolution as a Function of Congruence in Partners' Stage of Moral Judgment

We conducted Chi-square analyses of moral stage congruence and conflict resolution to determine whether couples who scored at the same stage of moral judgment were more likely than couples who scored at different stages to resolve their conflicts. One analysis involved global stage scores on Kohlberg's dilemmas; the other involved global stage scores on the IMCQ. Only the latter analysis was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.4, p < .01$ . Ninety-one percent (21/23) of the couples who scored at the same stage of moral judgment on the IMCQ reported their conflict was resolved, compared to 58% (11/19) of couples who scored at different stages. Eighty percent of the couples who had not resolved their conflicts scored at different stages of moral judgment on the IMCQ.

## DISCUSSION

### Variations in Moral Judgment Across Kohlbergian and Interpersonal Dilemmas

Consistent with past research (Armon, 1995; Wark & Krebs, 1996, 1997) participants made significantly lower stage moral judgments about their real-life moral conflicts than they did about Kohlberg's hypothetical dilemmas. In particular, real-life interpersonal dilemmas evoked more Stage 2 judgments than Kohlbergian dilemmas, and Kohlbergian dilemmas evoked more Stage 4 judgments. These findings demonstrate that the types of moral dilemma people face affects the forms of moral judgment they make.

The action in most real-life interpersonal moral conflicts is between the self-oriented "me" orientation of Stage 2 and the mutual "us" orientation of Stage 3. For example, one couple described a conflict concerning how much the male participant was drinking and how alcohol was impairing his judgment. The female participant (who scored at Stage 3 on the IMCQ) was attempting to "change his mind about drinking" because "it could save his or someone else's life" and his drinking was interfering with their relationship. The male participant (who scored at Stage 2) justified his drinking by saying he enjoyed it. He believed the most moral solution to the problem was to "avoid a fight" by telling his girlfriend that she was right and promising to drink less (even though he thought she was wrong and he had no plans to change his behavior).

As explained more fully by Krebs et al. (1997) and Wark and Krebs (1996, 1997), evidence that moral judgment varies as a function of the content of moral dilemmas is more consistent with additive-inclusive and layer-cake models of moral development (Levine, 1979; Rest, 1983), which assume that people retain old stage structures after they acquire new ones, than with transformation-displacement models.

Finding that virtually all participants made higher stage moral judgments about Kohlberg's hypothetical dilemmas than about their interpersonal dilemmas is consistent with Colby and Kohlberg's contention (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987) that Kohlberg's test assesses moral competence—the upper limits of people's ability to solve moral problems. One of our findings suggested that level of moral competence—stage of moral development as defined by Kohlberg's measure—may have influenced the type of real-life dilemma participants experienced. Couples who reported philosophical moral dilemmas scored significantly higher on Kohlberg's test than couples who reported antisocial types of conflict. These findings are consistent with the idea that people possessing different levels of moral competence are prone to experience different types of real-life moral conflict, but the findings do not, by any means, establish this relation. The differences may also have been due to a tendency for those who scored high on Kohlberg's test to report philosophical moral conflicts, because, for example, they preferred to discuss them.

Finding that most participants failed to perform at their level of competence when making moral judgments about real-life conflicts can be interpreted in two quite different ways. From the perspective of Kohlberg's test and Kohlberg's model, it could be argued we did not probe the moral judgments made by participants in response to their interpersonal dilemmas deeply and fully enough to obtain a good measure of their level of moral development, defined as their competence to solve moral problems. We readily acknowledge that our measure of moral judgment about interpersonal moral conflicts cannot compete with Kohlberg's well-validated test in this respect. If we wanted to obtain a valid assessment of our participants' capacity to resolve real-life moral dilemmas, we would have probed their judgments in an interview.

But this was not our purpose. Our purpose was to determine whether Kohlberg's test is equipped to supply a measure of the ways in which people make moral judgments about moral conflicts in their everyday lives. In real-life, people are usually not encouraged

or probed by disinterested interviewers to think hard about the moral dilemmas they are experiencing or have experienced in order to derive the most moral solution. People do not usually treat their moral conflicts as academic problems for which they should deduce the most moral decision. People treat them as interpersonal problems they need to resolve, and our findings suggest that for this purpose, people tend to invoke lower stage moral judgments. To explore more fully the source of the downward pull from real-life interpersonal dilemmas, we examined variations in level of moral judgment as a function of the types of interpersonal dilemma participants experienced and the roles they played in them.

### **Type of Dilemma and Role**

Consistent with past research by Wark and Krebs (1996), the type of real-life dilemma about which participants made moral judgments affected their level of moral judgment. In particular, antisocial types of dilemma evoked significantly lower levels of moral judgment than other types of dilemma did. Refining the findings of Wark and Krebs (1996, 1997) we found that the role participants played in the antisocial types of dilemma they faced was related to the types of moral judgment they made. Participants who were defending themselves against the accusation that they had committed a transgression made significantly lower stage moral judgments than participants who were passing judgment on a transgressor from a third person perspective. The most plausible interpretation of this difference is that being accused of behaving immorally induces people to adopt a narrow, defensive, self-focused Stage 2 perspective; whereas passing judgment on someone who has committed a transgression induces people to adopt a more impartial and idealistic, "generalized other," Stage 3 perspective.

Although not statistically significant, the pattern of results suggest that being victimized also may pull for a self-focused Stage 2 perspective. As an example, consider a moral dilemma involving a man who sold illicit drugs out of the family home. This man defended his behavior by saying, "The excitement till one is caught is beautiful, as a person is always trying to get away with something . . . I know it's wrong but the excitement, the friends, and the money never hurt anyone" (Stage 2). The female participant, whose young daughter lived in the home, felt victimized by the drug dealing: "It is considered illegal and if

you are caught you get a record. The consequences of going to jail or fines and [my daughter] possibly being taken away were too much to put up with" (Stage 2).

### **Relations Between Partners' Level of Moral Maturity**

There was no consistent association between partners' level of moral maturity on Kohlberg's test. The weak positive correlation between partners' level of moral maturity on their interpersonal dilemmas stemmed mainly from participants who scored at low stages on Kohlberg's test. In the same way that competitive people have been found to evoke competitive behavior from their partners (Kelley & Stahelski, 1970), participants who scored at relatively low stages on Kohlberg's test appear to have evoked low stage moral judgments about the interpersonal conflict from their partners.

In contrast to the encouraging probes made by interviewers administering Kohlbergian dilemmas, people invoked in real-life moral conflicts with partners possessing limited moral competence are confronted with low-stage moral arguments that may constrain the level of moral judgment appropriate in response. As an example, a male participant (who scored the lowest of all participants on Kohlberg's test) decided to go out drinking with his friends to celebrate his birthday, but his partner could not go along. In response to "I've got the right to have fun on my birthday" types of Stage 2 judgment by the man, the woman argued he should be thinking of her and not risking getting in trouble (Stage 2). The Stage 2 judgments made by the male participant in this example seemed to be aimed at justifying a behavior that served his own desires. Given the additive-inclusive availability of moral structures, his partner, who scored at Stage 3/4 on Kohlberg's test, could have drawn from a variety of stages in response to this interpersonal conflict, but she seemed to respond to the judgments made by her partner on their own terms. Her purpose was not to advance the most moral reasons for her position; it was to persuade her partner that he was wrong. In a more experimental study, Carpendale and Krebs (1992) found that participants made significantly lower stage moral judgments about the same Kohlbergian moral dilemmas when they believed the judgments would be read by a professor of business administration than by a professor of philosophy.

There was no evidence that participants who scored at relatively high stages on Kohlberg's test evoked high-stage judgments from their partners. Thus, it seems, low-scoring participants may bring their partners down to find common ground, but high-scoring participants do not pull their partners up to their level.

### *Conflict Resolution*

Partners who shared the same stage of moral competence on Kohlberg's test were no more likely to resolve their interpersonal conflicts than those at different stages. However, partners who based their moral judgments to their interpersonal moral conflicts on the same stage-structures were significantly more likely to achieve mutually acceptable resolutions than those who based their judgments on different structures, even when the shared structures were Stage 2 in nature. Viewing their conflict from the same moral perspective may have enhanced partners' ability to talk the same language, to negotiate, and to find common ground, even though this meant that partners who possessed relatively high levels of moral competence based their judgments on lower stage structures.

### **Conclusion**

With respect to models of moral development, the findings of this study add support to the growing body of evidence suggesting that Kohlberg's test assesses the upper levels of people's ability to make mature moral judgments, but that contextual performance factors may induce people to perform below their level of competence. There was an indication that stage of moral development, as assessed by Kohlberg's test, may exert an influence on the types of moral dilemma people experience in their everyday lives. In addition to performance factors found by past researchers to exert a downward pull, we found that the roles participants played and the level of moral competence of their partners were related to the types of moral judgment they made about their interpersonal moral conflicts. These findings are most consistent with a model that attributes the moral judgments people make in their everyday lives to an interaction between their level of moral competence—and therefore the structures of moral reasoning available to them—the structure of the moral problems they face, and the goals they seek to achieve by making moral judgments. In everyday life such goals are usually in-

terpersonal in nature and best achieved by making lower stage moral judgments than one is capable of making when offering ideal solutions to hypothetical moral dilemmas.

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