INTRODUCTION

Research on moral development attempts to respond to the following question: how is it that people grow morally, and what influences the development of a moral life? Moral development research makes some important assumptions that are seldom addressed in the literature but which are nonetheless central to it:

- All human beings have the capacity for moral thinking.
- Moral thinking is linked to experience. While philosophers have contributed enormously to a thoroughgoing analysis of the implications of choice within experience, no legitimate ethical theory divorces human action, and hence experience, from moral thinking, learning and growth.
- Moral thinking can be both general and particular. There are general moral questions—is it right to lie or to kill—to which all human beings have a response. But, there are particular elaborations of moral questions—is it ever appropriate for a journalist to deceive a source who is attempting to deceive the journalist—to which professionals must respond within a particular context.

This chapter will briefly review the general understandings of the field, place our research within that context, and then suggest potential paths for additional empirical and theoretical work.

THEORETICAL BUILDING BLOCKS

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget is considered the field’s founder in terms of both research results and approach. Piaget was particularly interested in how children put their cognitive worlds in order. He researched and wrote the book *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (Piaget, 1965) just after he had written a book on how children understand causality. In the subsequent work, Piaget was particularly concerned with the following questions:
1. How is it that children understand the moral “rules” of behavior with their peers;
2. Where do the “rules” come from;
3. How, and under what circumstances, can the rules be changed.

Piaget answered these questions with a qualitative study of children playing in their natural environment. He watched and interviewed young boys as they played marbles. The interviews were designed to elicit the boys’ understanding of the moral rules as well as their “consciousness” of the rules themselves. The use of the concept of autonomy in Piaget’s work is significant for philosophy as well as psychology. Philosophers assert that ethical thinking and action begins with the ability to make an autonomous choice. How such autonomy develops, and how it is bounded by life experience as well as cultural constraint, has significant implications for the fields of both psychology and philosophy.

The boys who played marbles ranged in age from 5 to 12, and Piaget found that their understanding of the moral rules changed according to a predictable, and predictably more sophisticated, pattern—hence, the term moral “development.” The very youngest children, age 2, put the marbles in their mouths, a kind of motor exploration every parent will recognize but with little moral import. Piaget called it motor and individual. As the children aged, this highly idiosyncratic play became both routinized and ritualized. By age 5, the children moved into the egocentric stage, where the rules were regarded as immutable and originating from authority figures. Boys in the 5- to 6-year-old-range didn’t really play together; they engaged in what psychologists today call parallel play. By ages 7 to 8, two important changes occurred. First, the boys actually played together and they moved into what Piaget called the stage of incipient cooperation. At this stage, the boys, in separate interviews, would give very different accounts of the actual rules, but they regarded these disparate rules as immutable, emanating from authority figures, and applicable to everyone in all instances—no exceptions. Finally, at about age 9 to 10, the boys entered the stage of the codification of the rules. At this stage, the boys gave the same account of the rules. These boys had internalized the rules and understood that they could change them—providing those changes were consistent with the reasons behind the rules themselves. Changing the rules summoned both moral autonomy and moral imagination. Philosophers would recognize some of the changes the boys instituted as reflecting an understanding of distributive justice (Rawls, 1971), and a grasp of the need for the universal application of principle.

While Piaget (1965) did his work on children, the applicability of his insights to adult moral behavior is straightforward. Adults sometimes do ethically questionable things (driving a car very fast just for the experience of speed) to see “what it would feel like.” Cooperation is the work of adult life—in families and on the job. Adults placed in novel situations—first-time parents, college graduates at the start of a career—often search for the “rule book” as a way of guiding themselves through a bewildering set of options and unanticipated need for decisions. Comfort, experience, and good cognitive skills ultimately allow most adults to internalize some universal understandings—even if those understandings are unevenly and irregularly applied. Adult life mirrors the moral judgments of the child in often uncanny and insightful ways.

Piaget’s work stood for more than two decades before psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (Erikson, 1950/1963) expanded on it. Erikson’s work will be dealt with in more depth later in this chapter, but it is important to note that Erikson focused on the entire adult life cycle, not just childhood. Furthermore, Erikson postulated that each stage of moral development depended to an important degree on how the issues raised in previous stages had been resolved. Based on the work of these two psychologists, scholars accepted that moral development was both sequential and hierarchical.
While many scholars have contributed to the theory of moral development, it is Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development that is one of the most widely used today. Kohlberg (1981, 1984), who tested Piaget’s framework on undergraduate men at Harvard, proposed that these stages reflect progressively higher quality ethical reasoning, based on principles of ethical philosophy, with the higher the stage the better the reasoning. His theory rests on the assumption that some reasons used to decide ethical quandaries are better than others; good ethical thinking is not relativistic. He said that some reasons for choosing a course of action represent more comprehensive, coherent, elaborated or developed ideas, and described the course of moral development as evolving from simpler ideas to more complex ones (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma, 1999a).

Kohlberg also intended for his theory to be applied to society, that is, to laws, roles, institutions, and general practices, rather than to personal, face-to-face relationships (Rest et al., 1999a). This type of macro-morality addresses relations between strangers, competitors, diverse ethnic groups, and religions, not just the micro-morality of family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. His is a psychologically-based theory of social justice—a society-wide system of cooperation among strangers, not only friends.

Kohlberg theorized that people progress through the six stages in hierarchical linear fashion with no slipping backward. People are fully “in” one stage or another, and move up the staircase one step at a time.

These hard stages based on a staircase metaphor have since been modified by a group of scholars known as Neo-Kohlbergians to reflect a softer model based on the concept of schematic thinking (Giammarco, 2016; Rest et al., 1999a). Schemas, which are expectations about the ways events usually unfold, are developed through previous interactions (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). People hold schemas for ethical problems that they use when making decisions about new dilemmas (Rest et al., 1999a). Schemas activate understandings from long-term memory to help people process new information; moral schemas are activated from long-term memory to help people understand and process information that arises from new ethical problems. That is, if a person has acquired the highest quality schema, it will be activated; otherwise, less developed schemas are used. In this model, people can reason using multiple stages at one time. They can regress and use lower stages at the same time they use the higher ones; however, generally, people will show more propensity to use the higher stages more often as they grow and develop.

Kohlberg’s six stages were divided into three broad levels—Preconventional, Conventional, and Postconventional, which correspond to the Neo-Kohlbergians model of three schemas, but with slightly different names. See Table 4.1.

The Preconventional stage, now called the Personal Interest schema, is defined by rules that are delivered by authority and are inviolable; breaking rules results in punishment, and adherence to rules is either to avoid punishment or gain rewards. In this stage, people are concerned with their own welfare. Acts that provide satisfaction to the self and others are “right,” but others are considered only when their needs are in line with one’s own. This level of moral development is defined by simple, self-interested obedience to the rules—following the rules primarily when it is in one’s own interest to do so. People who use the personal interest schema make moral decisions based on reasons that emphasize self-interest and punishment for wrongdoing. In the latter half of this stage or schema, reciprocity and fairness begin to emerge in a self-serving way, for example, children would agree to give others a birthday present because they believe that others will reciprocate on their birthday.

The second stage of Conventional reasoning, now renamed the Maintaining Norms schema, is where rules begin to be respected for their own sake and are eventually seen as serving society. Rules are necessary for maintaining social order and can be changed if all agree. This category is
defined by conformity to the expectations of society. Helping others and gaining their approval drive an individual’s actions. At this level, one’s moral reasoning is dominated by “doing one’s duty” and maintaining social order for its own sake. Authority here is vested in the social group(s) to which the individual belongs. The notion of social systems, or doing what is expected to maintain social order, is paramount, as is conformity, or doing what other people expect. Thinking at this stage acknowledges the role of duty. Research suggests that most people operate at this level of moral development most of the time (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984).

Kohlberg’s highest stage, the Postconventional, is still called Postconventional in the schema model. In this stage, Kohlberg relied heavily on Rawls’ (1971) concept of justice from an original position behind a “veil of ignorance.” When decision-makers do their reasoning behind a veil where they are ignorant of their own station in life as well as that of others, all people will be treated equally and as ends in themselves. This ensures the use of universal principles that all would agree to uphold, even if they did not benefit the person making the decision. Kohlberg referred to this as “moral musical chairs.”

In the Postconventional stage or schema, laws and rules are respected only so far as they appeal to universal ethical principles; rules are the result of intellectual reasoning and they should achieve full reciprocity; that is, the rules themselves should not favor one group over another. Right and wrong, and the value of rules and law, are determined by their appeal to mutuality and universality. Individual principles of conscience define morality at this level. People who use this schema are concerned about the reason for the rules and are willing to challenge both social norms and self-interest for a more universal understanding. For example, a journalist operating at this stage of moral development would agree to withhold publishing a photograph in order to protect a person’s privacy—even though publishing the photograph might attract more readers. At this level, there is an awareness of the process by which rules are arrived at as well as the content of the rules. People are aware of concepts such as a social contract that demands citizens uphold laws even if they are not in an individual’s best interest, and it includes an understanding that some rights are beyond debate, for example, life and liberty. Those at this stage internalize such principles and apply them even-handedly.

The following example distinguishes between thinking at the Conventional level and the Postconventional level: in the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., deliberately marched, sat, and ate in places that were illegal for African Americans to be in during that time. George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, had King jailed for breaking these laws. According to Conventional or Maintaining Norms reasoning, King would be ethically wrong and Wallace right. But Postconventional reasoning would determine that King was in the right because the laws he was defying were unjust; they singled out specific people rather than treating all people equally, thus they did not represent universal principles.

Kohlberg’s concept of moral development was challenged by Carol Gilligan (1982), a former student of Kohlberg’s who argued that women develop differently from men, placing more emphasis on caring for others. Kohlberg’s formulation focused on rights and justice, and was criticized by Gilligan (1982) because women systematically scored lower than men on Kohlberg’s test. Her study of women making moral choices about abortion uncovered the idea that moral weight should be given to caring for others. She suggested the moral adult was the person who could reason about both rights and connections or relationships to others. Although Kohlberg had specified his theory was to be applied to macro issues rather than micro ones, he revised his framework to include an ethic of care along with his rights-based reasoning; since then, women and men have done about the same on tests of this theory such as the Defining Issues Test (Thoma, 1986).
TABLE 4.1
Stages/Schemas of Moral Development and Sample Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample statements from PR and journalism dilemmas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preconventional/ personal interest</td>
<td>Avoid punishment, gain rewards. Doesn’t consider the interests of others.</td>
<td>Keeping quiet would help my firm’s bottom line. A chance like this photo comes only a few times in a career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional/ maintaining norms</td>
<td>Belief in the Golden Rule. Living up to what is expected by others. Desire to maintain rules and authority, uphold laws. Right is contributing to society, group, or institution.</td>
<td>Whether a community’s laws are going to be upheld. Whether the public has a right to know all the facts about drug use and its effects on people, especially children. It’s what my client wants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postconventional</td>
<td>Concern that laws be based on rational calculation of overall good. Recognizes moral and legal points of view sometimes conflict. Laws are valid when they rest on universal principles of justice. People are ends in themselves and must be treated as such.</td>
<td>What would best serve society? If I don’t run this photo, the conditions leading to situations like theirs will persist.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE DEFINING ISSUES TEST—HOW IT WORKS

Another student of Kohlberg’s who extended his work in important ways was James Rest. He applied the concept of moral development specifically to the professions, starting with nurses and including veterinarians, doctors, dentists, and social workers, among others. Rest and the other Neo-Kohlbergians also proposed a theoretical framework needed to produce moral behavior, called the Four Component Model. It consists of moral sensitivity, which is the ability to recognize that a situation is a moral issue; moral judgment, or the ability to determine morally acceptable options, which is the focus of most moral development research; moral motivation, or the ability to compel oneself to do the right thing; and moral character, or the long-term ability to behave in a moral fashion (Cruzer, 2014; Rest et al., 1999a). This idea has been expanded to become a dual process theory of moral development (Greene, 2007).

Most importantly, Rest and his colleagues devised a paper-and-pencil instrument called the Defining Issues Test, or DIT, that was faster and easier to administer and score than Kohlberg’s Moral Judgment Inventory, which used in-depth interviews and an 800-page code book to score each thought’s stage (Rest & Narvaez, 1998). Since the original six-scenario DIT, a newer version with five, updated scenarios called the DIT-2 has been developed (Giammarco, 2016; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999b).

We take a moment here to note that it is not our intention to suggest that the DIT is the only legitimate way to conduct morality research. There are many good instruments and approaches, such as Moral Foundation Theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). However, the DIT has been in use since the 1970s and more than 1,000 studies of literally hundreds of thousands of people in more than 40 countries allow us much comparative data and confidence. It is important to note that the DIT is copyrighted; while we refer to the instrument, we do not quote directly from it but only from our modifications to it.
Basically, the DIT poses six ethical dilemmas—the DIT-2 uses five—and asks respondents to make a decision about what they would do, for example, would you report to police a neighbor who has been a model citizen for 10 years but turns out to have escaped from prison a decade ago? The answers participants can choose from are rather limited—turn him in, don’t turn him in, or can’t decide. For the purposes of assessing one’s level of moral development, this behavioral choice is less important than the other tasks on the DIT (Rest et al., 1999a). In fact, because the DIT uses true moral dilemmas rather than ethical no-brainers, there is no one “right” choice; an equally good case may be made for either course of action. The idea behind the DIT is to assess the level of moral development a person draws from to justify his or her course of action. For example, someone who decides to turn the prisoner in because the laws says that is the right thing to do is reasoning at the Conventional level. Yet another person who makes the exact same choice but does so because she believes that is what is best for society is using the Postconventional level. While there may not be one “right” course of action, some reasons for it are better than others.

More than 400 published studies using the DIT have established its validity and generalizability. It correlates highly (up to $r = .78$) with other tests of ethical reasoning and developmental measures, and has been shown to measure moral development, not intelligence, education, verbal ability, or some other construct. Test-retest reliability is in the .80s using Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for internal reliability. It contains built-in checks to assure that participants are not randomly giving high ratings to statements that sound important but which have little meaning for them; in other words, trying to fake high. There also is a consistency check that ensures the statements ranked highest also are rated highest. The DIT is a projective instrument; that is, participants know they are taking an “ethics test,” but they cannot tell which answers are better than others unless they have developed schemas at those levels. Finally, the DIT has been linked to measures of ethical behavior such as cheating on tests, prosocial behavior, professional decision-making, and job performance (Rest et al., 1999a); in other words, it doesn’t just measure what people say they would do, but correlates with what they would be likely to actually do.

Of course, there are limitations to the DIT, only one of which will be discussed here; for more information see Rest et al. (1999a). First, in scoring the level of moral development, the original DIT gives “credit” only for statements at the highest stage of moral judgment, not for reasoning at the Conventional stage. This is because the DIT is designed to measure the relative importance that a person gives to principled moral thinking, and is not interested in lower stage thinking.

While the DIT measures ways of thinking, its connection to philosophy is clear. Universal principles and their application result in higher scores. In addition, because the DIT was based on Kohlberg’s work initially, universal principles that emphasize “rights” constitute the original conception of the postconventional schema.

**MAJOR PREDICTORS**

Much research on moral development is concerned with discovering the differences among individuals that are the major predictors of higher levels of moral development. In this section, we focus on four of the most consistent predictors correlated with higher moral development, and one individual characteristic that is not a predictor but is connected to this topic anyway.

Any theory that claims to be “developmental” implies that people change as they age. In the case of moral development theory, the higher the age, the higher the quality of moral reasoning used. Thus, age and education are the primary determinants of moral development (Rest,
Longitudinal studies have found stage progression as predicted by the theory from high school into adulthood (White, Bushnell, & Regnemer, 1978) and moral development levels off when formal education stops (Rest, 1979). The two are obviously correlated—one cannot usually achieve high levels of education at an early age—yet age and education are not the same thing. Advanced age alone does not guarantee high levels of education, and education is a more powerful predictor of moral development. One scholar who focused on delineating what it is about age that fostered moral development found the best predictors were when people’s life experiences involved intellectual stimulation or supported learning, or included a rich social environment in the form of a stimulating spouse, friends, and institutional affiliations (Deemer, 1989). Like age, education involves more than mere time spent in classrooms. Multiple possibilities help explain why education improves moral development. For example, college aims to develop critical thinking skills and professors are always asking students to explain why, give evidence for opinions, and think for themselves. The social experience of college exposes students to diversity of facts, ideas, people, and cultures. Alternatively, it could be that the people who choose to go to college are more interested in their own development, and college stimulates that (Rest et al., 1999a). Kohlberg (1976) thought it was the process of learning to see things from other people’s points of view that provided the key to growth in moral judgment.

Although age and education are the strongest predictors of the DIT’s moral development measure known as the P score (the DIT-2 measure is called the N2 score), “the most striking finding from the literature … is the consistent relationship between DIT P scores and religious beliefs” (Rest, Thoma, Moon, & Getz, 1986, p. 131). Consistently, and perhaps counterintuitively, more fundamental or conservative religious beliefs are correlated with lower levels of moral development in numerous studies (Lawrence, 1978; Parker, 1990; Rest, 1979, 1983, 1986). We wish to point out up front that it is religious fundamentalism that is implicated here—the literal interpretation of religious texts such as the Bible or Koran and rigid adherence to those principles, often with intolerance of other views—not one’s religious affiliation or the strength of one’s religious devotion. Some scholars theorize that a higher ethical orientation requires critical and evaluative reasoning that may be opposed to fundamental religious beliefs (Parker, 1990). If orthodox religions teach that it is improper and sinful to question, critique, or scrutinize the church or a divine authority, then people find it harder to move out of the conventional stage of reasoning. Fundamentalist ideologies that prescribe laws or norms and make them binding upon people without question are understood in terms of maintaining norms schemas; divine authority is outside the bounds of human scrutiny or understanding. In one study (Lawrence, 1978), radically fundamental seminarians who could understand Postconventional concepts did not use them in making moral decisions. They explained that they were setting aside their own intuitions about what was fair because as mortals, their judgment was fallible. Instead, they turned to religious teachings to tell them what to do. Similarly, other scholars (Glock & Stark, 1996) found that orthodox Christian beliefs were highly correlated with social intolerance, and yet another (Ellis, 1986) concluded that extreme religiosity leads to a greater disregard for the rights of others.

The DIT creators reject the idea that they or Kohlberg, his theory, or the DIT, are antireligious. Indeed, religious directives from transcendent authorities that are incorporated into life experience and therefore not beyond human understanding are Postconventional: “Many people of faith have a Postconventional understanding of their religion and its moral meaning for their lives” (Rest et al., 1999a, p. 123). Even Kohlberg wrote that religious beliefs influence moral thinking in powerful ways (Kohlberg & Power, 1981), and offered statements about religious beliefs that represented postconventional thinking (e.g., God is the force behind a just society and autonomous personhood; religious faith affirms a person’s desire to lead a moral life). This stance is entirely consistent with many contemporary ethical theorists and some ancient ones as well.
The final powerful predictor of moral development is political ideology. Typically, conservative attitudes are more supportive of authority and established practices, which describes the Conventional level of moral development. Political positions that encourage freedom of thought are more attuned to Postconventional thinking. In DIT studies, self-reported conservatives tend to prefer Conventional statements, and self-reported liberals tend to like Postconventional items.

The DIT creators say that it is natural for political ideology to mirror moral development because political attitudes represent ideas about how people should relate to each other in society; moral judgment also concerns itself with how people should get along in macro situations. In politics, people make decisions about how to relate to others in a larger sense, through laws, institutions, and general practices. Political choices involve choosing how a law or policy affects everyone in society and how society should work generally. Political attitudes mirror the DIT’s macro-morality by focusing on what principles should govern us all. The conservative/liberal scale in political ideology is independent of a particular party—one can be a conservative Democrat or a liberal Democrat, just as one can be a conservative or liberal Republican. Also like the religiosity measure, discriminant validity studies have shown that the DIT is not simply a measure of liberal political attitudes. Both conservative and liberal positions can be staged at Postconventional levels.

Finally, we want to briefly address a common misunderstanding of moral development theory—namely that the work of one scholar “disproves” the work of another. One of the most frequent comments we hear about the field is that Gilligan’s work disproved Kohlberg’s theory. Her book, *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan, 1982), argued that Kohlberg’s theory was biased against women, who preferred to use an ethic of caring for others rather than a justice orientation. She interviewed women who were facing a personal ethical dilemma—whether to have an abortion. Even though Kohlberg had devised his theory to explain moral reasoning in social situations rather than individual ones such as the abortion question Gilligan studied, he made changes in his theory and instrument to incorporate the ethic of care, or what he called benevolence, in the highest stage of development. When Rest and colleagues developed the DIT, they included women in their samples and that instrument has not shown any significant gender bias. Reviews of DIT studies show 90 percent of them find no gender differences (Rest, 1979; Thoma, 1986). When differences are found, it is usually women who score higher, not men (e.g., Auger & Gee, 2016). Nevertheless, this belief that Kohlberg is obsolete thanks to Gilligan is an enduring one that persists despite much evidence to the contrary.

**JOURNALISTS AND OTHERS IN MASS COMMUNICATION**

The original DIT scholars focused their research on professions with a large moral component including nurses, doctors, dentists, and accountants. They suggest the DIT is especially good at measuring decision-making in uncertain situations. Even though journalism is not technically a profession in the sense that its members are licensed and regulated by independent review boards, the DIT creators include journalism in this category, calling it an “emerging profession” (Rest & Narvaez, 1994, p. xi). We agree; as former professional journalists we are well acquainted with having to make decisions without full information about situations that have no one right answer, or even any good ones. To our knowledge, the first study of journalists using the DIT was a dissertation in 1995 (Westbrook, 1995), which was excerpted for a chapter in Rest and colleagues’ book on moral development in the professions (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Nor were we aware of any further research on these professionals with the DIT until our own pilot study of 72 journalists seven years later (Coleman & Wilkins, 2002). Since then, we and others have completed more research on this important group of professionals.
Our pilot study of 72 journalists showed that they scored fourth highest among all professionals tested with the DIT. The journalists ranked behind seminarians/philosophers, medical students, and physicians, but above dental students, nurses, graduate students, undergraduate college students, veterinary students, and adults in general. The mean P score for the journalists in the first study was 48.17; this is in comparison with the average adult’s P score of 40 (for comparison with other professions, see Table 4.2). In order to have confidence in results, social scientists look to replication. So, it was encouraging that the P score of our journalists was virtually the same as the P scores of the 66 journalists in Westbrook’s study—48.1. And, furthermore, that our later study of 249 journalists whose news organizations were randomly sampled from around the country was again nearly the same, with a mean P score of 48.68. Larger samples typically produce higher scores, so this slightly (but not statistically significant) higher number is to be expected. In all these studies, journalists scored higher than three groups whose members had higher education levels than the average journalist—dental, veterinary, and graduate students. Recall that education is consistently the best predictor of moral development; as education goes up, so does the mean P score. Yet, these journalists had, on average, a four-year college education, while dental, veterinary, and graduate students have one to two years more education.

More recent studies have extended these findings. Plaisance (2014) used our two journalism scenarios with the DIT and found a P score of 51.62 for journalists identified as “exemplars,” or those who were identified as highly ethical by their peers.

Our study of 118 public relations professionals around the country showed they fared similarly to the journalists (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009). The mean P score was 46.2, which puts the PR professionals in seventh place, just below journalists, dental students, and nurses. Plaisance (2014) found an even higher score—50.38—for public relations practitioners identified as exemplars, using our two PR-specific dilemmas with the DIT. Although our study randomly sampled PR firms around the country, it is by no means the definitive word on the moral development of public relations professionals; cumulative results obtained through replication would give us more confidence.

We issue similar caveats when interpreting the results of a non-random, web-based study of 65 advertising professionals (Cunningham, 2005). The advertisers who responded in this study showed considerably lower levels of moral development than the journalists or public relations professionals—their mean P score was 31.64, also well below the average P score of 40 for adults in general. They were more similar to the scores of people working in various businesses than other professions. Part of an explanation for this poor showing is the scores on the two advertising-focused dilemmas; the mean P score of 22.7 on these two dilemmas actually pulled down their score on the other dilemmas—more on that later.

In all these studies, we also looked for significant predictors of higher levels of moral development. What we found was somewhat consistent with the larger literature, but not on all counts. Religiosity was consistently a predictor of the P score. In both our pilot study and a larger, random sample of journalists, religion was significantly and negatively correlated with these journalists’ P scores. In both studies, journalists who said they were more liberal in their beliefs were significantly more likely to score higher than were the religious fundamentalists. Religious fundamentalism had the same negative effect on the public relations professionals’ P scores. In that study, we also teased out the difference between fundamentalism and depth of one’s religious conviction by including the question: “How religious are you, extremely to not at all?” While those who said they held fundamentalist views showed significantly lower levels of ethical reasoning, those who said they were deeply religious did not show any differences in P scores from the less religious. The advertising study did not ask questions about religion.

Political ideology behaved as it has in other studies only in the study of public relations professionals; in this group, those who rated their political views as more liberal were significantly
likely to have higher P scores. This effect did not hold for either study of journalists; advertisers were not asked about their political views.

Surprisingly, age and education were not the major predictors of ethical development in our four studies that they are traditionally. Education approached significance ($p = .06$) in the large sample study of journalists, but not the smaller study of journalists, or the ones of PR professionals and advertisers. We surmise this may have something to do with a lack of variance in education. When the education range is expanded by comparing studies of students to working professionals, we see a sizable difference in scores; for example, journalism and public relations students average a P score of 31.18 in one study (Cabot, 2005), compared to PR professionals’ average P score of 46.2 (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009) and journalism professionals’ average P score of 48.17 (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004). Whether this was because of education, experience, or something else is unclear.

Not surprisingly, gender was again not significant in any of the four studies. We also found there were no differences in ethical reasoning abilities between broadcasters and print journalists in either journalism study, although those who had done investigative reporting had significantly higher P scores than those who had not. Various other factors that we studied were significant predictors of better moral judgment, and we invite those interested to read the entire studies (Coleman & Wilkins, 2002, 2004, 2009; Cunningham, 2005; Wilkins & Coleman, 2005, 2006).

One common feature of the studies cited above is the use of domain-specific dilemmas. The DIT creators were adamant for years that the dilemmas should remain the same in order to complete a comparable cycle of research. However, after they devised new dilemmas of their own for a second version of the DIT, called the DIT-2, they began to encourage experimentation with new dilemmas in new formats (Rest et al., 1999b), adding that domain-specific stories can be more predictive of behavior (Rest & Narvaez, 1984). Our four studies reviewed here took advantage of that by including two dilemmas specific to journalism, public relations, and advertising. This allowed comparison between the domain-specific dilemmas and the more general dilemmas on the original DIT. This allowed us to test the idea that professionals may use more sophisticated reasoning in areas where they have expertise, and less sophisticated in other areas where they do not (Cruzer, 2014).

In the two journalism studies and the PR study, we found what the DIT theorists predicted—that expertise in an area leads to high quality moral judgment about those topics (Rest et al., 1999a). In both studies of journalists, the respondents had significantly higher mean P scores for the journalism dilemmas than for the non-journalism dilemmas. The same was true of the PR professionals. The advertising practitioners, however, showed exactly the opposite results; their scores on the two advertising dilemmas were actually significantly lower than their scores on the non-advertising dilemmas. Using other data they supplied, Cunningham (2005) theorized that these advertising practitioners were able to reason at a higher level, but suspended that ability when the issues were about advertising and focused instead on financial concerns for themselves, their clients, and agencies. Disturbingly, having worked in the advertising industry longer was significantly predictive of lower levels of moral judgment; thus, industry socialization seems to privilege self-serving financial concerns over more universal, social ones.

OTHER INFLUENCES ON MORAL THINKING

Another approach to the study of moral judgment has been to devise controlled experiments to see what sorts of interventions or manipulations can help improve people’s ethical reasoning. We also have conducted a few experiments on journalists in that vein. Most typically, researchers
look to educational interventions such as ethics courses (e.g., Auger & Gee, 2016) or internships (Craig & Oja, 2013); we began by examining two different influences that can be found in professional environments, not just college settings—race and the presence of photographs.

For these studies, we created an instrument we call the JERI, or Journalists’ Ethical Reasoning Instrument. It works similarly to the DIT, but uses only four dilemmas and thus cannot gauge a person’s overall level of moral development; instead, it assesses moral judgment in one particular domain, journalism. Additionally, the scores from the four dilemmas are calculated differently and are not interpreted the same way as the six scores of the DIT or the five scores of the N2. (Contact authors for more information on scoring or copies of the JERI.)

In two studies of the effects of race on moral judgment, we found that White journalism majors were significantly more likely to use lower quality reasons when the story subjects were Black than when they were White (Coleman, 2003), but that Black journalism majors were not (Coleman, 2011a). The Black future journalists showed the same level of judgment regardless of the race of the story subjects. The finding was replicated with professional Black journalists (Coleman, 2011b). This study also expanded the range of minority professional journalists studied, and found that neither Asian American nor Hispanic professional journalists showed significantly different levels of moral judgment for either their own or the other racial out-group (Coleman, 2011b). This suggests that in-group and social identity theories that have traditionally studied only Whites, do not apply the same way to the moral judgment processes of minorities. This study recommends future research to look for the mechanisms that mitigate this bias, suggesting personal experience with prejudice could be a factor.

In these studies, we found that the presence of a picture of the people in the dilemma significantly improved participants’ moral judgment (Coleman, 2007). The experiments identified thinking about the people affected by an ethical situation as important in the process (Coleman, 2007). Visualizing stakeholders is an important component of classical ethical theory, particularly in distributive justice and in many conceptualizations of duty. Providing ethical decision-makers with visual information may well evoke these more universal principles, something that has implications for media professionals and members of other professions as well. However, that visual information must be of a particular type—still photographs and not moving images that journalists use in broadcast and increasingly in web video. In a study designed to compare changes in audiences’ moral judgment when viewing still photographs, video shown once as on TV, or video shown multiple times as can be done with the Internet, moral judgment was significantly lower when audiences viewed video shown once compared to when they saw a still photograph (Meader, Knight, Coleman, & Wilkins, 2015). This study also contributed to the mounting evidence that photographs can provide a bump to moral reasoning (Coleman, 2003, 2006, 2011a). The studies suggest that when issues in the news are ethically charged, such as in shootings where race is a factor, that even broadcast and web-based journalists use still images rather than or in addition to video to help audiences reason at higher ethical levels.

However, it is not always the case that photographs improve moral judgment; in one study comparing vivid writing to photographs in the public relations context, photographs had no effect, although they did increase participants’ perception of the issue as morally important (McEntee, Coleman, & Yaschur, 2017). The authors speculate that the negative photographs in PR material were unexpected to audiences more accustomed to positive images in that context, leading to more evidence of the importance of domain.

Finally, one study explored the common perception among journalists that they treat children with greater ethical sensitivity than adults (Coleman, 2011c). In their self-reports, journalists said they were significantly more concerned with protecting children’s privacy, avoiding harm, and ensuring they understood the consequences of news coverage. However, when it came to following through in deeds, they did not withhold children’s photos significantly more than
adults, nor did they use significantly higher levels of moral judgment for children than adults. As many researchers know, there can be a disconnect between what people think they do and what they actually do when making ethical decisions. This makes it all the more important that research continue into influences on moral judgment.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: THE COMPONENTS OF MORAL THINKING

News increasingly crosses borders and media content is more and more produced for international audiences and by journalists who realize their work speaks to a worldwide audience. Thus, the study of professional moral development needs to be conducted on non-U.S. journalists, as well. This effort will allow scholars to begin to understand the impact of culture—not just newsroom culture but also history and country—on journalistic decision-making. Philosophically, if some ethical understandings do appear to be universal, and if some patterns of thought cross the boundaries of nation-state, then this evidence becomes central to the nascent search for universal norms and understandings (Christians, 2002; Gert, 1988). Culture certainly should make some

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4.2</th>
<th>Mean P Scores of Various Professions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seminarians/philosophers</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical students</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing physicians</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>48.1 to 48.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental students</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations professionals</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate students</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate students</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy students</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary students</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy enlisted men</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopedic surgeons</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults in general</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business professionals</td>
<td>38.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting undergraduates</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting auditors</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business students</td>
<td>31.35 to 37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising professionals</td>
<td>31.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations students</td>
<td>31.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school students</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison inmates</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior high students</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by the authors from individual published studies and data supplied by the Center for the Study of Ethical Development.
difference, and there is preliminary work in the field to suggest it is a difference of emphasis rather than quality and kind (Rao & Lee, 2005). For example, Baek (2002) identified some cultural concepts not accounted for by Kohlberg in Korean children. However, Gibbs, Basinger, Grime, and Snarey (2007) reviewed 75 studies and found cross-cultural convergence on moral values and moral development stage development. But more systematic work, and work that can be comparative without being colonial or invasive, would add considerable depth to the contemporary understandings in the field.

The existing literature of moral development has relied extensively on the psychological literature of intellectual development. In addition, much of the literature on moral growth focuses on children (e.g., Piaget) or adolescents and undergraduate college students (Perry, 1970). Relatively few studies have examined moral development throughout the first four decades of the human life span (Levinson, 1986) or moral development in people past the age of 35 to 40 (Belenky, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Only Levinson’s work devotes much attention to the impact of work on development, and in that study, work was emphasized as marking some sorts of moral growth rather than as an influence on that growth. The same is true of Women’s Ways of Knowing (Belenky, 1986).

Only Erikson (Erikson, 1950/1963) has provided any sort of theoretical map of the links between moral growth and individual development from birth to extreme old age. That theory is linked with life experience in general, and only at certain times focuses on specific actions; for example, the ability to establish and maintain adult, intimate relationships. However, Erikson’s theory also establishes a profoundly influential place for the environment, in his words the society into which human beings are born and function. Erikson provides some tantalizing suggestions about what sort of external influences may spur moral adult development and growth. He notes,

> We must expand our scope to include the study of the way in which societies lighten the inescapable conflicts of childhood with a promise of some security, identity, and integrity. In thus reinforcing the values by which the ego exists…societies create the only condition under which human growth is possible.… Yet, political, economic and technical elites, wherever they have accepted the obligation to perfect a new style of living at a logical point in history, have provided men with a high sense of identity and have inspired them to reach new levels of civilization. (Erikson, 1950/1963, pp. 277–278)

Because Erikson is first and foremost a psychoanalyst, his theory places the individual first and links individual development with specific “crises” that all human beings must surmount. But, another group of psychologists—without the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis—have come to remarkably similar conclusions. When Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001) note that journalism is a profession profoundly out of joint with itself, they also summon notions of identity, roles, and professionals goals as they are influenced by the world of work in which contemporary people spend so much of their adult lives. By interviewing professionals “at the top of their game,” Gardner and colleagues assured themselves of a sample with both professional vision and the professional career informed by life experience to reflect upon it. As their book demonstrates, these journalists worked and yearned for a profession that was reconnected to its nurturance and sustenance of political society, specifically contemporary democracy. They saw themselves as reflecting that connection but stymied by the powerful economic factors currently influencing media organizations. Authentic alignment, in their terms, meant creating new institutions, expanding the functions of, reconfiguring membership in, and reaffirming the values of existing institutions, and taking personal stands (pp. 212–218.)

These suggestions are not so far removed from the final four stages of Erikson’s adult moral development. Future research should investigate the specific impact of work on moral
growth—specifically professional moral development. In addition, understanding moral growth may encourage philosophical work. For example, the ethics of care in the psychological literature has generally been separated from classical ethical theory. However, by an in-depth evaluation of the moral growth of professionals, as well as analyzing their individual moral choices, how professionals connect philosophical concepts such as care and duty have remained separated in the academic literature (Wilkins, 2010).

One future challenge of moral development research is to tease out the areas of the world of work that can promote or retard moral growth in a professional context. Empirical work, of course, would follow.

NOTES

1. The DIT is scored as follows: Participants rank 12 issues statements according to how important each one is in making a decision. The statements represent the different stages of schemas that make up the categories developed by Kohlberg as modified by Rest. Participants have five options—from not important to very important—on each statement, the presumption being that if a person has developed a particular schema, say the conventional schema, the participant will rank statements from that stage higher than statements at other stages. The final task is for participants to consider all 12 statements and rank only the top 4 of them in order of importance in decision-making. This ranking forms the basis of the P score—a number which reflects the relative importance the person gave only to Postconventional statements.

2. The developers of the DIT spent 20 years trying to develop an alternative scoring system that would eliminate “throwing away data,” that is, the lower stage items. The P score survived because it consistently gave better trends for the theoretically expected findings, and was relatively easy to compute and interpret (see Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, & Bebeau, 1997).

3. It takes the full five to six dilemmas of the DIT or DIT-2 to gauge a person’s overall level of moral development, which is a larger concept that comprises a person’s moral reasoning on many individual ethical dilemmas. Moral judgment, defined as the ability to determine appropriate options in a moral dilemma (Rest, 1993), is one of the components of moral development and the term we use with fewer dilemmas.

REFERENCES


