

Morality Research from a Neo-Kohlbergian Perspective

Rest and his colleagues (Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanz, & Anderson, 1974) developed the Defining Issues Test (DIT) during the early 1970s. This measure was first considered as a paper and pencil alternative to Kohlberg's (1969) classic semi-structured interview for assessing moral judgment development. This perception was quite reasonable since there were many similarities between the two measures. Consistent with Kohlberg's measure, the DIT used moral dilemmas to focus participant's attention on a moral situation and Kohlberg's stages to inform the items. However, with the criticisms of Kohlberg's theory and methodology in mind, DIT researchers (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999) proposed a reformulation of Kohlberg's approach based on a large body of findings produced by the DIT. To highlight these significant changes to theory and measurement, DIT researchers identified their position as the Neo-Kohlbergian approach. This paper will review the positions DIT researchers took in framing the Neo-Kohlbergian and then identify research traditions that have been particularly influenced by this model.

Theoretical Background of the Neo-Kohlbergian perspective

Why continue to identify with Kohlberg?

Kohlberg's theory dominated the field for decades and his legacy is

still evident in more current models of moral functioning. Kohlberg was successful in bringing Piagetian perspective on moral development (Piaget, 1932/1965) to America and by fusing the Piagetian notions with the then current work by Rawls (1971), he provided a new way of understanding human cooperation. During the 1960s and 1970s, Kohlberg's theory and measurement system were the gold standard by which all other models of moral thinking were compared. Furthermore, Kohlberg's theory had a lot to say about the social issues of the day including the United States involvement in the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and the political turmoil of the 1960s.

It was during this heady time in moral psychology that Rest's DIT originated. It is important to note that all of the stories used by the original DIT originated from Kohlberg's work. Similarly, the items used on the DIT were distillations of participant interview responses on the Kohlberg interview. Indeed, the DIT gained early acceptance by its close relationship to the Kohlberg approach.

At first, the view in the field was that the Rest group had developed a "quick and dirty" objective measure of Kohlberg's theory that might have its uses when one could not use the preferred Kohlberg interview approach. However, over time and with the accumulation of data sets numbering in the hundreds of thousands, the two research programs began to diverge on key theoretical issues. Reflecting these divisions across the 1980s and 1990s, the Rest approach became viewed as a distinct theoretical branch of the cognitive developmental approach to moral psychology. In order to respect and acknowledge their connections to Kohlberg and to reaffirm some basic points of agreement, the Rest group named their research as the "Neo-