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Markoulis, Diomedes

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Political involvement and socio-moral reasoning: Testing Emler's interpretation*

Diomedes Markoulis

*University of Thessaloniki, Department of Philosophy-Education-Psychology,
Thessaloniki 540 06, Greece*

In previous research on the relationships between socio-moral reasoning and political orientation, the evolving capacities in the moral-cognitive realm have been considered as the framework for the formation of different political orientations or attitudes. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether an alternative interpretation proposed by Emler, Renwick & Malone, (1983), i.e. that differences in moral reasoning reflect differences in content of politico-moral ideology, could be verified with students and university graduates actively involved with politics, in a different political culture. Seventy-five young adults completed a measure of moral reasoning from their own and a contrasting political perspective. The results are interpreted as supporting Emler *et al.*'s interpretation. The implications and the limitations of the study are discussed in terms of understanding vs. discriminating moral arguments and the possible impact of the experimental manipulations of the subject's response pattern.

One of the most fundamental assumptions of structural-developmental theories of moral reasoning (e.g. Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs & Lieberman, 1983; Gibbs & Widaman, 1982; Kohlberg, 1976; Kohlberg, Levine & Hewer, 1983; Rest, 1975, 1984) is that moral judgement development reflects an age-related reorganization of thinking pertaining to socio-moral problems. According to Kohlberg's theory, moral reasoning proceeds through six stages in an invariant sequence, though in more recent expositions of the theory, stage six 'has disappeared as a commonly identifiable form of moral reasoning' (Kohlberg, *et al.*, 1983, p. 60). Factors related to culture, to the attainment of cognitive capacities and to role-taking opportunities influence the rate but not the order of progression; also regression to previous stages does not occur. Of particular relevance to the study under report, a basic tenet of the theory implied in the concept of a developmental stage is that moral reasoning arguments representing a full stage or more above one's own cannot be understood.

The moral judgement stages are grouped into three levels of development: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. The main feature of the stages composing each level is the progressive adequacy of their socio-moral perspective in resolving conflicts of interest. Furthermore, they come increasingly close to rational

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