

# Exploring Moral Action in the Context of the Dilemmas of Young Adulthood

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**T**he study of moral action in young adulthood provides an opportunity to understand more fully its origins in order that educational experiences which increase the likelihood of moral action may be intentionally designed and implemented during the college years. This is a report of the Sierrans Revisited Project, an investigation of the response by young adults to the moral dilemmas encountered in their lives in their late 20s and early 30s. Using the personal narrative approach, the investigators identified recurring patterns of moral action in the interpersonal and work environments in which moral dilemmas occurred.

The organization of the report is as follows. Section I describes the original Sierra Project and its rationale at the University of California, Irvine from which the Sierrans Revisited Project developed. Section II introduces the Sierrans Revisited Project and the approach taken to data collection by researchers from Boston University and the University of California, Irvine who collaborated on the research. This section also covers the theories of moral action which informed the original design, and the additional theories which provide a context for the interpretation of results. Section III describes the approach to studying moral action which was taken, and some of the central insights by Katherine Kalliel (1989, 1999), David Connor (1989, 1999a, 1999b) and James Day (1999). Section IV presents six research questions around which the Sierrans Revisited Project was organized, and a theoretical context for thinking about the results from this exploratory study.

## THE ORIGINAL SIERRA PROJECT

This study grew out of an earlier investigation of the development of character in college students known as the Sierra Project (Whiteley and Associates, 1982; Loxley and Whiteley, 1986; Whiteley and Yokota, 1988). The development of values and ethics during the college years has a venerable tradition in America. There has been an expectation that components of the experiences which students have during the college years will contribute to both personal and professional development. During the formative years of higher education in the United States, «the academic curriculum and the entire

campus environment clearly viewed the formation of student character as a central mission of the collegiate experience» (Nucci & Pascarella, 1987).

One of the fundamental obligations of the modern college and university is to influence intentionally the moral thinking and action of the next generation of society's leaders and citizens. Two of the general arguments in support of this fundamental obligation are the «benefits now» argument for students and the «psychological maturity» argument relating to accomplishment in adulthood. The «benefits now» argument is that a greater ethical awareness, and a concern for fairness and the welfare of others are achievements which are ultimately self-rewarding. The «psychological maturity» argument is that research has consistently demonstrated that an important predictor of accomplishment in adulthood is psychological maturity. The Sierra Project had among its goals increasing the impact of the college experience on young people, the psychological development of college students, particularly on dimensions of character, and assisting the broader transition from adolescence to young adulthood. An important rationale for the Sierra Project and related attempts to raise the level of character is the impact of moral and psychological education programs on the level of moral, reasoning and ego development of junior high, high school, and college students (Erickson & Whiteley, 1980; Mosher, 1979; Mosher & Sprinthall, 1971; Rest, 1979a; Scharf, 1978; VWhiteley & Bertin, 1982).

The evidence is conclusive that properly sequenced educational and psychological experiences raise the level of moral reasoning and ego development of adolescents and young adults. This research is extraordinarily hopeful in its implications: For society, education can make a difference in raising the level of the moral reasoning of the citizenry. Inquiry into devising curricula for character education, however, is in its infancy. Research has just begun on the crucial problem of determining the optimal match between the developmental level of students and the sequencing of educational experiences. Nonetheless, the legacy of the past decade is one of documenting the extraordinary potential of our educational institutions for positively impacting the character of students.

For perhaps the first time in their lives, college students are physically and psychologically autonomous from those who have previously been highly influential in their lives: parents and siblings, school-age chums, and high school teachers and friends. Since the vast majority of beginning college students reason in a highly conventional manner, their moral referents are those people immediately around them. It is to significant others and to the peer group that college students look for guidance in formulating their thinking about ethical issues. Homogeneity of influence predominated in high school. The typical college environment, however, contains the opportunity for exposure to, and intellectual confrontation with, diversity in beliefs, lifestyles, and personality types. This is especially the case where there is a coed, multicultural, and mixed socioeconomic population, as in the Sierra Project. A further reason why the college years forcefully impact moral reasoning is the challenge of the growth tasks of late adolescence and early adulthood: securing identity, seeking intimacy, choosing enduring values, and initiating career and educational explorations of crucial significance. Each of these tasks contains the seeds of significant moral dilemmas.

Mosher (1999) noted another rationale for a character education program like the Sierra Project:

*...adolescence and young adulthood are «prime times «for the building of a personal epistemology by students: the values and priorities by which the young will live and order their personal and social lives. Maturation impels them to form their own norms aided or unaided (i.e., in response to many random and inimical forces). Faculty, in my view, have the wisdom and the «position «to help by listening to young people’s pain and confusion, by mentoring, by example, by advice. (p. xvii).*

The Sierra Project investigated the impact of the freshman year and four years of undergraduate study on a central dimension of personal development: the formation of character and its progression from late adolescence to young adulthood. Character was defined conceptually in two parts. The first part referred to the understanding of what is the right, fair, or good thing to do in a given circumstance. The second part referred to the ability to do those things (the courage to act in accordance with one’s understanding of what is right, fair, and good). Thus, character constitutes understanding what is right and acting on what is right.

The emphasis in the Sierra Project at the University of California, Irvine in the latter years of the 1970s was on understanding the internal (intrapyschic) progression of character within a maturing individual through his/her interaction with others and the environment. Character was defined empirically as principled thinking, moral maturity, and ego development. Principled thinking is a measure of moral reasoning which refers to the degree to which individuals use principled moral considerations in making moral decisions (Rest, 1979a). Moral maturity is a measure of moral reasoning which is based on the response which individuals give to issues raised by a series of moral problems cast as dilemmas (Colby, Gibbs, Kohlberg, Speicher-Dubin, & Candee, 1979). Ego development taps broad dimensions of the interwoven relationship of impulse control, character, interpersonal relations, conscious preoccupations, and cognitive complexity (Loevinger, 1966, 1976; Loevinger & Wessler, 1970).

In the 20 years that extensive research has been possible methodologically (the availability of valid and statistically reliable empirical measures) on the correlates of development in moral reasoning, the strongest relationship has been years of formal education (Rest, 1979b, Rest and Deemer, 1986). The research of the original Sierra Project (1975-1982) found that the freshman year was a period of moderate growth in the level of the principled thinking dimension of character. The college years were found to be a period of significant growth in the principled thinking dimension of character development. This growth was found to be both statistically significant and psychologically important.

There is perhaps no period in young people’s lives when they are more open to new experiences and alternative ways of thinking about those experiences. In retrospective interviews, in detailed case studies, and in the context of regular interviewing throughout an academic year, students were nearly unanimous in reporting that they would not be who they had become if it were not for the college experience, especially on dimensions of thinking about moral issues. They did make one important qualifier: They had not changed as much as they had developed.

As we struggled to understand their meaning in using development in contrast to change, it seemed to us that they were expressing that the core of who they were had remained the same. It was their appreciation of the world of moral choices and their stance in relation to those choices which had become more acute and sensitive, and this was appropriately considered by them to be development.

Irrespective of the meaning attributed to their characterization of the subjective experience of change during four years of college, and the context in which they understand that change to have occurred, the empirical measures confirm the magnitude of what occurred, at least on the principled thinking dimension of character. It proved possible in the Sierra Project to stimulate the personal psychological development of college students within a framework of rigorous academic accomplishment.

### THE SIERRANS REVISITED PROJECT

The companion Sierrans Revisited Project (1987-1999) investigated young adult response to the moral dilemmas encountered in their lives in the years immediately after college. All of the young adults in the Sierrans Revisited Project had been participants in the Sierra Project as college freshmen at the University of California, Irvine. A personal narrative interview methodology was used to elicit the moral dilemmas of young adulthood, the actions taken in response to those dilemmas, and the antecedents of that action.

The subjects of the Sierrans Revisited Project were a decade out of college, in their late 20s and early 30s at the time of the study. There was an extensive data base for each subject because of their frequent testing as participants in the original Sierra Project. The shift to studying moral action, however, and lack of established valid and reliable approaches to measurement, required a rethinking of how to approach the study of moral action in the context of young adulthood.

A first challenge was to familiarize ourselves with the implications for the study of moral action research which could be gained by returning to the general theoretical framework which so influenced the initial formulations of character and character development in the Sierra Project-the cognitive developmental approach. In his excellent history of the study of moral action inquiry, Augusto Blasi (1980) maintains that there have been three major theoretical shifts this century in conceptualization of moral reasoning/moral action and in the empirical research which follows from that conceptualization. The first wave of researchers, exemplified by Hartshorne and May (1928), focused on moral traits in the belief that traits, either singly or in combination, were involved in moral action. The second wave of researchers concentrated on the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and his insight into how a subject formed decisions about what is morally correct (Kohlberg, 1958). Studies of moral reasoning and moral judgment dominated the next 20 years of inquiry. The third wave of research followed Blasi's (1980) argument that investigating moral choice necessarily should be done in ways that examine the relationship of moral judgment to the actual decisions people make.

Five authors and their associates who were influential in initial formulations concerning the Sierrans Revisited Project were chosen for extensive review: Augusto Blasi, Carol Gilligan, Norma Haan, Lawrence Kohlberg, and James Rest. These earlier theories of moral action are in fundamental disagreement about the structure of the morality by which people judge moral circumstances, about the decision-making processes involved prior to behavior characterized as moral, and about the forms of action which can be called moral. They disagree about the role, existence, and nature of deontic choices. The role of the self also varies from model to model.

The original Sierra Project did not address either moral action/moral choice, or the relationship between moral reasoning and moral action, because when the Sierra Project was conceptualized in 1973 the most immediate research challenges were learning more about moral judgment in the college years and the character education necessary to enhance it. Also, there were numerous problems of curriculum development to confront (Loxley and Whiteley, 1986), as well as uncharted territory in understanding the development of moral reasoning over four years of the undergraduate experience.

By the time that the Sierrans Revisited Project data collection had been completed and the results were available, two intersecting insights compelled the expansion of the moral action theories being considered. The first insight was coming to understand the depth and extent of the fundamental disagreement in earlier theories. The second insight was that there had been a proliferation of potentially relevant writing about moral choice and its antecedents, including the work of many authors who are well beyond the usual cognitive development paradigm.

These two insights caused us to expand the paradigms which we would draw upon in recommending directions for future research, and in conceptualizing the meaning of the results. Included in this general expansion were such general questions as:

Do we need to incorporate insights from moral philosophy, and why?

Do we need to incorporate other insights from moral psychology, and why?

The real problem was the practical necessity of expanding our thinking, as comprehensively as possible, about the meaning of what young adults had been telling us.

A number of very interesting theoretical perspectives appeared in the 1990s after the Sierrans Revisited Project data had been collected which broadened the theoretical net to include, for example, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991), the implications of moral identity for moral functioning (Blasi, 1993), the uniting of self and morality in the development of extraordinary moral commitment (Colby and Damon, 1993), the relationship between morality and personal autonomy (Nucci and Lee, 1993), and the wellsprings of altruism (Monroe, 1996).

This latter work by Monroe represents a sharp contrast to the Sierrans Revisited Project research, though both drew upon a common methodology: the personal narrative. Where the Sierrans Revisited

researchers had interviewed young adults confronting the moral choices of everyday life, Kristin Monroe investigated extraordinary moral behavior and self-interest in extreme contexts: rescuers of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, Carnegie Hero Fund rescuers, and philanthropists and entrepreneurs in challenging moments.

There is a complex psychological riddle of why people sometimes do and often don't do as they know or say they should. As Brown and Herrnstein (1975) noted, «There is neither paradox nor even surprise in someone talking on the high road and acting on the low road» (p. 289). The Sierrans Revisited Project was undertaken to increase understanding of such intriguing general questions as:

What might we learn about the relationship between moral thinking and moral action that could inform new initiatives in moral education?

To what extent do people who know the right or the good act proceed to actually do it, and why or why not?

Empirical study of these challenging questions is in the earliest stages of learning what prompts people who know for themselves the right or good act, to actually act on that knowledge.

The methodological approach taken was a qualitative investigation of naturalistic, real-life moral dilemmas, choices, and subsequent actions. The research was not constrained by particular a priori theories, though there is a deep and abiding (and genuinely acknowledged) indebtedness to a number of theorists and researchers in the cognitive developmental tradition (Haan, Kohlberg, Rest, Gilligan, Blasi) as well as broader approaches to moral psychology and philosophy. This latter group includes Colby and Damon, 1992, 1993; Blasi, 1993; Bandura, 1989, 1991, 1995; Monroe, 1996; Nucci and Lee, 1993; Hoffman, 1991; Blum, 1991; Longino, 1996; Pritchard, 1991; Wren, 1990; Haste, 1990; Rorty, 1993; Noam and Wren, 1993; Frankfurt, 1993; and Tugendhat, 1993).

Kohlberg (1984) examined two philosophical issues relevant to the definition of actions which were morally commendable. The first issue was whose standards of rightness are used in defining an action as moral: the standards of individuals, the standards of a particular society, or a «universal» standard or principle. The second issue was how to determine the morality of a particular action: by the behavior as it conforms to a norm; by the intention, judgment or principle guiding the act; or by the welfare implications of the act.

Kohlberg (1984) and Kant (1781/1969) essentially define the morality of a particular action by the intention, judgment, or principle guiding the action with a proviso that rational moral judgment is necessary but not sufficient for moral conduct. For the authors of the Sierrans Revisited Project, the intention or principle guiding the action and its welfare consequences was basic to determining assessments of the moral dilemmas of everyday life, including defining exceptional moral behavior, and strength of character and moral agency. For the general sample of young adults, however, their definitions of what was moral action spanned individualistic conceptions, particular societal norms, and the welfare consequences of the action. They were much less likely to articulate a moral intention or principle.

## STUDYING MORAL ACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUNG ADULTHOOD

In an exploratory study, the Sierra Revisited Project researchers were attempting to discern recurring patterns of moral action and the social contexts in which those patterns occurred with a goal of creating an evaluative portrait of moral action in young adulthood. The method of data collection was first and foremost to listen, but while listening, to be prepared to ask questions intended to be empathic, but also thoughtfully catalytic to promote further elaboration by the young adults sharing parts of their lives with us.

While the operative constructs guiding the research were moral action and young *adulthood*, we were not proceeding from any prior ideological or theoretical perspective. Nor were we trying to prove in some scientific way the validity of specific theories of moral action, or to provide support for a particular viewpoint on the psychology of young adulthood.

The team of researchers were intending to ask young adults about actual real life moral action dilemmas in their lives. As we listened to them, we wanted to be prepared to ask questions which would further illuminate the meaning for them of the moral actions they took, and not to miss an opportunity to understand the broader context for their actions in terms of the challenges they were encountering in the rest of their lives. In a phrase of sociologist Herbert J. Gans, the method of the researchers was «being with and talking to people.» (Gans, 1992, p. xi) But beyond that, the researchers wished to be poised to probe the thinking and its contexts of each young person as they told stories from their lives.

The multi-generational context of the moral dilemmas encountered by the young adults in the Sierrans Revisited Project will be presented in terms of the content of the dilemmas themselves encountered in personal life and in the workplace, and in terms of the resolutions made (or attempted) of those issues.

## CONTENT AND SUBSTANCE OF THE MORAL DILEMMAS DESCRIBED BY THE YOUNG ADULTS

Kalliel (1989, 1999) indicated that the locus of the dilemmas for both females and males was almost evenly divided between work dilemmas and personal dilemmas. For the women, Kalliel reported such dilemmas as: whether or not to return to an old unfaithful boyfriend, whether to share course material with law school classmates, whether to **let the** company owner know that the foreman was mistreating workers, and deciding whether, as a trainee, to testify in a child custody case. For the men, there were dilemmas such as whether to tell his mother that his brother was homosexual, or whether to follow his convictions and teach school in a bi-lingual format which was contrary to school policy.

A recurrent theme in the narratives was that moral choices could jeopardize relationship bonds, particularly with immediate family and significant others. By way of illustration, the dilemma of one

young woman comes immediately to mind. A man in her life needed what for her was a lot of money in order to finish his education. While ordinarily this would be a matter of no major moral consequence, in her case she was also the primary support of her mother and a sibling. Her father was dead, and the sum of money involved, \$4,000, was money she used in reserve as security for their welfare. She was also an enterprising person, and had found an opportunity to invest, the \$4,000 in herself in a way to enhance her long-term income, and therefore better provide for her family.

In the scheme of moral dilemmas encountered in life, this dilemma of whether or not to loan money to the boyfriend was not a major moral choice. But for a young woman just starting her career with the welfare of others to consider as well as that of her own, the dilemma became a moral one of consequence. Saying «No» to the loan could have unforeseen consequences for the relationship with the boyfriend. If the \$4,000 were not available if she needed it for her immediate family's welfare, then there could be genuine harm to people significant to her. Also she had found a use for the money herself in the same time frame that the boyfriend wanted the use of the money.

This type of everyday dilemma is the «stuff» of the moral dilemmas in young adulthood which were facing the Sierrans Revisited sample. Our sample, at least in the time frame we collected data from them, had been spared the life and death ethical choices which accompany catastrophic illness or life-threatening accident. Resolving the moral dilemmas they did face, however, in Noam's (1993) phrase, confronted them with the fact that «moral action closes many doors.»

Connor (1989, 1999a) used the Moral Behavior Interview to investigate moral dilemmas in multi-generational interpersonal relationships. The array of dilemmas he encountered in interpersonal situations ranged from whether or not to have an abortion to the morality of lying to parents. In the workplace, dilemmas encountered by young adults centered on four themes: being pressured to act by superiors in a manner considered immoral, feeling tempted to act immorally, others in the workplace not acting morally, and acting altruistically but not necessarily in the interests of the employer.

Connor (1999b) drew attention to the report of some young adults he interviewed that there were differences between their moral behavior at work and their moral behavior in the rest of their lives. Others indicated they considered themselves to act the same irrespective of setting. Still others suggested that they used different processes of decision-making. Connor suggested that it is possible that for some young adults, moral action in the workplace may be influenced importantly by the potential consequences of losing one's job. He also found that moral skills acquired in one arena «do not necessarily easily transfer to another arena» (p. 143).

Day (1999), in his interviewing of «exemplary» Sierrans, focused on both the form and the content of what was said by his subsample. They examined moral experiences and moral definitions in the context of their psychological communities of partners, parents, and mentors. Their stories were «intimately connected to their deepest held convictions about the meanings of life» (p. 151). Moral thinking was imbedded in the «larger reality of personal and interpersonal identity...» (p. 151). Their moral heroes were local ones, «persons intimately bound up in the daily routines of life» (p. 151).



## THINKING ABOUT THE RESULTS OF THE SIERRANS REVISITED PROJECT

The Sierrans Revisited Project was organized around six research questions. In theoretical context, the answer to those questions follow.

Question 1: Will young adults talk about intimate moral issues in their lives?

The Sierrans, almost without exception, described moral issues they were facing in their personal or work lives and the associated actions they took. An original concern of the researchers had been that the subjects might be reluctant to tell the stories of the moral dilemmas in their lives. This concern proved to be unfounded. Even though all the participants in this research had been in the Sierra Project, we cannot ascribe their relative ease in talking about «real life» moral dilemmas and actions to earlier participation in the moral discussions of the freshman year. There was no control group interviewed. Nor can we assert that there was an effect of the original Sierra Project on the forthcoming way in which the subjects responded to questions.

The personal narrative approach did yield very rich accounts of moral action. The moral conceptions of the young adults which emerged from the approaches to data collection taken by the interviewers is holistic and evocative of their lived moral lives. Paul Vitz's (1990) timely article in the *American Psychologist*, «The Use of Stories in Moral Development: New Psychological Reasons for an Old Educational Method», provides further theoretical and practical support for this personal narrative approach, as does Robert Coles' accounts of children's narratives (Coles, 1986) and the treatises by Tappan and Brown (1989) and Day and Tappan (1996) which reference many other investigations using this methodology.

The principal approach of this research was to utilize personal narratives as the core for a series of individual case studies. The focus of inquiry and analysis was on understanding the internal dynamics and anatomy of moral action in response to the moral dilemmas of everyday life. And it merits repeating that an ultimate aim of such developmental research is to understand more fully the origins of moral action so that it may be educated for more effectively. The roots of this research are, after all, in a character education project.

Question 2: What actual dilemmas do these young adults identify as characteristic of their work and personal lives?

The Sierrans described more than 80 moral dilemmas in their personal and work lives. A partial taxonomy of those real life challenges and their actual moral solutions appear in Kalliel (1989, 1999), Connor (1989, 1999a, 1999b) and Day (1999).

What is to be said about our subjects and the moral dilemmas they face? First, their stories are of everyday happenings («affairs» is not a suitable term here although there seem to have been a number of them as well). However familiar and commonplace the dilemmas may seem to the reader, they were profound experiences for those who faced them. And the moral lives of these young adults are sharply, unavoidably drawn and explicit. The good guys wear white hats. The bad guys wear nothing at all.

And that leads to another trivialization as stated. When you have heard one man's moral dilemma, or one theorist's paradigm of moral action, you most certainly have not heard them all. Classic moral «voices» on issues of evil and good, justice and injustice, compassion and non-caring, courage, fear, truth and so on reoccur even in our small sample. But they are new and perplexing and painful to these young adult individuals experiencing them for the first time. And they are filled with reality (a great relief incidentally, from Heinz, his dying wife and an obdurate druggist).

A part of our observations is that it is necessary to study subjects with more time spent with each respondent than we ultimately had (less than a day including tests to cover the span of a decade). The richness of description and character insight possible from the longer, more elaborate story of the moral is increasingly recognized (Coles, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Vitz, 1990; Day & Tappan, 1996; Tappan & Brown, 1989). Embedded in such in-depth studies of character lies a key to a broader, overarching theory of moral thinking and its relationship to action, and ultimately to education.

Question 3: What are the factors which the subjects identify as influencing their action in response to moral dilemmas?

A relatively wide and diverse array of factors were reported by the Sierrans as influencing their action in response to moral dilemmas. They included, in no order of priority:

- 1) Consideration of *one's own well-being and that of affected others*.
- 2) The influence of *the family*.
- 3) Other people and the quality of the *interpersonal relations* involved.
- 4) The influence of *religion*.
- 5) The influence of *society and its norms* were not widely reported.
- 6) The influence of particular *codes* (religious, business and professional norms) were cited.
- 7) The influence of one or more personal (i.e. internalized) moral *norms* or *virtues*.
- 8) The influence of *personal moral principles*.
- 9) The influence of *feelings*.

(Adapted from Mosher, Whiteley and Associates, 1999)

Based on the data for this Sierrans Revisited research, the diverse array of factors reported by Sierrans suggests again the multiple determinations of the moral act itself. A solely cognitive, rational model for the emergence of moral action does not square with the reports of our respondents.

Question 4: Does the stage of moral reasoning relate to moral action?

The data available to the Sierrans Revisited researchers does not allow an informed answer to this question as it was originally framed. The reasons for this are several, some related to the research design itself, some related to the relative homogeneity of the sample, and some related to the sequence with which the research was conducted.

A consequence of the homogeneity of the sample is that there is an absence of representation of subjects in most of the stages of moral maturity as measured by the MJJ, and in most of the stages of ego development as measured by the WUSCT. Therefore it is not possible with these data to relate empirically individuals at different stages of moral reasoning or ego development to moral action.

At the same time, there is insight to be gained from examining the interview data in relation to the empirical data on moral maturity, ego development, and principled thinking. Particularly relevant is the capacity of individuals at the I-4 stage of ego development to be able to see themselves with responsibility and obligation for other people. As Hauser (1976) phrased it, «At this stage a person is his brother's keeper.» (Hauser, 1976, p. 21). Two of the three «Exemplary» Sierrans scored at 1-4, and were high as well on principled thinking. While generalization to the larger question of understanding the wellsprings of moral action is not possible from such small amounts of data, the implications are intriguing.

There are at least three interrelated issues which call for further investigation. First, there are numerous individuals at post-conventional stages of moral reasoning who choose in any given situation not to take moral action. Second, and conversely, as is reported in the research by Colby and Damon (1992, 1993), there are numerous individuals at conventional stages of moral reasoning who quite consistently take responsible moral action when confronted with moral dilemmas.

Third, the apparent complexity of factors involved in moral action based on the consideration of the first four of the six Sierran Revisited research questions reviewed so far argues for future research designs which are more inclusive of factors to consider rather than less inclusive. Intensive focus on only one factor in isolation, such as the role of moral reasoning alone in moral action, will not provide the richness of data necessary to further understanding of the obvious interrelationship of factors.

A major challenge for future research is to identify why some individuals at higher stages of moral reasoning did not choose more positive moral choices. When faced with moral dilemmas from everyday life, for example, the Sierrans Revisited research data indicates that our subjects, from the perspective

of conventional moral reasoning, felt more free to act upon their convictions in interpersonal situations than they did in work situations where their employment might be at risk.

Question 5: Are there young people with exceptional characteristics whose moral behavior is exemplary? If yes, what can be learned about how they got that way?

The brief answer to the question of whether there are young people with exceptional characteristics whose moral behavior is exemplary is an emphatic «Yes!» In selecting from among the larger pool of subjects from the Sierrans Revisited Project to include in answering this specific question, the research team used as definition of «exceptional characteristics» the following:

1. The subjects had been especially lucid in their articulations of moral thought and action;
2. The subjects had been compelling in describing poignant moral dilemmas;
3. In the moral accounts they told, the subjects had been consistent in the relationship between the actions they took and the principles they had espoused; and
4. The stories the subjects told contained an element of risk to their own welfare which was reflected in their deliberations, as well as considerations which would have promoted the welfare of others.

Using that working definition, approximately 10% of the larger pool of the Sierrans Revisited Project qualified.

Question 6: Is it possible to identify a composite of factors/influences which correlate with outstanding strength of character and powerful moral agency?

Four promising theoretical approaches provide the framework for thinking about Sierrans Revisited results on Question 6: identity and moral motivation, emotions in moral action, capacity for empathy and moral action, and social cognitive theory and moral agency.

#### IDENTITY AND MORAL MOTIVATION

The Sierrans Revisited research was not designed to address the origins of personal concern with taking moral action in response to moral dilemmas. Blasi (1993) considered aspects of this when he posed the question of «how objective morality becomes integrated in one's personality, how it acquires personal value and subjective relevance» (p. 116). The answer to the question Blasi posed is fundamental to the design of college curricula concerned with moral development. After noting the absence of clear empirical data, he indicated that a strong personal concern with morality is «not a necessary byproduct of the subjective experience of identity» (p. 117). Further, he did not believe that strong personal con-

cern with morality was «even a certain consequence of more sophisticated forms of understanding moral principles» (p. 117). The issue of how to contribute to the development of strong personal concern with morality, and the subsidiary issue of taking moral action in response to moral dilemmas, are fundamental to the construction of college curricula addressed to moral education, indeed to all moral education curricula.

The broader question is the linkage between identity and moral action. Blasi has cautioned one could argue that:

*...moral identity is not a more secure predictor of moral action than other forms of moral motivation. It is neither conceptually obvious nor empirically evident that the various reasons for morality to be important to a person have different relations to moral motivation and moral action, at least in the large majority of morally relevant situations. (p. 118)*

One of the morally relevant situations which fits this characterization may be when acting on one's beliefs is difficult because of especially negative consequences. The Sierrans Revisited sample reported such an area of difficulty in the workplace when one's contemplated moral action could have resulted in the loss of one's job.

One of Blasi's (1993) central conclusions is that people vary with respect to «whether and to what extent a person constructs his or her sense of self around moral concerns» (p. 120). Further, it was not clear to him how «identity modes would help us to predict behavior» (p. 120). Nor was it clear «the different ways in which moral beliefs are integrated in personality» (p. 120). One consequence of conducting the Sierrans Revisited research was the realization that the search for universal modes of thinking by the field of moral psychology has been only a «proximate» search for a more elusive source of interest; namely, predicting moral action. The ultimate answers to questions about the role or roles of moral reasoning and the wellsprings of moral action may not be found within universal conceptions.

## EMOTIONS IN MORAL ACTION

An intriguing area for future researchers to explore is the role of emotions in moral action. Many of the Sierrans Revisited sample, in recounting the moral dilemma they faced, recalled strong emotions which accompanied the dilemmas for them. Exploring the role of emotions in moral action was not a formal subject of inquiry in the Sierrans Revisited research.

There already is an extensive body of literature, however, exploring aspects of emotion in moral action. In the late 18th Century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant had argued that since emotions and feelings are transitory and capricious, conduct with its origins in emotions is unreliable and inconsistent. The basic reason is that emotions do not have the universality required for principled, rational morality (Kant, 1785/1959).

The design of the Sierrans Revisited research did not call for investigation of emotions and their role, if any, in moral action. It became apparent as the research progressed, however, that outrage served as a motivator for taking action in some circumstances, and emotions such as love and caring sometimes influenced the choice of action in response to moral dilemmas. Guilt and shame were reported as consequences of having chosen one course of action over another. The presence of emotion was so pervasive in the stories of moral dilemmas and moral choice told by the Sierrans Revisited respondents that future researchers are encouraged to investigate the specific circumstances in which emotions trigger action, whether emotions are a factor in making a particular choice, and what emotions are consequences of particular moral choice outcomes.

### CAPACITY FOR EMPATHY AND MORAL ACTION

Martin L. Hoffman (1991) traces the significance of the role which empathy may occupy in a comprehensive moral theory. Empathy is described as a «reliable, biologically based motive that became part of human nature through the long process of natural selection» (p.276).

While Hoffman's argument for the role of empathy in moral action is within the disciplinary framework of moral psychology, he traces the origin of the relationship to the moral philosophy of David Hume in the 18th Century (Hume, 1751/1957) as does Monroe (1996). Hoffman cites another philosopher, John Stuart Mill (1861/1979), as suggesting that empathic anger, defined as a natural feeling of retaliation, serves as a «guardian of justice.» Yet another and more contemporary philosopher, John Rawls (1971), is cited as arguing in contrast to Hume that empathy lacks «the situational sensitivity necessary for achieving a rational consensus» (Hoffman, 1991, p. 286).

Hoffman(1991) traces a second general rationale for the role of empathy in moral action to the general proposition that there are motivational properties in affect, and to the work of learning theorists in the 1940s and 1950s and their linkage of affect and reinforcement to motivation for action. Drawing also on the psychoanalytic theory of object relations in which individuals are motivated to possess objects (people) that are invested with affect, Hoffman concluded that «...it seems safe to assume that empathic affect motivates action on behalf of the person with whom one empathizes or toward other people in general» (p. 276).

One theoretical reason that it is possible to raise the level of empathic understanding is to be found in the conceptualization of empathy as both cognitive and affective. In such a conceptualization, empathy as a cognitive process conveys the ability to observe and make meaning of what other persons are feeling, and to make inferences about their emotional state from overall behavioral cues. There is a capacity for connectedness to other people denoted by empathy (Eisenberg, 1986; Batson, 1991). The affective component of empathy manifests itself in emotional arousal toward the plight or other circumstances of people in need.

The concept of empathy was introduced into the original Sierra Project from a different theoretical perspective and rationale. The theoretical rationale was developed from the practice of counseling

and psychotherapy of Carl R. Rogers (1961, 1975) and his associates. Empathy is portrayed by the proponents of the Rogerian approach as one of three primary ingredients of therapist behavior in successful psychotherapy, the others being genuineness and unconditional positive regard. From this perspective of the positive role of empathy in successful psychotherapy have been developed a number of straightforward approaches to teaching listening skills and modes of empathic communication. These teaching approaches were variously developed for use with counselors and therapists in training, then extended in scope to the training of other professionals, to para-professionals, and to lay persons.

With respect to the role of empathy in the Sierra Revisited research, the design of the data collection did not provide for the systematic collection of data on feelings in general, or of any particular emotions, including capacity for empathy. Since, irrespective of specific format, the interviews were tape-recorded, listened to extensively, and many were transcribed, it has been possible to form clinical impressions of what the Sierrans were communicating on the dimension of empathy in moral action.

### SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY AND MORAL AGENCY

For Bandura (1991), «a comprehensive theory of morality must explain how moral reasoning, in conjunction with other psychosocial factors, governs moral conduct. Moral conduct is motivated and regulated mainly by the ongoing exercise of self-reactive influence» (p. 45). Within the conceptual framework of the cognitive interactionist perspective from social cognitive theory, «personal factors in the form of moral thought and affective self-reactions, moral conduct, and environmental factors all operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bidirectionally» (p. 45).

The general implications for the future research on moral action in young adulthood are several. First, data would need to be systematically collected on each of the various determinants which are hypothesized to interact «bidirectionally»: personal factors in moral thought, affective self-reactions, moral conduct, and environmental factors. The Sierrans Revisited design did not approach data collection in this framework. Second, the personal narrative approach which was used in the Sierrans Revisited research would have to be supplemented by more systematic data collection following initial interviewing. There might of necessity be fewer subjects who are covered in greater depth and detail. Subsequent structured data collection to augment personal narrative data would make it possible to analyze more fully bi-directionality (mutual influence and interaction among relevant factors) rather than personal narrative data alone.

In the Bandura (1995) paper on human agency there is a section on moral agency which, in some respects, goes well beyond the Bandura (1991) treatise on the social cognitive theory of moral thought and action. Bandura (1995) is particularly helpful in stimulating thinking about the next generation of research on what the Sierrans Revisited research team called the exemplary Sierrans with his thinking about moral agency. For Bandura (1995), «A theory of moral agency must specify the mechanisms by which people come to live in accordance with moral standards» (p. 198). He sees a movement in psychology toward cognitive structures linked to major domains of functioning and away from global cognitive structures. Within developmental psychology he sees a similar movement away from the global structur-

alism associated with Piaget (and presumably aspects of Kohlberg's work). The concept of moral agency is presented in the context of explaining self-regulation of moral behavior and his view that «It is difficult to conceive of a personality process that is disembodied from a guiding structure» (p. 201). Irrespective of the theoretical perspective, understanding more fully the origins of exemplary, morally committed behavior expressed over time is a crucial agenda item for the next generation of research on moral action.

From the theoretical perspective of social cognitive theory such research might begin with the cognitive structure of moral rules:

*Moral rules represent an enduring cognitive structure for judging the moral status of conduct in situations containing many morally-relevant decisional ingredients. One does not have a set of moral standards on Monday, none on Tuesday and a new set on Wednesday. It is through the cognitive rule structure that the self-regulatory processes of self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-sanctions govern conduct anticipation. (Bandura, 1995, p. 210)*

The Sierrans Revisited approach to data collection did not allow exploration of the notions of self-sanction and self-monitoring. Further, the impression from listening to the interviews of the exemplary Sierrans is that they have very high standards for themselves in terms of self-evaluation. In this sense, they are very similar to the types of people Bandura (1995) was referring to as he described people with high efficacy, and the role of efficacy belief systems in the exercise of human agency. Again, understanding more about the origins and characteristics of such individuals will inform curriculum development in moral education.

## TOWARD PROMOTING MORAL ACTION IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD

One of the broader issues raised by the Sierra Project and this companion Sierrans Revisited initiative is what role can the freshman year in college - and indeed four years of undergraduate study - have in raising the level of moral action in society? A closely related conceptual question is who will provide the primary sources of instruction in moral choice? Will it be the random effects of the self-forming and constantly reforming peer groups, or the cultural norms of the mass media? For how long are parents especially influential? What roles will the institutions of organized religion play? Are there viable roles for educators in educating for moral choice within the traditional roles accorded to school and university by society?

A related approach to raising the level of moral action is to identify the core tasks which must be accomplished. Wren, a philosopher, spoke of the «seemingly impersonal demands of morality (to be fair, keep one's promises, etc.)» as also «deeply personal demands as well» (Wren, 1993, p. 94). The task of moral education in such a conception is to provide learning experiences which will translate the impersonal into the personal. A variation on this idea is Blasi's (1993) linkage of moral action to moral



understanding which is in turn related to personal responsibility: «...moral understanding more reliably gives rise to moral action if it is translated into a judgment of personal responsibility» (Blasi, 1993, p. 99).

The original Sierra Project curricula was designed to take advantage of the openness to new experiences of entering freshmen, the richness of residence hall living, and the nature of the freshman year requirements. There now exists a body of theoretical developments and research results to support the creation of the next generation of curricula to build upon the basic structure of Sierra and to focus on experiences which will promote moral action in response to moral dilemmas. Since the context for creating the next generation of curricula remains the four years of undergraduate study, it is useful to begin with the practicalities of fitting new classes into the challenges of upper-division instruction. An assumption of this presentation is that the moral action component will build upon a previous Sierra-type experience in the freshman year. This is particularly important given what has been learned about the importance of sequencing educational experiences.

#### APPRECIATIONS

The Sierrans Revisited Project was a collaboration between Ralph L. Mosher, David Connor, Katherine M. Kalliel, James M. Day, Norma Yokota, Mark R. Porter, and John M. Whiteley. A book length report was published in 1999 under the Title *Moral Action in Young Adulthood* by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina. The authors of the book version are indebted to John N. Gardner, Stuart Hunter, Betsy Barefoot, Corrina McLeod, and Dorothy Fidler of the University of South Carolina for identifying where the manuscript needed fuller elaboration and clarification, and for the hard work of seeing it through the production process.

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The book length version was dedicated to four individuals. James B. Craig has maintained the educational program of the Sierra Project for the past quarter of a century. Daniel G. Aldrich, Jr., the founding Chancellor of the University of California, Irvine nourished an atmosphere where the Sierra Project could be established and maintained. Professor Ralph Mosher and Jessica Mosher inspired the project with their courage in adversity.

Professor Mosher described his reason for joining the Sierrans Revisited Project in 1987:

*...the study chose to focus more centrally and heuristically on the gap between knowing and doing the right or good act. The implicit intellectual and research questions embedded in the gap*

*between knowledge, reasoning, and action were complex and demanding ones. Moreover, their importance to psychology and to education (to say nothing of society) was obvious.*

His collegueship to me was a source of enduring intellectual enrichment; his friendship of thirty-seven years was one of life's most cherished.

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