

— A FIRST LOOK AT —
COMMUNICATION THEORY

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A Different Voice

of Carol Gilligan

Carol Gilligan is associate professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*, presents a theory of moral development which claims that women tend to think and speak in a different way than men when they confront ethical dilemmas. Gilligan contrasts a feminine ethic of *care* with a masculine ethic of *justice*. She believes that these gender differences in moral perspective are due to contrasting images of self.

GENDER DIFFERENCES: MEN WHO ARE FAIR, WOMEN WHO CARE

For centuries, ethical theorists have talked about two great moral imperatives—justice and love. The second term has been interchanged with the concepts of goodness, beneficence, and utility. Gilligan chooses the word *care* to identify her different voice because she believes it points to a “responsibility to discover and alleviate the real and recognizable trouble of the world.” She says that under an ethic of justice, men judge themselves guilty if they do something wrong. Under an ethic of care, women who allow others to feel pain hold themselves responsible for not doing something to prevent or alleviate the hurt.

People who merely browse through Gilligan’s book might conclude that she takes a “we versus they” approach to differences between the sexes. Almost all of the evidence she presents is drawn from the experiences of women. Yet Gilligan was careful not to title her book “In a Woman’s Voice” because she realizes that there are women who view moral questions in terms of justice, duty, and rights. There are also men who make moral decisions based on whether their actions help or harm the people involved. She merely sees two separate but noncompeting ways of thinking about moral problems. One is associated with men; the other is typical of women.

Both sexes have the capacity to see ethical issues from the two perspectives, but they tend to select one focus or the other depending on how they view themselves. Ego psychologists have traditionally recognized the role of the self in determining the extent to which people base decisions on ethical considerations. Gilligan says that self-image also determines whether fairness or caring will be the basis for moral judgment.

What distinguishes an ethic of care from an ethic of justice? According to Gilligan it's the quantity and quality of relationships. Individual rights, equality before the law, fair play, a square deal—all of these ethical goals can be pursued without personal ties to others. Justice is impersonal. But sensitivity to others, loyalty, responsibility, self-sacrifice, and peacemaking all reflect interpersonal involvement. Care comes from connection. Gilligan rejects biological explanations for the development of a given moral voice. She believes that women's greater need for relationships is due to a distinct feminine identity formed early in life. The greater need for relationships in turn leads to the ethic of care.

Gilligan supports her theory with research of children at play conducted by Northwestern University sociologist Janet Lever.⁸ Lever found that boys like games with lots of intricate rules. Disputes often arise over interpretations of the rules, but the argument doesn't break up the game. In fact, Lever notes that some boys seem to enjoy wrangling over the rules even more than the game itself. Since rules are sacred, a cry of "That's not fair!" is an accusation with moral force. Girls, on the other hand, play shorter and less complex games. When arguments arise, girls will usually bend the rules so no one will feel hurt. Gilligan believes that this difference carries over into adult life. Women change the rules in order to preserve relationships; men abide by the rules and see relationships as replaceable.

IMAGES OF SELF: MALE SEPARATION, FEMALE CONNECTEDNESS

"How would you describe yourself to yourself?" The question is Carol Gilligan's open invitation for women to voice the images of self they carry inside. The answers she hears are sometimes muted, often halting, but together they reveal a common image which she believes guides women throughout their lives. The responses show a feminine fusion of identity and intimacy. Women speak of being a daughter, wife, mother, lover, or friend. In short, they define who they are by describing relationships.

Contrary to the descriptive words of attachment chosen by women, men select a vocabulary of self-reference that is clearly individualistic. The male "I" is defined by separation. Men distinguish themselves from others by their accomplishments, and their individual climb to the top is a solitary pursuit. Gilligan notes that these masculine and feminine self-portraits are consistent with childhood fairy tales. The common male fantasy is going forth alone into the world to slay dragons. The typical female dream is an intimate relationship. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty wake up not to be world beaters but to marry a prince.

Gilligan says the male image of going forth alone is consistent with masculine relationship patterns. The average adult male has a wide circle of friendly relations, but no intimate friends. Women picture themselves as part of a closely

knit network of intimates; they are in the center of a web of connectedness. The difference between the self-descriptions of men and of women is consistent with a distinction long recognized in the field of group dynamics. Groups need a mix of task-oriented and relationship-oriented members. Males tend to be more concerned with getting the job done; females tend to be concerned with holding the group together.

In order to study the differing importance that men and women assign to relationships, Gilligan and her colleague at Harvard, Susan Pollak, analyzed the stories that students created after looking at ambiguous pictures of people.⁹ The researchers used this fantasy-theme technique because although many people can't or won't respond to a direct question about how they see themselves, they will unconsciously project their motives and images of self into the characters they describe. The study confirmed what others have found—men think in terms of violence much more than women. But Pollak and Gilligan also discovered that the circumstances which stimulated fearful thoughts were different for the two sexes. Although everybody wrote stories about people being alone and people being together, men feared intimate situations, while women were afraid of isolation. In this passage from *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan summarizes the gender differences she and Susan Pollak discovered.

The danger men describe in their stories of intimacy is a danger of entrapment or betrayal, being caught in a smothering relationship or humiliated by rejection and deceit. In contrast, the danger women portray in their tales of achievement is a danger of isolation, a fear that in standing out or being set apart by success, they will be left alone.¹⁰

Along with ego psychologists, Gilligan is convinced that gender differences in identity are grounded in early childhood experiences with the person who provides primary physical and emotional nurture, usually the infant's mother. Early in life, girls discover that they are like their mothers. Growing up means relinquishing freedom of self-expression in order to protect others and preserve relationships. Boys' first psychic task is to understand that they aren't (and never will be) like their mothers. Maturity means renouncing relationships in order to protect freedom and self-expression. The result is an adult population of men who see themselves as separate from others and of women who think in terms of connectedness.

Since distinctions of identity shape the selection of moral perspective, the link between gender and moral judgment is particularly strong in the teenage years when young men and women are highly self-conscious. Justice is ultimate moral maturity for adolescents (usually male) who see themselves as autonomous. Care is the ultimate responsibility of adolescents (usually female) who see themselves linked to others.

THE MASCULINE ASCENT UP THE STEPS OF JUSTICE

Gilligan believes that the field of psychology has tried to treat women as if they were men. Psychologists who study moral and intellectual development have assumed that male experience is the typical way childish views of right and wrong grow into adult ethical thinking. When women don't follow the normative path laid out by men, "the conclusion has generally been that something is wrong with women."¹¹

To understand the basis of Gilligan's criticism, you need to be familiar with the work of her well-known colleague at Harvard, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. He measured ethical maturity by analyzing responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas. The story of a man named Heinz is typical of the case studies he used:¹²

In Europe, a woman was near death from a very bad disease, a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could get together only about \$1,000, which was half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Should the husband have done that? Was it right or wrong?

Most people say that Heinz's theft was morally justified, but Kohlberg was less concerned about whether they approved or disapproved than with the reasons they gave for their answers. Starting in the 1950s with a group of seventy-five boys ranging in age from ten through sixteen, he monitored the reasons they gave for their judgment over a twenty-year period. He was able to isolate six distinct stages of moral thought. Each stage built on previous thinking, but each one also represented a qualitative jump from the type of reasoning that went before. From Kohlberg's standpoint, higher meant better. Although most of his subjects never reached the highest stages, those who did invariably went through the sequence one stage at a time without ever skipping a step or reversing the order.

Figure 8-1 shows Kohlberg's hierarchy of moral development and the type of comments people make about the Heinz case at each stage of their thinking. He regarded moving from concrete interests to general principles as a sign of moral maturity. Whereas Korzybski (see Chapter 5) was suspicious of abstract concepts like justice, truth, and freedom, Kohlberg stated unequivocally that the universal principle of justice is the highest claim of morality.

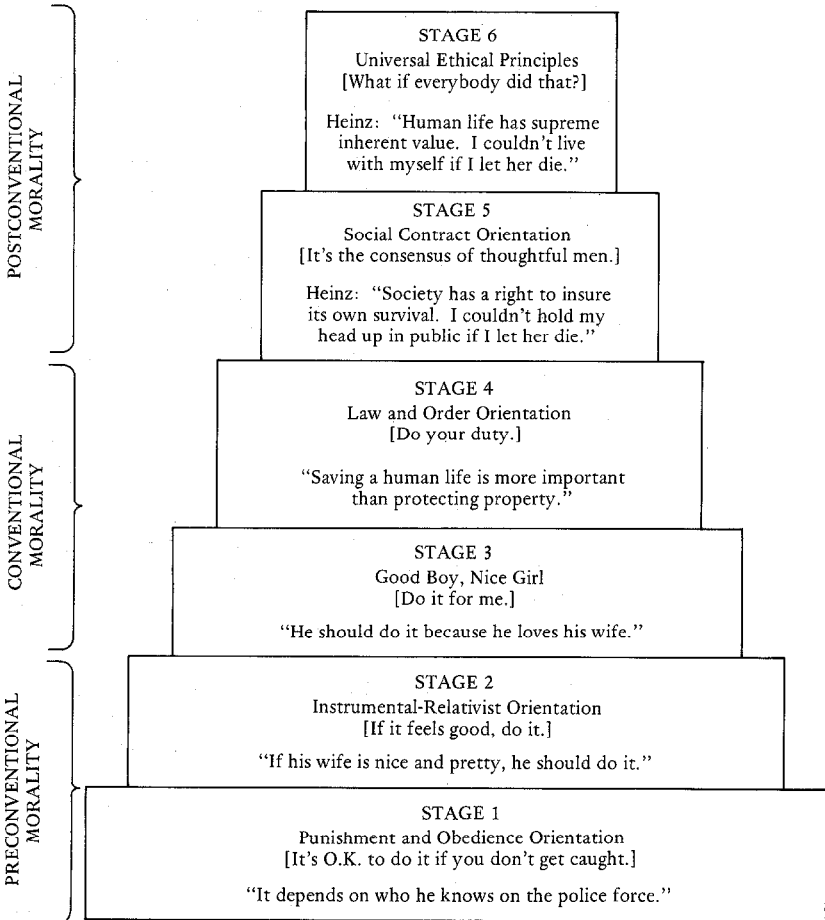


Figure 8-1. Kohlberg's Model of Moral Development (Based on Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Development as a Basis for Moral Education," in *Moral Education: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, C. M. Beck, B. S. Crittenden, and E. V. Sullivan (eds.) Univ. of Toronto, Toronto, 1971, pp. 23-92.)

NOT ALL PEOPLE ARE MEN

Gilligan worked closely with Kohlberg at Harvard, and they coauthored an article which reported on the use of his theory in analyzing adolescent development.¹³ But the more she used Kohlberg's criteria to judge moral sophistication, the more she became uncomfortable with the way women are categorized in his model of development. According to his method of analysis, the average young adult female scores a full stage lower than her male counterpart.

Gilligan notes that men respond decisively to Heinz-type dilemmas, using set prescriptions or formulas to line up each person's rights. It's like a math problem to be solved. The story contains enough information for the lis-

tener to plug in the variables and solve the equation to get the “right” answer (Stage 4).

Women, however, are uncomfortable responding to hypothetical ethical dilemmas. They ask for more information about the characters, their history, and their relationships. They seem to feel that the storyteller has asked the wrong question. The real question for them isn’t “*Should* Heinz steal the drug?” The issue is “Should Heinz *steal* the drug?” Females look for ways of resolving the dilemma where no one—Heinz, his wife, or the druggist—will experience pain. Gilligan sees this hesitation to judge as a laudable quest for nonviolence, an aversion to cruel situations where someone will get hurt. But Kohlberg considered it a sign of ethical relativism, a waffling which results from trying to please everyone (Stage 3).

Gilligan charges that Kohlberg’s downgrading of female moral sensitivity was just another case in a long history of male intellectual bias. Freud claimed that “women show less sense of justice than men..., that they are often more influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility.”¹⁴ He called women’s relationships the “dark continent” of psychology. Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget wrote that “the most superficial observation is sufficient to show that in the main, the legal sense is far less developed in little girls than in boys.”¹⁵

Gilligan doesn’t challenge the fact that there are differences of identity and moral reasoning between the sexes. On the contrary, she develops her theory to explain these differences. But it does bother her that Kohlberg’s influential theory relegates loyalty, compassion, and care for the individual to a lower plane than individual rights and justice. It seems to her “an unfair paradox that

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the very traits that have traditionally defined the 'goodness' of women are those that mark them as deficient in moral development."¹⁶ To those who would claim that Kohlberg was merely reporting the facts of his twenty-year study, Gilligan points out that his is a theory conceived by a man and tested on an all-male sample. She has no quarrel with its validity for those who see ethics in terms of justice, but she objects that psychology has "tried to fashion women out of a masculine cloth." Her thesis is that most women speak in a different—but not inferior—moral voice.

FOR WHOM DO YOU CARE? THREE PERSPECTIVES

Just as Kohlberg's justice-based model of development claims different levels of moral maturity, so Gilligan assumed that there would be different perspectives within an ethic of care. Rather than relying on hypothetical dilemmas to spot different nuances in the feminine voice, she was determined to hear women speak about real-life moral struggles where they had the power to choose. She saw the 1973 Supreme Court ruling legalizing abortion as creating a situation in which women would have to make a major choice on moral grounds.

Gilligan received twenty-nine research referrals from abortion- and pregnancy-counseling centers. Although the women varied in age, education, marital status, and socioeconomic background, all were in the first trimester of their pregnancy and planning or considering an abortion. Gilligan was able to conduct extensive interviews with twenty-four of the women and successfully followed up with twenty-one of them a year later. As predicted, these women discussed their choice within a care orientation rather than a framework of justice. Over and over they used the words *selfish* and *responsibility* to explain their thinking. Responsibility was interpreted as exercising care; not being selfish meant not causing hurt.

As already shown in Figure 8-1, Kohlberg assigned his six ordered stages to three levels of maturity: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Gilligan found evidence of a similar sequence within an orientation of care.

1. Orientation to Individual Survival (Preconventional Morality). At this base level, women who sought an abortion were looking out for themselves. They usually felt alone in a hostile world and were unable to look beyond their own self-interest. When eighteen-year-old Susan was asked what she thought when she found out she was pregnant, she said, "I really didn't think anything except that I didn't want it." At this egocentric level there is no feeling of "should." Gilligan calls it "moral nihilism." The only problem of choice women face here is getting in touch with what they really want. Another teenager, Josie, tried to balance her desire to "have a baby that I could take care of..." with the reality that as a mother, "you can't be out of the house all the time, which is one thing I like to do."

Gilligan points out that prospective motherhood often brings a change in self-concept. Nature has made it difficult for a pregnant woman to feel detached

from her fetus, the father, or from other mothers. With a new sense of connect- edness, a woman may begin an internal dialogue contrasting the selfishness of a willful decision and the responsibility of moral choice. This debate marks a transition to the second level of ethical thinking.

2. Goodness as Self-Sacrifice (Conventional Morality). Instead of Level 1 selfishness, conventional feminine morality is selfless. Women with this view defined their moral worth on the basis of their ability to care about others. They searched for solutions whereby no one would get hurt, but realized that they often faced the impossible task of choosing the victim—usually themselves. They felt a responsibility to give others what each of them needed or wanted, especially when these others were conceivably defenseless or dependent. They therefore made a decision to get an abortion or have the child on the basis of the choices or advice of others. They felt compelled to respond to the vocal appeals of people around them. Twenty-five-year-old Denise wanted to have the baby, but her married lover convinced her the consequences would be disas- trous for him and his wife. Gilligan's Level 2 ethic of care would give Denise credit for her belated sense of responsibility. She was now willing to put others first. Had she been at this stage earlier, she might not have had the affair.

The woman who thinks she is responsible for pleasing others may begin to feel manipulated. Denise started to question the worth of a relationship that required passive acquiescence—"just going along with the tide." She also began to doubt her own moral worth for blaming the man for the abortion decision rather than having the strength of her own convictions. Here again, changing self-image can stimulate a transition to more mature ethical thinking.

3. Responsibility for Consequences of Choice (Postconventional Morality). Writing within the framework of care, Gilligan states that the "es- sence of moral decision is the exercise of choice and the willingness to take responsibility for that choice." For the women contemplating an abortion, this meant recognizing that great hurt was inevitable whatever they decided. Al- though most women in the study didn't reach Level 3, those who did under- stood that there were no easy answers. They made an effort to take control of their lives by admitting the seriousness of the choice and considering the whole range of their conflicting responsibilities.

The criterion for judgment thus shifts from goodness to truth when the morality of action is assessed not on the basis of its appearance in the eyes of others, but in terms of the realities of its intention and consequence.¹⁷

Unlike conventional goodness, the perspective of truth requires that a woman extend nonviolence and care to herself as well as others. Gilligan says that she claims the right to include herself among the people whom she con-

siders it moral not to hurt. Sarah, a twenty-five-year-old woman who seemingly has taken control of her life, is one who has a postconventional understanding:

I would not be doing myself or the child or the world any kind of favor having this child. I don't need to pay off my imaginary debts to the world through this child, and I don't think that it is right to bring a child into the world and use it for that purpose.¹⁸

Women on Level 1 cared only for themselves. Women on Level 2 saw virtue in caring for others. Women on Level 3 saw care as a universal imperative and were able to assert a moral equality between caring for self and others. As one nineteenth-century feminist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, proclaimed: "Self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice."¹⁹

CRITIQUE: IN SEARCH OF A JUST AND CARING EVALUATION

Gilligan's theory is a compelling description of differences in masculine and feminine moral perspective. Her book is required reading for those who want an in-depth understanding of women's self-concept. Yet her two-voice hypothesis has drawn considerable criticism.

Some people fear that Gilligan's attempt to establish a different but equal voice merely reinforces the cultural stereotype that men act on reason while women respond to feelings. Others censure Gilligan for swallowing the anger that many women feel. They note that her "voice of care" takes care not to accuse men of anything more than ignorance or insensitivity to a feminine perspective.

Many ethical theorists are disturbed at the idea of a double standard—justice for some, care for others. Moral philosophy has never suggested different ethics for different groups. Each ethical theory described in Chapter 33 assumes a moral standard that applies to all. People who think in terms of justice often object that Gilligan's ethic of care has no external criteria by which to judge whether people have met their responsibility. For example, on what basis does Gilligan assign Sarah's explanation to Level 3 rather than considering it a selfish rationalization more characteristic of Level 1? How can we tell that the woman has taken responsibility for her choice?

In response, Gilligan could point out that people who hold the welfare of individuals as their moral ideal may have to adjust what they do to meet the requirements of the situation. The same action could be ethical in one case but unethical under a different set of circumstances. If flexibility is a fault, it is one shared by all utilitarians who seek the greatest good for the greatest number.

Many social scientists criticize the thin research support which Gilligan offers to validate her theory. For example, the small, specialized sample in the abortion study casts doubt on whether these women represent the thought of most females. Only four chose to give birth, and their voices are not recorded

as examples of care. We should remember, however, that Freud's, Piaget's, and Kohlberg's developmental theories were based on biased samples as well. The case study approach is always open to the charge of being nonrepresentative. Mead and Gilligan think that the rich interpretations of self-concept make the risk worth taking.

The voices Gilligan recorded are not the final word. Some follow-up studies by other researchers using Kohlberg's scoring system have found men and women at the same level of moral development. When the samples are controlled for education and occupation, findings of greater male moral sophistication are rare.

Readers of both sexes report that Gilligan's theory resonates with their own personal experience. Many men are encouraged that Gilligan does not exclude males from an ethic of care. She even holds out the possibility that in postconventional morality, the voice of justice and the voice of care can blend into a single human sound. If so, the result might be a caring law that resembles the Golden Rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

A SECOND LOOK

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- 17 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. 83.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 129.