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Cultivating Moral Student Leaders: The Relationship between Experience as a Resident Assistant and Moral Development

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Abstract

This study compared two groups of college students, resident assistants and non-resident-assistants, on their increases in moral development assessed by the Sociomoral Reflective Objective Measure – Short Form (SROM-SF), a moral judgment measure. The study utilized a pre-test/post-test design. Participants were recruited through in-person communication, classroom presentations, or email. Participants responded to the SROM-SF on an online version in the beginning of a fall semester and completed the same online version of the measure again at the end of that fall semester. Results indicated that the RAs exhibited a greater increase in SROM-SF scores over the course of the semester than non-RAs. These findings suggest that RA experiences may contribute positively to the moral development of college students.

Keywords: resident assistants, moral judgment, moral development, SROM-SF, student leadership

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Cultivating Moral Student Leaders:

The Relationship between Experience as a Resident Assistant and Moral Development

Introduction

In 2013, the Pew Research Center (Global Views on Morality, 2013) released the results of their 2013 Global Attitudes survey. Approximately 40,000 participants in 40 countries were asked about their thoughts, perspectives, and attitudes concerning moral issues, such as: extramarital affairs, divorce, abortion, and gambling. Interestingly, participants varied on their attitudes on moral issues. Some participants in some countries and cultures found almost all of the behaviors completely unacceptable. Other participants were more accepting of some of the behaviors listed, and some participants did not even consider some behaviors as relevant moral issues at all. While the survey does not provide conclusions regarding what issues should be of concern or which behaviors are morally wrong, the ever shifting and often confusing landscape of moral values is made quite evident.

With the diversity of moral thinking across the globe, it is important to have a good sense of moral judgment. One must know what actions are morally right, and, most importantly, one must learn what factors to consider when making a moral decision: the moral issue(s) at hand, how parties involved will be affected, and the reasoning for the action or decision (Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997). How people decide what is morally right or morally wrong will affect their community and even their nation. One could look to recent events to see an example of a situation requiring careful moral evaluation.

In August 2015, Turing Pharmaceuticals, a start-up pharmaceutical company founded by Martin Shkreli, acquired rights to a drug called Daraprim (Pollack, 2015). Daraprim is currently one of the commonly used drugs for the daily treatment of toxoplasmosis, a life-threatening

disease that can affect people with compromised immune systems, such as patients with acquired immune deficiency syndrome or certain cancer patients (Wei, Wei, Lindsay, & Peng, 2015).

After acquiring the drug, Turing immediately increased the price to from \$13.50 a tablet to \$750 (an increase of over 5,000%), which brought the annual cost of treatment to thousands of dollars for some patients (Pollack, 2015). This price increase led to public and official outrage as well as heated debate (Fedde, 2015). Shkreli explained that the price increase was necessary, so that Turing could fund research and development for better treatments (Pollack, 2015). However, an open letter to Turing from the Infectious Diseases Society of America and the HIV Medicine Association criticized the price increase for Daraprim, calling it “unjustifiable for the medically vulnerable patient population” and “unsustainable for the health care system” (Calderwood & Adimora, 2015).

Was it right for Shkreli to increase the price since it might lead to better research? Do pharmaceutical companies have a right to sell a drug at any price they want, even though it may negatively affect the individuals who need it? These were the moral questions that doctors, businesspeople, politicians, and the general public had to process as this situation unfolded. As one can see, it is important that people understand how to contemplate moral issues, since how they decide what are morally right actions might lead to severe, detrimental consequences (e.g., individuals lacking affordable treatment in order to survive) in our societies.

A functioning society requires mechanisms in which people can develop into good moral thinkers. Many institutions have certain facets that can help people learn how to decide what is right or wrong. One can point to religious organizations or legislatures as examples of how humanity has attempted to positively influence moral development. However, there are

institutions in our society that can be equally or even more effective in positively influencing moral development: our colleges and universities.

The current study will seek to explore the role of higher education in developing positive moral judgment and argue for colleges and universities. College-age students are entering a period where they will experience several transitions (e.g., moving away from home, learning new concepts and ideas, and preparing to enter the workforce) that can influence how they develop (King & Mayhew, 2002). In addition, they will be making important life decisions which will result in lasting, positive and negative consequences. Colleges and universities have not only an academic goal but also an aspiration for their students to learn how to become people who appropriately contemplate personal and societal moral issues (Rest & Narvaez, 1991).

Some institutions of higher education are especially influential in developing programs or systems to stimulate moral development in their students. The United States Air Force Academy and West Point have cohort programs that involve learning the values of the institution and leading others to learn these values (Cycyota, Ferrante, Green, Heppard, & Karolick, 2011; Dufresne & Offstein, 2012). Other institutions, such as Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, have programs where students can participate in service opportunities, such as volunteering with local community organizations (Bringle, Studer, Wilson, Clayton, & Steinberg, 2011). The initiatives of these institutions can be beneficial in preparing their students to be moral citizens in their careers as well as communities (Cycyota et al., 2011), and other colleges can certainly emulate their programs. However, each institution is different - in population, values, and culture - and each college or university might have different ways to help their students to learn how to reason what behaviors are right or wrong. Therefore, it is important to examine how certain universities might do so.

Southeastern University is a private, Christian liberal arts university that seeks to teach its students moral reasoning through a Christian framework and perspective. The university offers courses on morality and ethics, which can foster students' moral development. Besides curriculum, Southeastern University also offers other avenues that might help promote moral development. One of these avenues is being a student leader in a dormitory or school residence as a resident assistant. At Southeastern University, resident assistants (RAs) are responsible for providing students a positive social and emotional environment at the university. Their responsibilities might include organizing campus-wide events, assisting students in their transition into college, and connecting them to other students at the university. In addition to these social responsibilities, RAs at Southeastern University are also responsible for promoting Christian values on the university's campus. RA responsibilities that foster the Christian culture at Southeastern include encouraging students to attend and be engaged in weekly chapel services, promoting volunteering in local outreaches, and providing guidance for students' spiritual and religious questions. RAs also go through unique experiences that may contribute to their moral development. In their RA responsibilities, they have to mediate interpersonal conflicts that occur on their floor, resolve situations with students who are not acting in accordance with the school handbook, or mentor students who are experiencing difficult circumstances or decisions.

In addition to their unique experiences, RAs receive training before the school semester begins and attend periodic meetings, which contain instruction on RA conduct, throughout the semester. While the subject of moral judgment is not directly addressed in training sessions and meetings, RAs are encouraged to learn how to make the right decisions in various situations. For example, RAs learn how to resolve roommate or student conflicts. They are taught how to observe and note signs that a student is dealing with emotional or social problems, then report

their observations to their resident director. In addition to the training concerning minor situations and emergencies, RAs are also educated on proper emergency procedures (e.g., protocol in an active shooter situation, first aid procedures, and responses to self-injury or suspected/potential self-injury).

My research will evaluate whether involvement in student leadership as an RA at Southeastern University is related to students' moral development. The hypothesis is that students who are involved in student leadership as resident assistants will exhibit a greater increase in moral development over the course of a semester than students who are not involved in student leadership. Through this study the author hopes to highlight the role of the RA program at Southeastern University in promoting the moral development of students who are involved in the program. The author also wants to explore how other institutions might incorporate similar elements of RA experiences and benefit from offering these RA-like experiences.

Literature Review

Moral Judgment and Moral Development

This section discusses Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which provides the framework for moral judgment and development that will be used in the current study. I will discuss criticisms of the theory and how they have been addressed. In addition, I will present instruments that are used to measure moral judgment.

Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory of moral judgment.

This text's framework for understanding moral judgment is based on Kohlberg's (1963) seminal work in psychology: the cognitive-developmental theory of moral judgment. Moral judgment refers to the psychological process by which a person will decide whether an action or decision is morally right or morally wrong, while also accounting for the specific context and situation (Rest et al., 1997). According to Kohlberg (1963), moral judgment develops throughout the lifetime in a sequence of six cognitive stages. Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs, and Lieberman (1983) defined these stages by the following four criteria:

1. Stages imply distinct or qualitative differences in children's modes of thinking or of solving the same problem at different ages.
2. These different modes of thought form an invariant sequence, order, or succession in individual development.
3. Each of these different and sequential modes of thought forms a "structured whole." A given stage response ... represents an underlying thought organization which determines responses to tasks which are not manifestly similar.
4. Cognitive stages are hierarchical integrations. Stages form an order of increasingly differentiated and integrated structures to fulfill a common function (p. 1).

Kohlberg (1984, as cited in Reimer, Paolitto, and Hersh, 1983) generally organized the six stages into three levels. The three levels are labeled as: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional (Reimer et al., 1983)

At the pre-conventional level, an individual's moral judgment is centered around the direct effects of a decision on the individual (Reimer et al., 1983). Overall, someone thinking at the pre-conventional level is only concerned with what consequences he or she will experience upon making a certain decision (Reimer et al., 1983). Stages one and two are grouped into the pre-conventional level. Stage one is labeled as a “punishment and obedience orientation” (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 11). Reimer et al. (1983) explain that, at this stage, people decide what is right or wrong by what an authority figure (e.g., parents) determines is right or wrong. People at stage one make moral decisions by considering which decision will avoid punishment or negative effects (Kohlberg, 1963). An example of stage one in conventional reasoning would be a child who explains the justification of behavior and actions by the punishment he or she receives (Kohlberg, 1963). The child might say that stealing is wrong because the child’s parents say it is wrong and will punish him or her with a timeout if the child ever steals (Reimer et al., 1983). To the child, punishment from the parent provides “proof” a particular action (e.g., stealing) is wrong (Reimer et al., 1983).

Stage two is labeled as “naive instrumental hedonism” (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 11). As explained by Kohlberg (1963), someone at stage one considers “right action instrumentally, as means to individual values” (p. 14), but will also define right action hedonistically. At this stage, people begin to understand that values are relative from individual to individual, but will still determine moral decisions by the consequences of each decision (Reimer et al., 1983). Similar to stage one, an example of stage two would be a child by the consequences of a behavior he or she will receive (Kohlberg, 1963). The distinction is that a child who has reached stage two will explain what decisions are right or wrong based on self-interest and the rewards he or she will receive (Kohlberg, 1963). Reimer et al. (1983) explain that, at this particular stage, a child might

say a phrase similar to the following statement: “Stealing is wrong because mom will punish me, but I will steal to get what I want if I will not get caught.”

At the conventional level, an individual's moral judgment emphasizes that people are members of society (Reimer et al., 1983). As Reimer et al. (1983) summarize, people who are at the conventional level understand that culture or society has certain norms or values that people should live by and that the decisions of the individual should ensure the existence of the society. Stages three and four are grouped into conventional moral reasoning. Stage three is defined as “good-boy morality of maintaining good relations and approval of others” (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 11). People at stage three move beyond thinking only of actions and consequences (characteristics of stages one and two), and consider decisions based on what will garner the admiration or approval of others (Kohlberg, 1963; Reimer et al., 1983). These consequences are distinct from the consequences in the pre-conventional level because it focuses more on relationships and being in good standing within society (Reimer et al., 1983). An example of stage three would be a child – who is probably entering into the teens – who understands and believes that people should follow expectations set by the family or community in order to be known as a good person. These expectations usually mean people should be loving, empathic, trusting, and concerning of others. This child might explain stealing is only right if done for the right motives (i.e., a loved one is in danger). An excerpt from Kohlberg’s (1963) interviews provides a typical stage three response:

It was really the druggist's fault, he was unfair, trying to overcharge and letting someone die. Heinz loved his wife and wanted to save her. I think anyone would. I don't think they would put him in jail. The judge would look at all sides, and see that the druggist was charging too much. (p. 25)

Stage four is labeled as “authority maintaining morality” (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 11). Reimer et al. (1983) explains that stage four thinkers make moral decisions by the standards set by

society and the law. People who think at stage four evaluate moral decisions by “rights, assigned duties, and rules” because these societal rules maintain society (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 17). Usually, people reach stage four at young adulthood (Kohlberg, 1963). Someone reasoning at stage four justifies behavior based on how it affects society (Reimer et al., 1983). An example of stage four reasoning would be an emphasis on how obeying the law, respecting other people, and meeting set expectations maintain society and order (Kohlberg, 1963). Someone at stage four would probably explain that stealing is wrong due the reason that, if everyone stole, society would cease to function (Kohlberg, 1963).

The final and highest level, the post-conventional level, is characterized by focusing on the principles and values that comprise a good society rather than simply focusing on the given values and norms set by the present society (Reimer et al., 1983). To summarize this level, a person who is at the post-conventional level realizes that society's norms and values do not necessarily constitute morally right decisions and that certain principles (e.g., sanctity of life, justice, liberty) take precedence over society's rules (Reimer et al., 1983). Kohlberg (1963) considered stages five and six as stages of moral judgment rarely reached by adults.

Stage five is defined as “morality of contract and of democratically accepted law” (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 11). Stage five thinkers, in addition to recognizing the societal rules, understand that there is a difference between “what is rationally right for the individual actor, and what is legally or rationally right for the society” (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 18). As explained by Reimer et al. (1983), people at stage five consider what society determines is right while at the same time considering how decisions affect individuals. They still evaluate moral decisions through societal rules and law (Reimer et al., 1983). However, people at stage five will also think about whether these rules are unjust or whether they maximize the welfare of individuals living

in the society (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 18). Stage five is generally the highest stage people ever reach in their lifetime (Reimer et al., 1983). An example of reasoning at stage five would be a person who wants to maintain a functioning society but understands that a functional society may not be morally right if it is detrimental to individuals (Kohlberg, 1963). A totalitarian society may be properly organized and functioning, but it is not the ideal. People at stage five will argue that society should support certain basic rights and that society should democratically make laws to protect these rights (Kohlberg, 1963). The basic rights people at stage five argue for are usually the right to life and the right to liberty (Kohlberg, 1981). In regards to the question of whether stealing is wrong, stage five people may argue that only when individuals are in danger should someone steal (Kohlberg, 1963). To someone at stage five, life takes precedence over property. However, since society usually considers stealing wrong, stage five people will also argue that someone who stole, even for the right reason, should get punished.

Stage six is defined as “morality of individual principles of conscience” (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 11). Kohlberg (1963) argued that people rarely develop to this stage of moral judgment. In addition to understanding the potential conflict between societal rules and the individual, people who are at stage six make moral decisions by moral principles and values (e.g., the Golden Rule, greatest good for the greatest number) rather than societal rules (Kohlberg, 1963). Most importantly, stage six people evaluate moral decisions by the value that life is sacred and all lives should have equal value (Kohlberg, 1963). Reimer et al. (1983) explain that these individuals often approach moral problems with questions such as, "Does protecting an innocent person's right to life take precedence over protecting another person's right to property?" (p. 64). People at stage five and stage six reason similarly when they discuss moral dilemmas. However, the distinction between the two stages is that people at stage five work towards a good society

through democratic means, while people at stage six understand that the majority group can vote for laws that deny basic rights from a minority (Kohlberg, 1981). Therefore, people at stage six argue that these rights must still be upheld and protected even when the law states otherwise. Examples of people who Kohlberg (1981) argues reached stage six are famous civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi. These men understood that their respective societies were denying rights to certain people, and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi acted in ways considered unlawful to give these people these rights (Kohlberg, 1981). With these examples, theoretically, one distinction between stage five and stage six people is civil disobedience (Kohlberg, 1981). When one truly believes that rights – such as life and liberty – are universal, then breaking the law may be justified and even necessary in order to ensure these rights are upheld and protected (Kohlberg, 1981).

In one of the most ambitious studies concerning moral development, Colby et al. (1983) coordinated a 20-year longitudinal study in order to evaluate Kohlberg's theory. Throughout this 20-year period, Colby et al. (1983) followed 58 young males and their development of moral judgment. The study consisted of six interviews, an original interview and five subsequent interviews delivered at 3-4 year intervals, which asked for the participants' judgments on hypothetical moral dilemmas (Colby et al., 1983). The purpose of these interviews was to evaluate whether the participants' judgments would change as they grew older and whether these judgments were consistent with Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Colby et al., 1983). Upon their analysis, Colby et al. (1983) found that the participants did progress through Kohlberg's theoretical developmental stages according to the proposed sequence. Young participants' responses, at the beginning of the study, corresponded with the pre-conventional level of moral judgment (Colby et al., 1983). As the study progressed and the participants grew

older, their responses in the interviews reflected the stages in the conventional level of moral judgment (Colby et al., 1983). At the final years of the study, Colby et al. (1983) found that some participants reached stage five in the post-conventional level, but none of the study's participants reached stage six. Colby et al. (1983) maintains that the development of the participants' moral judgments was consistent with the developmental path that is described in Kohlberg's theory. Another important finding of the study was that moral judgment was positively correlated with four factors: age, socioeconomic status, IQ score, and education. With their findings from this study, Colby et al. (1983) argue that Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory of moral judgment is consistent with how moral judgment progresses throughout the lifetime.

As with any theory, researchers continually evaluate the claims of Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development. Dawson (2002) analyzed data from participants' interviews in which participants were asked to respond to moral dilemmas with what they believed was the right decision and why the decisions they chose were right. The data from the interviews were collected by four different research teams over a period of 30 years, and 996 participants (620 males and 376 females) were interviewed (Dawson, 2002). Dawson (2002) found that the data supported the claim that moral judgments develop in stages that are qualitatively distinct. Results indicated that the moral development was consistent with the description provided in Kohlberg's theory. Overall, participants progressed from pre-conventional stages (stage one and stage two) to conventional stages (stage three and stage four), and some participants reached stage five in the post-conventional level (Dawson, 2002).

Criticisms of Kohlberg's theory

Kohlberg's theory of moral development has received criticism since its introduction. Some researchers have argued that Kohlberg's theory does not accurately reflect how actual

people behave and make real-life decisions (Argyris, 1982; Snell, 1996). Argyris (1982) and Snell (1996) argue that Kohlberg's theory of moral development lacks data to support the idea that moral judgment can be positively correlated with moral behavior. A study conducted by Snell (1996) found that the study's participants did not make moral decisions according to the levels described in Kohlberg's theory. Specifically, Snell (1996) found that a significant amount of participants utilized multiple stages of moral judgments (e.g., using responses representing stage five judgments while also using stage three or four judgments). According to Snell (1996), these findings suggest that Kohlberg's theory may be lacking explanations concerning actual moral behavior.

A metareview of literature conducted by Blasi (1980) counters Snell (1996) and Argyris' (1982) argument that the levels of moral judgment do not reflect real-life decisions. In this metareview, the majority of studies (fifty-seven out of seventy-five) indicated that there is a significant correlation between levels of moral judgment and actual behavior (Blasi, 1980). Blasi's metareview (1980) is a well-cited source that many researchers have used to support Kohlberg's theory. Recent literature corroborates Blasi's (1980) findings. Reynolds and Ceranic (2007) found that, in both college-age students as well as managers, moral judgment is correlated with moral behavior.

Carol Gilligan, a student of Kohlberg's, argues that there is a sex bias favoring males concerning the theoretical six stages of moral judgment (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan (1982) criticizes Kohlberg for generalizing findings from his all-male samples to both males and females. Gilligan (1982) maintains that females have values of responsibility and care that do not necessarily fit with the "male" values of individualism and personal justice that are featured in the theory.

There is legitimacy in Gilligan's claims. Kohlberg did use all-male samples in his research and this particular methodology has affected the development of his theory (Colby et al., 1983; Kohlberg, 1963). Gilligan's (1982) arguments did serve as means to bring additional breadth to the theory. However, concerning the argument that the theory does not properly reflect both males' and females' levels of moral judgment and moral development, the literature suggests otherwise.

In a study designed to evaluate Gilligan's claims, Friedman, Robinson, and Friedman (1987) tested students in college with a moral judgment test with statements from Kohlberg's theory and Gilligan's proposed female values. In this sample of 101 participants (47 male, 54 female), the researchers did not find substantial data supporting the claim that there are gender or sex-differentiated types of moral reasoning (Friedman et al., 1987). In their review of literature on college students and moral development, King and Mayhew (2002) found that development of moral judgment could be positively correlated with time spent in higher education, and that the moral development levels of males and females were not significantly different. White (1999) conducted a study among members of the U.S. Coast Guard to address Gilligan's claims that there was a significant difference between males and females if moral judgment tests based on Kohlberg's theory were used. Interestingly, the study's results found that men did not score significantly higher than women on the DIT, a moral judgment measure, in his study comparing male and female members of the U.S. Coast Guard (White, 1999). White (1999) argues that the claim that there is sexual bias in Kohlberg's theory is unfounded.

While these discussed criticisms should be considered when evaluating the cognitive theory of moral judgment development, considerable research using measures based on Kohlberg's theory suggests these criticisms do not completely undermine the theory. Results

from the majority of research on moral judgment and moral development support Kohlberg's cognitive theory of moral judgment development (Dawson, 2002; Gibbs, Basinger, Grime, & Snarey, 2007; Friedman et al., 1987; White, 1999). Kohlberg and his work is the preeminent theoretical framework concerning moral development and continues to influence research on the subject (King & Mayhew, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Reimer et al., 1983)

Measuring moral judgment.

There are several ways that moral judgment has been measured. In this section, I will discuss two tests that have been used to measure moral judgment: the DIT/DIT-2 and the SROM-SF.

In his longitudinal studies, Kohlberg measured moral judgment via interviews where participants discussed their responses and judgments on hypothetical moral dilemmas (Colby et al., 1983). These qualitative responses were then scored by a trained evaluator who matched the participants' particular statements to scores based on the six stages of moral judgment. While Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanz, and Anderson (1974) agreed with Kohlberg's theory, they argued that moral judgment should be assessed differently. Kohlberg's interviews were time-consuming and, if evaluators were not trained properly, results could be overly subjective. Rest et al. (1974) explained that moral judgment should be measured through a recognition task, which consists of presenting statements that participants rank or rate. These statements should present a decision about the dilemma and require participants to rank what decisions are morally right (Rest et al., 1974). The DIT was developed in light of this argument (Rest et al., 1974).

Defining Issues Test (DIT/DIT-2).

The Defining Issues Test (DIT) is the most commonly used measure of moral judgment in literature on moral development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This measure was developed

from Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Rest et al., 1997). The measure consists of six dilemmas that participants read. For example, Rest et al. (1974) included the dilemma of whether a man, Heinz, should steal an egregiously priced medicine for his dying wife (the Heinz dilemma). In each of these dilemmas, there are 12 statements that reflect the six stages of moral judgment, as well as how an individual might make a decision about what actions should take place in the dilemma (Rest et al., 1974). The participant rates each statement on a Likert scale of importance and, from these ratings, different scores (depending on what the researcher is looking for) can be produced to reflect the participant's level of moral judgment (Rest et al., 1997). The Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2) was released in 1999 to update the dilemmas and statements since there were criticisms that they were dated (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999).

Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure – Short Form.

The Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure – Short Form (SROM-SF), which was developed by Basinger and Gibbs (1987), is a shortened version of the Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure (SROM). Similar to the DIT, the SROM was developed from the framework of Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987). This measure has been shown to be comparable with other measures of moral development, such as Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview or the DIT (Gibbs et al., 1984). These questions feature statements about the dilemma that represent different levels of moral judgment, and participants respond by choosing (Gibbs et al., 1984). For example, a question included in the SROM asks whether they agree with the statement that one should not steal because stealing is bad, and one will go to jail (Gibbs et al., 1984). Basinger and Gibbs (1987) developed the short form of the measure (i.e., SROM-SF),

which has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure that is comparable to the other moral judgment measures (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987; Koops, Brugman, Ferguson, & Sanders, 2010).

The author elected to utilize the SROM-SF due to the argument that the SROM-SF addresses the question, “what moral arguments would a participant spontaneously produce and justify,” rather than the question, “what arguments would a participant recognize and appreciate” (Gibbs et al., 1984).” Gibbs et al. (1984) argued that the DIT addresses the latter question. Since the author was interested in how participants would justify decisions in a moral dilemma, the SROM-SF was the measure that was used. Other reasons the SROM-SF was utilized were that the SROM-SF was easily provided by the main author, the measure was free, and the SROM-SF was easily transposed into an electronic version.

Higher Education and Moral Development

In this section, I will discuss the overall findings and results of the literature published on higher education and moral judgment development. I will review literature that presents explanations or possible interpretations of these overall findings. Programs designed to positively influence moral development will be the final point of discussion.

The relationship between higher education and moral development.

In a significant review of several studies concerning the subject of higher education, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) were able to devote a whole chapter to a synthesis of the findings from a multitude of studies on the relationship between higher education and moral development. The results from numerous studies indicate that higher education shares a significant, positive correlation with higher levels of moral judgment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 364). In all of the cross-sectional studies reviewed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), third- and fourth-year students measured higher on moral judgment measures, such as the DIT-2,

than first- and second-year students. Other cross-sectional studies, which evaluated the extent to which increases in moral judgment could be ascribed to higher education, found that levels of higher education shared a stronger relationship with increases in moral judgment than did age (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). These findings were not limited to American samples, and results from studies conducted in Hong Kong, Korea, Iceland, Australia, and the Philippines suggest that moral development is positively related with higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). There are fewer longitudinal studies - compared to cross-sectional studies - on moral development in higher education. However, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that the results from longitudinal studies that have been conducted suggest that "exposure to postsecondary education appears to be linked with marked increases in principled thinking [higher moral judgment]" (p. 340).

To complement Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) work, King and Mayhew (2002) reviewed 172 studies that specifically used the DIT/DIT-2 to explore moral development among college students. In all of their reviewed literature, except for two studies, King and Mayhew (2002) found that "moral development is an outcome of higher education, at least measured by the DIT" (p. 249). From the results of longitudinal studies using the DIT/DIT-2 to measure moral judgment in higher education, King and Mayhew (2002) argue that - similarly to Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) conclusion - "student participation in higher education is associated with gains in moral development during the college years" (p. 250).

While the majority of research has indicated that there is a positive correlation between moral judgment development and higher education, there is a substantial body of recent literature suggesting this relationship is changing. This research on moral judgment development has revealed that, over the past 30 years, there has been a drop in post-conventional moral reasoning

as well as moral development in our society (Chung, Bebeau, You, & Thoma, 2009, as cited in Mechler & Bourke, 2011).

In a study intended to evaluate millennial college students and their moral judgment, Mechler and Bourke (2011) administered the DIT-2 along with measures of narcissism, civic engagement self-reports, and other moral judgment measures to a population of 169 students enrolled in a public research university located in the southeastern United States. The DIT-2 scores of the study's sample were significantly lower than those of previous generations of college students (Mechler & Bourke, 2011). Another interesting finding from Mechler and Bourke's (2011) study was that the students' narcissism scores were positively related to their civic engagement but were not significantly related to their moral judgment development scores. This decline of moral development in Millennials highlights the need for administrators, faculty, and staff in college and universities to better engage students in their moral judgment development.

Explanations for moral development in higher education.

Classroom experiences.

The types of curriculum or learning strategies that are utilized in the classroom can be influential in affecting moral development. For example, Barkley (1942) conducted a study on students in a women's college that indicated the type of curriculum students experience has an influence on their moral development. The study was comprised of two groups: one group included students who were majoring in liberal arts majors and the other group included commercial students who were enrolled in a one-year commercial skills program but did not take liberal arts courses (Barkley, 1942). The liberal arts student group experienced a greater average

change in moral development than the commercial student group, which indicates that the type of curriculum students experience has an influence on their moral development (Barkley, 1942).

Mayhew and King (2008) also found that the students' experiences with pedagogical strategies within the classroom setting could influence the moral development of college students. Four hundred and twenty-three students enrolled in sociology courses were studied, and their moral development scores, measured by the DIT-2, were more likely to increase after experiencing certain learning strategies used to teach morally-related content (Mayhew & King, 2008). The strategies most likely to be correlated with increased moral development were encouragement of active participation, reflection, and faculty-student interactions (Mayhew & King, 2008).

A study conducted by Mayhew, Seifert, Pascarella, Nelson Laird, and Blaich (2012) proposed a possible explanation for the strategies' likelihood to promote moral development. Mayhew et al. (2012) analyzed data from the 2007 Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education – which was a longitudinal study intended to examine liberal arts institutions' effects on students' development – and found that participation in activities involving various, different perspectives and consistent evaluation of personal views and beliefs had a positive effect on moral development. The strategies of encouraging active participation, reflection, and faculty-student interactions, in some form or fashion, integrate these two aspects (Mayhew & King, 2008)

Co-Curricular Experiences.

In studies that sought to examine the relationship between higher education and moral development, co-curricular experiences were an important facet of influencing students' moral development. As mentioned earlier, Mayhew et al. (2012) discovered curriculum had influences

on students' moral development. In an earlier study, Mayhew, Seifert, and Pascarella (2010) gathered data from the 2007 Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education that supported the idea that the type of practices and experiences (e.g., quality of non-classroom interactions, degree of expectations and challenges, co-curricular activity) were more influential in moral development than the type of courses the students were enrolled in. The main conclusion that Mayhew et al. (2010) reached was that the quality of the interactions, especially outside the classroom, was more likely to affect positive moral development in the students than curriculum and in-class experiences. Mayhew et al. (2012) would study what factors of the curriculum are influential, and this study indicated that co-curricular experiences were more influential on moral development than the curriculum and in-class experiences (Mayhew et al., 2010).

Kuh (1995) gathered similar results when he conducted a study comprised of 149 seniors from 12 higher-education institutions. The main type of co-curricular experiences to which students attributed their changes in personal and moral development was experiences outside the classroom that required the input of consistent effort on several tasks with interactions between other people or groups (Kuh, 1995). These two studies also concluded that the majority of co-curricular experiences that were influential on the moral development of students were interactions with others who were diverse in physical attributes, background, and attitudes (Kuh, 1995; Mayhew et al., 2010).

A co-curricular experience that may be beneficial in contributing to moral development because it can feature quality interactions with diversity is service learning. A study on the relationship between service learning programs and whether they affect the development of moral reasoning in college students supports this idea (Lies, Bock, Brandenberger, & Trozzolo, 2012). This study found that 215 students in a summer service-learning program demonstrated an

increase in their DIT-2 scores in a pre-test/post-test study (Lies et al., 2012). A comparison group of 158 students who did not participate in any service activities did not demonstrate a similar increase (Lies et al., 2012). In their analyses of the results, Lies et al. (2012) found that the different increases of DIT-2 scores between the two groups was statistically significant.

Studies have indicated that interactions with diversity can be found in service learning opportunities and are influential in moral development. Compared to students in a lecture-based class, students in a class that required service in the community (e.g., “working with a Latino coalition organization to survey the Latino community's health care needs”) were more likely to state that they would attempt to understand other peoples' points of view as well as respect different views (Marullo, 1998). Keen and Hall (2009) examined how co-curricular service learning contributed to the development of college students becoming more ethical and engaged citizens. There was a correlation between the students' development (academic, civic, and personal) and their involvement in the program. As with Marullo's (1998) study, the researchers saw an increase of participants being more willing to participate in dialogue with people with different backgrounds or perspectives when they participated in service learning (Keen & Hall, 2009). Being able to recognize the need for interaction with diversity is important since it contributes to moral development (Kuh, 1995; Mayhew et al., 2010).

Haan (1985) provides an explanation for why co-curricular experiences, especially ones that involved service and/or interactions with various, different people, have shown positive effects on students' moral development. Students were more likely to experience gains in moral development when they experienced social disequilibrium; this type of disequilibrium occurs when a person experiences real-life conflict (physically or emotionally) with other people in situations that must be emotionally and socially resolved (Haan, 1985). Social disequilibrium is

also present in service-learning opportunities, since many of these opportunities involved experiences where interactions with diverse people led to conflict that was appropriately resolved (Keen & Hall, 2009; Marullo, 1998). In addition to the presence of social equilibrium, there is some evidence that a combination of both social disequilibrium and cognitive disequilibrium experiences contribute to positive moral development. As opposed to social disequilibrium, cognitive disequilibrium is the type of disequilibrium that occurs when people encounter thought processes concerning moral judgment higher than theirs, and must apply cognitive effort to either reject or apply it to their moral judgments (Boss, 1994; Haan, 1985). In the study conducted by Boss (1994), results indicated that when students experienced both cognitive and social disequilibrium, they saw greater increases in moral development than students who only experienced one of the disequilibrium types. The study was comprised of three groups: students who were only enrolled in an ethics course, students who were only volunteering in community service, and students who were both enrolled in an ethics course and volunteered in community service (Boss, 1994). According to Boss (1994), the ethics course presented opportunities for experiencing cognitive disequilibrium, whereas serving at community service presented opportunities for experiencing social disequilibrium. Boss (1994) found that the students who were involved in both the ethics course and community service saw greater increases in moral development than any of the other groups. The study concluded that the results support the idea that experiences with both cognitive and social disequilibrium contribute greater increases in moral development than experiences only having one of the disequilibria (Boss, 1994).

Established programs for moral development.

Case studies have examined the methods various institutions have initiated to develop their students into citizens with positive moral reasoning and character. These programs

demonstrate ways other institutions might seek to develop programs for student moral development. For instance, West Point employs a holistic and intentional process in developing character and moral reasoning within their students (Dufresne & Offstein, 2012). Dufresne and Offstein (2012) examined West Point and found that the honor code was primary to the character education of its students; the institution communicated what it means to be a moral citizen. West Point's structure and systems each had an element of character development (e.g., assigning leadership roles to upperclassmen, references to morality in several courses), the honor code was embedded comprehensively in the system, and students had opportunities to discuss the honor code and what values are important (Dufresne & Offstein, 2012).

A similar system can also be found in the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). Cycyota, Ferrante, Green, Heppard, and Karolick (2011) describe how the system is a process that takes place over a four-year incremental period. A cohort will be divided into squadrons, and each squadron will go through the four-year system with each year emphasizing a particular facet of student development and leadership responsibilities (Cycyota et al., 2011). An example of responsibilities given might be the organization and hosting of a holiday party for children in a hospital, where leadership tasks included are communication with external organizations or affiliations as well as communication and organization among the squadron members (Cycyota et al., 2011). Cycyota et al. (2011) also discuss the fact that USAFA includes an academic capstone experience that offers the students opportunities to utilize what they have learned academically to practical real-world situations; these capstones often include experiences that help the community and help the students exhibit prosocial, ethical behaviors.

In regards to service learning, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is an institution that has developed a system where ethically-minded citizens are

developed through service learning (Bringle et al., 2011). IUPUI heavily invests in promoting civic engagement, and its values of civic engagement and moral development led to the creation of the Center for Service and Learning (Bringle et al., 2011). This center organizes programs for students to participate with non-profit organizations within the community (Bringle et al., 2011). A common theme Bringle et al. (2001) found in all programs was that the programs were designed to allow for students to evaluate who they think they are, engage with different people through serving, and process what it means to be an ethically-minded individual.

Among many of these programs, there is an emphasis on students being given opportunities to lead. Students in West Point and USAFA are assigned underclassmen to whom they are responsible for communicating and teaching the values of the institutions (Cycyota et al., 2011; Dufresne & Offstein, 2012). This development has been supported by findings by literature that has found that experience in leading peers can have positive effects in higher moral judgment (Mayhew et al., 2010; Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milner, 2002).

RA Experiences

Serving as an RA can provide similar kinds of experience positively related to higher levels of moral development that were described in the literature. With the different responsibilities and roles RAs have, they might experience the same increases in moral development that other literature has found. This section will provide a summary of the roles and responsibilities RAs have. Possible explanations for why RAs might experience moral development are given.

RA roles.

RAs provide a unique service to a college or university, and they have several roles and responsibilities required of them. Blimling (1999) discusses five roles that RAs have: 1) student, 2) role model, 3) counselor, 4) teacher, and 5) administrator.

First and foremost, an RA is a student, and the academic goals should be the main priority for an RA (Blimling, 1999). Unfortunately, many times RAs find that their academic work must be set aside for the other responsibilities they have as RAs (Blimling, 1999). As students, RAs have to develop the skill of balancing their academic workload while providing substantial effort to their responsibilities as RAs (Blimling, 1999).

Second, RAs have the responsibility to be role models to their fellow students, especially new students, and there is an implied idea that RAs reflect values the university wants (Blimling, 1999). The task of being a role model is not limited to their specific residence hall. From being students in the classroom to eating in the cafeteria and even going off-campus, RAs have to conduct their behavior in an appropriate and desired manner (Blimling, 1999).

Third, RAs may sometimes have to take on a counselor role which mainly refers to helping students adjust to the unfamiliarity and resulting stress of living on a college campus (Blimling, 1999). While they are neither trained nor expected to have the skills of a licensed counselor, RAs do have the responsibility to help with the minor emotional or psychological problems students face, as well as to discern when students experience major problems necessitating professional counseling (Blimling, 1999).

Fourth, RAs have the role of being informal teachers (Blimling, 1999). They are expected to teach students general information, interpersonal skills, and the values held by their institution (Blimling, 1999). RAs, for example, might meet up with students in one-to-one meetings and

teach them steps to become a successful student (e.g., take good notes, engage in classroom activities). RAs may also organize events where they teach students in attendance how to do well in job interviews and behave professionally in the workplace.

Fifth, RAs are usually occupied with some form of administrative duties. These duties might include checking students in and out of residence halls, managing paperwork, and filing reports with their housing staff (Blimling, 1999). While they may not be the reasons why they are hired, administrative duties help maintain the function of residence halls (Blimling, 1999).

Due to the roles RAs have, opportunities to develop in moral judgment may present themselves. The responsibilities of being a role model, counselor, and teacher will require frequent interpersonal interaction, which may result in gains in moral judgment. An RA's roles will also lead to experiences with conflict (e.g., dealing with campus violations, mediating conflict between roommates), which, as described in the previously, may contribute to moral development.

RA training.

RAs' training may contribute to their moral development as argued in Jacques's (2014) study of a college RA training class on moral judgment development. The training and education may vary between institutions, but Jacques (2014) maintains that most RA training programs discuss similar topics (e.g., making appropriate decisions, building community, and social interactions) and emphasize similar values (e.g., morality, selflessness, and diligence). The research study featured an experimental group of 43 college students who were prospective RAs and underwent an RA training course. The control group was comprised of 45 students who did not participate in the course nor were previously RAs (Jacques, 2014). Their moral judgment was measured by the DIT-2 in a pre-test/post-test design (Jacques, 2014). The RA training course

lasted seven weeks (Jacques, 2014). The participants took the pre-test before the course began and then took the post-test at the conclusion of the seven-week course (Jacques, 2014).

Students enrolled in the RA course obtained significantly higher pre-test DIT-2 scores compared to the pre-test scores of the students who were not enrolled (Jacques, 2014). Another significant finding of the study was that the increase between the pre-test and post-test scores of the RA training group was significant compared to the comparison group (Jacques, 2014). Jacques (2014) argues that the students who become RAs, compared to students who do not pursue such a goal, may have a higher predisposition to attain a higher level of post-conventional moral judgment. Another interpretation Jacques (2014) proposes is that training to become an RA in a residence hall does have an impact on moral judgment development.

Conclusion

Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory of moral judgment provides the overall framework for this current study. While there are critiques of Kohlberg's theory, this current study utilizes Kohlberg's theory to maintain a consistent focus and framework because the majority of research supports the claims in the theory (Gibbs et al., 2007; Dawson, 2002; Blasi, 1980). The reviewed research indicates that individuals' moral development is affected by their experiences in higher education. Substantial literature has attempted to explore what aspects of higher education are influential in developing moral judgment and has found that service learning can contribute to students' moral development.

Concerning the current study's focus on RAs and moral development, some research exists on how training may affect RAs' moral development. Jacques (2014) found that the training an RA receives may result in higher gains in moral development. However, there is a lack of literature in exploring whether the actual experience of being an RA might impact moral

development. This current study's purpose seeks to address this gap by evaluating a group of RAs' moral development over the course of a semester.

Method

Recruitment Procedures and Sample

The participants from both sample groups were recruited from a Christian liberal arts university located in the Southeast region of the United States with approval from the university's institutional review board. At the pre-test stage, the RA sample was recruited through email as well as in-person recruitment. The RAs' email information was provided by resident directors and lead resident assistants. The comparison group was recruited from two psychology courses via brief, in-person visits to describe the study to the students. This group was selected because these classes featured substantially large enrollment and offered a better chance for recruitment.

The author invited 55 RAs to participate in this study, with 19 RAs completing the online pre-test survey (response rate = 34.55%). The author also invited 180 students from the psychology courses to participate, with 47 non-RA students completing the online pre-test survey (response rate = 26.11%). At the post-test stage, 16 of the original RA participants completed the online survey again (attrition rate = 15.79%). Nineteen non-RAs initially responded to the post-test survey, but only 18 participants completed the survey. The one participant's data was not included in the analysis. Therefore, 18 of the 47 original non-RA participants completed to the post-test survey (attrition rate = 59.57%). Demographic information about the participants can be found in Table 1 (Appendix A).

Measures

As described in the literature review, the SROM-SF is a measure intended to evaluate participants' levels of moral judgment (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987). The measure features two moral dilemmas with questions that participants read and respond to. The first dilemma is

Heinz's dilemma. The second dilemma portrays a boy who must decide whether to obey or disobey his father, after the father has broken a promise made to the son. The questionnaire is organized into sets that contain *close* items and *closest* items. In each set, there are four possible ways to respond to the dilemma, and each response includes the reason for selecting that response. Participants indicate whether each response is close or not close to the response they would give to the dilemma. Participants also have the option to indicate that they are not sure whether the response is close or not close. (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987). Each of the four responses reflect a different level of moral judgment. In addition to these *close* items, the set includes a *closest* item in which the participant rates which of the responses included in the set is the closest to the one they would give. For the Heinz dilemma, there are 9 sets of items, and the second dilemma includes 3 sets of items. The ratings that participants give are assigned specific values based on the level of moral judgment they reflect. These ratings are combined according to Basinger and Gibbs's (1987) scoring protocol to provide a total SROM-SF score. Possible SROM-SF scores range from 100 to 400. Higher scores (300 to 400) are interpreted as indicating the post-conventional level moral judgment. Tests of the measure's reliability and validity showed acceptable test-retest reliability, concurrent validity, and construct validity (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987). SROM-SF has been shown to be comparable with other measures of moral development, such as Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview, the DIT, and the SROM (Basinger & Gibbs, 1987; Koops et al., 2010).

The sociodemographic questions and SROM-SF were transposed - through the university's institutional survey tool - into an online survey. The purpose of collecting the data through an online survey was to allow for ease in data collection and analysis. The institutional survey tool allowed for exporting data into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS

Version 20.0.0). In addition, data collection through online means eliminated the need for transposing raw data into SPSS and decreased human error in inputting data to an electronic file. Finally, distributing the SROM-SF online allowed the participants to complete the survey at their convenience, which meant that the investigators did not have to schedule meetings and avoided scheduling conflicts. This data collection method allowed for better recruitment as well as better data analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

During recruitment, possible participants were contacted by email or through in-person recruitment. Those who expressed interest in participating were given a sign-up sheet where they provided an email address through which they could be contacted. Each participant received an email containing a link to the questionnaire. The email contained general information about study (e.g., time it would take to complete) and recipients of the email were given instructions if they wished to unsubscribe from receiving information concerning the current study. Participants were assigned a unique ID number in the email, which they entered when using the online survey. This unique ID number would be entered at both the pre-test and post-test stages. This procedure enabled the researchers to organize results and pair participants' data from the pre-test and post-test stages while still maintaining the participants' confidentiality. The document containing the codes linked to each participant was stored in the locked cabinet of the principal investigator. An electronic version of this document was password protected, and only the investigators possessed access to this document.

The online survey was open to the participants for approximately two weeks during both the pre-test and post-test stages. The pre-test stage took place at the beginning of the fall semester and the participants could respond to the survey from late August to early September.

When the emails were sent, the participants opened a link leading to the online survey containing the measures. Participants were informed that, by completing the survey, they were indicating that they were over 18 and consented to participating in the study. Participants were informed, as well, that they could exit the survey at any point. The participants entered their unique IDs and answered the set of sociodemographic questions. After filling out the sociodemographic questions, the participants completed the SROM-SF. The responses to these questions constituted the data collected for the study. The participants completed the online survey again at the end of the fall semester in December. The time that passed between the pre-test and the post-test stages was approximately three months.

Results

Relations between Demographic Variables and Completer Status among RAs and non-RAs

Results from an independent *t*-test indicated that the average age of RAs who completed both pre- and post-test surveys ($M = 20.00$, $SD = 1.21$) was not significantly higher than the average age of RAs who did not complete both surveys ($M = 20.00$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(17) = .00$, $p = 1.00$. Similarly, results from an independent *t*-test indicated that the average age of non-RAs who were completers ($M = 19.17$, $SD = 2.07$) was not significantly higher than the average age of non-RAs who were non-completers ($M = 18.76$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(45) = -.88$, $p = .380$.

Chi-square tests were computed to evaluate the relationship between gender and completer status. For the RAs, the results indicate that there was no association between gender and completer status, $X^2(1) = .28$, $p = .59$. Male RAs and female RAs were equally likely to be completers. For the non-RAs, the results indicate that there was no association between gender and completer status, $X^2(1) = .18$, $p = .68$. Male non-RAs and female non-RAs were equally likely to be completers.

A chi-square test of association was also computed to compare the frequency of completer status in Whites and non-Whites. In the RA group, White RAs and non-White RAs were equally likely to complete the surveys and results indicate there was no significant association between race and completer status, $X^2(1) = .67$, $p = .41$. In the non-RA group, results indicate there was no significant association between race and completer status, $X^2(1) = .72$, $p = .39$. White non-RAs and non-White non-RAs were equally likely to be completers.

Another chi-square test did find a significant relation between RA status and completer status, $X^2(1) = 11.42$, $p = .001$. RAs (84.21%) were more likely to complete both pre-tests and post-tests than non-RAs (38.29%).

Demographic Variables and RA Status

Results from a chi-square test of association indicated that there was no significant relationship between gender and RA status, $X^2(1) = 0.97, p = .32$. Males and females were equally likely to be RAs. A chi-square test of independence was also conducted comparing race and RA status. Whites and non-Whites had similar probabilities of being RAs, $X^2(1) = 0.39, p = .53$.

Results from an independent t-test indicated that there was no significant relationship between age and RA status, $t(32) = -1.41, p = .17$. The average age of RAs ($M = 20.00, SD = 1.56$) was not significantly higher than the average age of non-RAs ($M = 19.17, SD = 1.53$).

Distribution and Descriptive Statistics of Overall SROM-SF Scores

The distribution of the SROM-SF scores was examined to evaluate the assumption that the scores were normally distributed. The average pre-test score of participants was 311.10 ($SD = 23.74$). The scores of participants were normally distributed, with skewness of -0.48 ($SE = 0.40$) and kurtosis of 0.26 ($SE = 0.79$). A Shapiro-Wilk's W test was also computed to test the distribution of the pre-test scores, and the results indicate that the scores were normally distributed, $W(34) = 0.96, p = .23$. The average post-test score of participants was 315.51 ($SD = 34.45$), with skewness of -0.72 ($SE = .403$) and kurtosis of -0.74 ($SE = 0.79$). Results from a Shapiro-Wilk's W test indicate that the distribution was normal, $W(34) = 0.96, p = .23$. In the analyses of the scores' distribution, no statistically significant outliers were found among the participants' test scores.

Demographic Variables and SROM-SF Scores

Independent samples t-tests were conducted comparing the SROM-SF scores - both pre-test and post-test scores - of males and females. The results indicated the females' pre-test scores

($M = 315.73$, $SD = 22.04$) were not significantly higher than the males' pre-test scores ($M = 304.48$, $SD = 25.32$), $t(32) = 1.38$, $p = .18$. Similarly, results indicate the females' post-test scores ($M = 317.04$, $SD = 32.62$) were not significantly higher than the males' post-test scores ($M = 313.32$, $SD = 25.32$), $t(32) = -0.58$, $p = .76$. These results suggest there was no significant association between gender and SROM-SF scores.

Results from independent samples t -tests suggest there was a significant relationship between race and pre-test SROM-SF scores, $t(32) = 2.05$, $p = .05$. The average pre-test score of participants who identified as non-White ($M = 330.26$, $SD = 25.21$) was significantly higher than the pre-test scores of participants who identified as White ($M = 307.79$, $SD = 22.29$). However, results indicate that the average post-test score of non-Whites ($M = 300.39$, $SD = 59.91$) was not significantly different than the average post-test score of Whites ($M = 318.11$, $SD = 29.95$), $t(32) = -1.07$, $p = .29$.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between age and SROM-SF scores. There was not a statistically significant correlation between age and pre-test scores, $r = .21$, $p = .22$. Similarly, there was no significant correlation between age and post-test scores, $r = .15$, $p = .39$.

Bivariate Associations of SROM-SF Scores

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between pre-test SROM-SF scores and post-test SROM-SF scores. There was a significant positive correlation between pre-test scores and post-test scores, $r = .45$, $p = .007$.

An independent samples t -test was conducted to evaluate pre-test SROM-SF scores in RA and non-RA groups. The average pre-test SROM-SF score of RAs ($M = 318.29$, $SD = 19.68$) was not significantly higher than the average SROM-SF score of non-RAs ($M = 304.35$, $SD =$

25.49), $t(32) = -1.82, p = .08$. An independent samples t -test was also conducted to compare post-test SROM-SF scores in RA and non-RA groups. The average post-test score of RAs ($M = 332.89, SD = 26.16$) was significantly higher than the average score of non-RAs ($M = 300.05, SD = 34.09$), $t(32) = -3.12, p = .004$.

RA Status and Post-Test SROM-SF Scores

Initially, a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the effect of RA status on pre-test and post-test SROM-SF scores. RA status was treated as a between-subjects variable, and the comparison of pre-test to post-test scores was treated as a within-subjects variable. An interaction between RA status and the SROM-SF scores was also tested. The results indicated that, on average, the RAs scored higher on the SROM-SF than non-RAs, $F(1, 32) = 9.51, p = .004$. The comparison of pre- to post-test SROM-SF scores found no significant difference, Pillai's Trace = .03, $F(1,32) = 0.88, p = .36$. The interaction between RA status and SROM-SF scores was also non-significant, Pillai's Trace = .09, $F(1,32) = 3.06, p = .09$. Upon further review of the results, the ANOVA was underpowered. A post hoc power analysis revealed only a 15% chance of detecting an effect in the comparison of pre- to post-test SROM-SF scores and a 40% chance to detect an effect in the interaction between RA status and post-test SROM-SF scores.

To increase power, a one-way, between-subjects analysis of co-variance (ANCOVA) was calculated to compare RAs and non-RAs on post-test SROM-SF scores controlling for pre-test SROM-SF scores. The ANCOVA [between-subjects factor: RA status (non-RA, RA); co-variate: pre-test SROM-SF scores] indicated that SROM-SF post-test scores were significantly related to RA status, $F(1, 33) = 6.10, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .16$. RAs exhibited a statistically greater increase than non-RAs with a mean difference of 25.80 on the SROM-SF post-test, 95% CI [4.50, 47.10]. As

expected, the ANCOVA was better able to detect an effect. The post hoc power analysis revealed that power had increased to 67%.

Discussion

Results

In this study, the author tested the hypothesis that students who are RAs would exhibit greater increases in moral development scores over an approximately 3-month span than students who are not RAs. To test the hypothesis and address possible confounding variables, the author utilized independent t-tests, chi-square tests, correlations, a repeated measures ANOVA, and an ANCOVA. The purpose of the ANCOVA was to analyze whether the post-test SROM-SF scores differed between RAs and non-RAs after adjusting for their pre-test SROM-SF scores. The analyses show that RAs experience a greater increase in scores than non-RAs over the period of a semester when controlling for their pre-test scores. In addition to the results from the ANCOVA, the difference of increase between RAs' scores and non-RAs' scores does not seem to be attributable to their demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, race, etc.). The RAs and non-RAs were demographically similar. Most importantly, the analyses did not find a significant relation between demographic variables and post-test SROM-SF scores. The results lend support to the author's hypothesis that students who are involved in student leadership as RAs will exhibit greater increases in moral development scores than students who are not involved in student leadership as RAs.

Results from the current study suggest that the experiences specific to an RA might be beneficial in promoting moral development. An RA has a multitude of responsibilities that he or she must attend to. The RAs' most unique responsibilities at Southeastern University were mediating and resolving conflicts, mentoring students, and collaborating with a variety of people.

The literature offers several possible factors by which RA-like experiences might positively affect moral development. Lies et al. (2012) found that college students who

volunteered in community service experienced greater gains in moral development scores. While an RA's responsibilities do not necessarily constitute community service, they do share some similarities. In Lies et al.'s (2012) study, two of the community service types students participated in were tutoring at-risk youth and visiting children at a local hospital. Similarly, an RA usually meets with students who are struggling with the adjustments in college – possibly because of their background – and provide some form of mentoring. They might also provide support, care, and comfort to students who are dealing with hardships in their lives (e.g., loss of a family member, self-esteem issues, etc.). Similar to the conclusion in the study by Lies et al. (2012), the responsibility of helping others might be a factor in RAs' moral development.

Another possible factor for the RAs' moral development is that RAs interact and engage with people of various backgrounds. Mayhew et al. (2008) found that the aspect of higher education that had a positive effect on moral judgment scores was interaction with people with different perspectives. RAs continually have to interact with other people, such as their students on the hall or their team members, who have different perspectives than their own. This facet of an RA's responsibilities might contribute to their moral development because it leads to both cognitive and social disequilibrium. Haan (1985) found that social disequilibrium – the type of disequilibrium that is characterized by interacting with the facets of real-life conflict – can affect a person's moral development. A study conducted by Boss (1994) indicated that when students experience both cognitive and social disequilibrium, they see greater increases in moral development than students who only experience one of the disequilibrium types.

Social disequilibrium and cognitive disequilibrium are ever present in an RA's daily life. Take for example, an RA who is solving a roommate conflict. The RA has to deal with cognitive aspects of the conflict: each student's argument and logic, factual information, and the actual

problem itself. In addition to the cognitive aspects of the conflict, the RA also has to process the social disequilibrium in the roommate conflict: the relationship between the two students, the emotional investment of each student, and how their backgrounds might influence their perspectives on the conflict. Typically, RAs resolve these disequilibria by addressing each person's perspective and the roles they might have in the problem. They look at what values should be the priority (e.g., value of friendship, value of kindness and compassion) and attempt to help the students in the conflict see why these values are a priority. RAs can also get advice and guidance from the supervisory resident directors, who will help the RAs process through the social disequilibrium.

In the analyses of the data, possible confounding variables that have been proposed by past literature were addressed. For instance, Gilligan (1982) argued that Kohlberg's theory of moral development and the tests utilizing this theory were inherently biased against women. Her argument was that Kohlberg overly emphasized the cognitive processes of moral judgment and did not consider "feminine" qualities (e.g., emotions, compassion for others) of making moral decisions (Gilligan, 1982). This argument would suggest that men would score higher on moral judgment tests that are founded on Kohlberg's theory (i.e., the SROM-SF). The implications of Gilligan's (1982) argument poses a possible confounding variable for this study. However, the results from the t-test analysis indicate that gender was unrelated to SROM-SF scores. From this analysis, there was no evidence suggesting that the SROM-SF was biased against women. This lack of bias against women is consistent with findings of other studies which were discussed in the literature review (Friedman et al., 1987; White, 1999).

Age is another potential confounding variable. Literature on moral development argues that age is positively correlated with moral development (King & Mayhew, 2002; Pascarella &

Terenzini, 1991). Results from a correlational analysis, however, found that the participants' age was unrelated to pre-test or post-test SROM-SF scores. Differences between the current study and past studies might account for the lack of a correlation between age and moral development scores in this study. Most studies (King & Mayhew, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) discussed in the literature review that found correlations between age and moral development scores covered at least a full school year or longer.

Implications of Results

An important implication of this study's results is that being involved in college as a student leader, such as the position of an RA, may be beneficial to moral development. One of the goals of higher education institutions is to provide means for students to develop into citizens who can make moral judgments and decisions in their career fields and living communities. While not every student has the opportunity to be an RA, it is positive to note that students who do get involved in student leadership as an RA may experience gains in moral development. RAs are mentors, role models, teachers, and sometimes even counselors on their campus.

If the experiences of RAs have a positive effect on moral development, educational institutions may wish to borrow facets from experiences in the RA position and give non-RA students opportunities to have experiences similar to those of RAs. Taking advantage and capitalizing on pre-existing courses might be an excellent way for colleges and universities to implement this strategy. One example might be an ethics course that also includes volunteering that leads to experiences of cognitive and social equilibrium (e.g., tutoring and mentoring at-risk students, volunteering at local charity events, mediating student conflict, etc.) as a requirement to complete the course. Boss's (1994) study on how the combination of volunteering and enrollment in an ethics course is beneficial to positive moral development supports this idea.

Incorporating volunteer activities that are similar to RA experiences would be appropriate since it would maximize the likelihood that these experiences would foster moral development.

Students in an ethics course are already participating in coursework and classroom discussions on ethics and moral issues. Real-life application of what they have learned about morality and ethics may lead to greater increases in their moral development. It is already common for universities to require students to do community service as a requirement for graduation. In requiring community service hours, universities may provide these opportunities for students

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

There are certain limitations that affect the results and interpretation of this study. First, the study was conducted in a private, liberal arts Christian university, which minimizes the generalizability of this study's results to other institutions. The university's on-campus population is roughly around 1,500. Larger, public universities might produce different results from the current study since they might include representatives of a population that were not included in this current study. Differences of RA programs in these different institutions might also produce different results from the current study. Southeastern's RA program focused on giving RAs the responsibility to foster relationships with students and provide guidance as well as mentoring. Some RA programs focus more on giving RAs the responsibilities to monitor student behavior and report violations of the institution's student handbook. Southeastern's RA program might be different from other programs at other universities and that might have affected the current study's results. Future research could examine the differences between specific types of RA programs and how it could influence moral development.

Second, the sample size of the current study was small. The sample size did limit the power of the initial ANOVA. A larger sample size might have produced different results than the

ones the current study produced. In order to address this limitation, future research could have a larger sample size in their methodology.

Third, while the current study does offer some explanations for its results, the author cannot fully conclude which factors of being an RA are beneficial to moral development. Future research can address this limitation by evaluating what specific mechanisms of RA experiences positively influence moral development. For example, future studies could include both quantitative elements, such as the ones utilized in the current study, and qualitative elements where researchers can ask for or observe what factors contribute to an RA's moral development. Researchers may also want to develop quantitative measures to evaluate certain aspects of being an RA. Researchers could specifically measure the social and cognitive disequilibrium that RAs experience, such as dealing with student conflict or helping students adjust to difficulties in life, and study whether these two types of disequilibrium affects moral development. In addition, researchers can measure how often RAs encounter disequilibrium and analyze whether frequency of disequilibrium is correlated with moral development. Future researchers may also want to measure the time RAs spend on their responsibilities and see if that factor is shares a relationship with moral development.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to address a gap in literature by evaluating whether involvement in student leadership as RAs contributes to moral development during time in college. Literature on moral development and higher education found that higher education shares a significant, positive correlation with higher levels of moral judgment (King & Mayhew, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). However, there was a need for studies to evaluate what aspects of higher education contribute to developments in moral judgment. One of the aspects

that needed evaluation was RA experiences. In regards to this subject, studies have addressed whether the training RAs receive is beneficial in moral development (Jacques, 2014; McKelfresh, 1987).

The current study demonstrated that, on average, RAs exhibited greater increases in moral development scores than non-RAs. This outcome lends support to the idea that the experiences of an RA may contribute to gains in moral development. Universities and higher-education institutions should always be seeking to offer opportunities for their students to engage and develop their moral judgment. One of these opportunities might be involvement as an RA or a position with similar responsibilities. With a well-developed RA program, a higher-education institution can take part in developing people who can make morally right decisions in today's dilemmas.

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Appendix A

Table 1 Demographic Composition of Sample ($N = 34$)¹

Mean Age (<i>SD</i>)	19.79 (1.75)
Gender	
Male	14 (41.2%)
Female	20 (58.8%)
Race	
White	29 (85.3%)
Non-White	5 (14.7%)
Academic Rank	
Freshman	11 (32.4%)
Sophomore	11 (32.4%)
Junior	8 (23.5%)
Senior	4 (11.8%)
RA Status	
RA	16 (47.1%)
Non-RA	18 (52.9%)

¹Figures represent the number of participants in each category, followed by percentages in parentheses unless stated otherwise