

Profile

The Life and Legacy of Lawrence Kohlberg

Catherine Walsh

A year after police pulled Lawrence Kohlberg's body from Boston Harbor, 600 people gathered at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) on April 15, 1988, to commemorate "Lawrence Kohlberg Day." The event's speakers sought to understand the sudden loss of a man who had made a profound impact on the fields of moral psychology and moral education.

Professor Howard Gardner, co-founder of Project Zero at HGSE, called the day "inspiring" in dealing with the "unfinished business of a figure who was larger than life." William Damon, a scholar of human development from Clark University (now at Stanford University), summed up the mood of speakers, students, and other participants: "It's going to take a long time to figure out what [Kohlberg's] work meant in all of its implications," he said.

Many attendees expressed disappointment over the absence from Lawrence Kohlberg Day of HGSE professor Carol Gilligan, who had been unable to attend because of an illness in her family. After publishing her 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan had become perhaps the most famous questioner of current psychological theories of human development, including Kohlberg's. Gilligan had analyzed the voices of women to argue that theories, like Kohlberg's, that were developed from studies of boys and men did not fully "encompass the human condition." The absence of her voice from a celebration that included such prominent figures as German philosopher Jurgen Habermas added to the poignant sense of "unfinished business," inevitable for an event so close in time to Kohlberg's death.

Only in 1997—more than 10 years after Kohlberg committed suicide by walking into the frigid waters of the Atlantic Ocean on a January day—did Gilligan

speak publicly for the first time about her relationship with the late moral educator. Reflecting recently on her speech, "Remembering Larry," which received a standing ovation at the 1997 Association for Moral Education conference, Gilligan said that she welcomed the chance to honor Kohlberg, and to quell rumors and revisit the past.

"Something of a false story had been circulating, that I was Larry's student, that we were involved in a war," she said. "So the news that, for example, we taught together about our disagreements, and that what was at stake were real and serious issues on both sides, came as a reminder to some people as to what both his work and my work were really about."

Spurred in part by Gilligan's remembrances, others at the Ed School, too, have begun to reexamine and put into context the life and work of one of HGSE's former superstars. Not only was Kohlberg famous for his theory of six stages of moral development—every psychology textbook published in the last quarter-century touches upon Kohlberg's work—but he also founded the Center for Moral Education at HGSE and taught at the School for 20 years. His international reputation attracted scholars the world over, making the "Larsen Hall third floor" synonymous with the exchange of ideas about morality, psychology, and education. One European scholar went so far as to call Larsen "the moral mecca of education."

During his tenure at the Ed School, Kohlberg inspired a generation of academics to become activists. He sought to put theories of human development into practice by encouraging the formation of democracies or "just communities" in schools and prisons. His belief was that moral education would flourish in an environment in which everyone had decision-making power.

But then Kohlberg became physically and mentally ill; as he fell apart, some say, so did much of his work. After his death, some of Kohlberg's colleagues questioned whether his agenda had died with him. Had his pursuit of practical applications undermined his research? Others insisted—and still insist—that Kohlberg's legacy lives on at the School in programs such as Risk and Prevention.

Reassessing Kohlberg's legacy now, more than a dozen years after his death, makes sense, says Robert L. Selman, who is professor and director of the Risk and Prevention Program. "The rawness of Larry's death is kind of gone," he says.

Selman believes that the time has come to examine what is perhaps the most enduring part of Kohlberg's legacy. "Larry Kohlberg gave meaning to an inordinate number of individual's professional identities—including mine," he says.

Kohlberg's Origins

Lawrence Kohlberg was born in 1927 into a wealthy family and grew up in Bronxville, New York. After attending Phillips Academy, where he later recalled that he had been known far more for his sense of mischief and forays to nearby girls' schools than for his interest in academic theories, Kohlberg threw himself into the Zionist cause. The young man became the "second engineer" on an old freighter after World War II, smuggling Jewish refugees past the British blockade of Palestine.

In an article titled "Beds for Bananas," Kohlberg recounted with glee that he and his shipmates had convinced various government inspectors that the South American freighter's makeshift passenger beds were, in fact, banana-storing containers. Robert Kegan, chair of the Learning and Teaching area at HGSE, points to the article for an example of Kohlberg's humor and of a nascent "just community" in action.

"The ship's crew had a meeting one night to decide whether to risk going ashore and having a good time or staying on the ship," Kegan says with a chuckle. "The crew voted to deny themselves shore privileges and then broke out the beer. Everyone felt virtuous about their democratic decision. But then they drank a lot and promptly left the ship!"

In 1948, Kohlberg enrolled at the University of Chicago. Because he scored so high on admissions tests, he extricated himself from most of the school's course requirements and earned his bachelor's degree in one year. Staying on to do graduate work in psychology, Kohlberg thought that he would become a clinical psychologist, not a researcher. But Jean

Piaget's theories of moral development in children and adolescents fascinated him; Kohlberg eventually found himself interviewing children and adolescents on moral issues.

Research and Innovation

Kohlberg's doctoral dissertation, published in 1958, made him psychology's newest star. In the dissertation he uncovered six stages of moral development—in contrast with Piaget's two stages—based upon interviews of 72 white boys in Chicago about the dilemma of Heinz.

After asking the boys whether a fictional and financially strapped man named Heinz did right or wrong in stealing a drug for his dying wife, Kohlberg explored the reasoning behind the answers. Kohlberg found that young children assumed that they had no choice but to obey rules handed down by powerful authorities. Heinz was wrong to steal the drug, a child typically says in Stage 1, "because it is bad to steal" or "because it is against the law to steal." But once children realize that more than one way of doing things exists, they move to making moral decisions from a position of self-interest (Stage 2). Furthering individual relationships becomes the main concern in Stage 3, whereas by Stage 6, a person works for a moral society—for justice—to the point of disobeying unjust laws.

Kohlberg's six stages of moral development—his concept of "the child as a moral philosopher"—broke radically with earlier psychological approaches to morality.

Instead of seeing morality as a concept that adults impose on children (the psychoanalytic explanation), or as something based solely on avoiding bad feelings like anxiety and guilt (the behaviorist explanation), Kohlberg believed that children generate their own moral judgments. Moved by social relationships and by a variety of emotions—including love, respect, empathy, and attachment—children become moral agents, Kohlberg said.

Because he insisted on using empirical data and thus created a framework for looking for universal qualities of moral judgment, the world of psychology—and the world of education—grew excited.

Only in his thirties, Kohlberg had revived a field of inquiry and, in the process, become a hot commodity. In 1968, at the age of 40, he came to the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Married at the time and the father of two young sons, Kohlberg looked the part of the brilliant young academic. Unruly dark hair topping an angular face and a full, sensitive mouth, Kohlberg always seemed to be in motion. In nearly every photo

from that era, his hands sweep his hair or jab the air—gestures of a mind racing to keep up with itself.

Academic Appointments

No one works in a vacuum, of course, nor does an institution. The atmosphere of the Ed School, of Harvard as a whole, in the late sixties and early seventies pulsed with energy and angst, with a sense of urgency and a belief in the possible. The era's events—civil rights and the women's movement, Kent State and Vietnam—shaped Kohlberg and his contemporaries in ways still being felt and comprehended.

Responding to the demand of undergraduates in 1970 that their education directly address their moral and political questions, Harvard College, for instance, asked Kohlberg to teach a course on moral and political choice. Carol Gilligan taught a section of that course.

"I remember a young woman raising her hand in class one day to ask Larry what his theory said about what she should do, knowing that people were starving," recalls Gilligan in "Remembering Larry." "Her moral anguish filled the room."

The Ed School responded in fits and starts to the cultural demands on it, believes Bob Selman. "At HGSE the seventies were the ripple effect of what we think of as 'the sixties.' This was a time when academics tried to become activists, when the energy was around bridging; Larry Kohlberg was a big part of that."

Drawn in part by Kohlberg, scholars from around the country and the globe converged upon the Ed School. The ethos of the place" dynamic and occasionally chaotic, tolerant and often trusting—made for a few slips. Such as a visiting professor whose credentials, it turns out, were all made up.

Doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows in the Human Development area like Selman, Bob Kegan, and Gil Noam recall a palpable excitement generated by Kohlberg.

"From my very first meeting with Larry, I was struck by his strong and powerful curiosity, his extreme respect for other people's ideas," says Noam, associate professor of education at HGSE.

"There were times that we sat in my apartment, discussing everything from German philosophy and Judaism to longitudinal research. Larry never noticed my rickety chairs, because he was totally focused on the conversation."

Intellectual and Academic Circles

Kohlberg gathered together an intellectual community that was "unusually inclusive" on a number of levels, Bob Kegan says.

"The 'Larsen Hall third floor' expanded into other areas of the School and all over the world. You would be in Berlin and find yourself connected to the third floor, or you'd turn the corner on the third floor and run into someone from Jerusalem or Switzerland."

Gil Noam laughs as he recalls "the homespun business" that developed on the third floor of Larsen Hall, then home to Human Development, as demand for Kohlberg's articles grew. "For a while, Larry needed a part-time position just to keep up with requests for reprints."

Friday afternoon gatherings on the third floor, marked by spirited discussions and the sipping of sherry, became a tradition. And, Kegan says, the differing nationalities of folks attracted to the floor was not the only thing that accounted for the diversity found there.

"The people that Larry brought in did not necessarily agree with him. He would bring in critics. You never felt an 'us/them' or 'either/or' approach with him."

Robert A. LeVine, the eminent cultural psychologist, recently retired from HGSE, agrees.

"Even though Larry and I never saw eye to eye on anything in the field of human development, but were part of fundamentally different approaches, he initiated the Ed School's interest in bringing me here," LeVine says.

The two had taught in the University of Chicago's "Committee on Human Development" from 1962 to 1968.

"Although Larry became a kind of guru at the Ed School who was surrounded by followers, he did not try to stack the HGSE Human Development program with people who agreed with him," says LeVine.

Jerome Kagan, a child psychologist and professor at both HGSE and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, co-taught a seminar with Kohlberg and remained close to him—despite the fact that as academics they didn't agree on much.

"Larry helped developmental psychologists to understand that a child's moral development doesn't spring forth fully developed at three or four years old," Kagan says. But Kohlberg's reliance on children's verbal responses to moral dilemmas, in order to measure their stage of development, didn't make sense to Kagan.

"I could imagine a child who could not put into words, or into coherent sentences, his or her take on a moral problem, thus scoring at a lower stage than is actually the case," says Kagan. But the two men were good friends, and so were their families.

Whatever disagreements colleagues had with Kohlberg, some remember him as an inspired teacher who insisted that students be active learners. "Larry truly believed that the knowledge-constructing activities of students should be respected," Bob Kegan says.

Kegan adds, "Larry would stand in front of 120 students and fearlessly—and often successfully—attempt to conduct dialogue. He had a talent for turning comments that ranged from inane to incomplete into something interesting and contributive."

But Kohlberg as a teacher and a researcher, according to Carol Gilligan, "ignored some vast cultural silences." By listening to certain voices—first of young men facing the Vietnam draft and then of women facing abortion decisions—Gilligan moved, in her words, to "fill that silence with experience."

Kohlbergian Theory Challenged

The section of Kohlberg's course on moral and political choice that Gilligan taught in 1970 proved unsettling to her—and ultimately life-changing.

"The young men refused," says Gilligan, "to talk about their own draft dilemmas, aware that there was no room in Larry's theory for them to talk freely about their concerns without sounding morally undeveloped, like women, in their thinking about relationships and other people's feelings.

"Uneasy about taking a stand in public that was at odds with what they were feeling in private, finding no room for uncertainty and indecision, they chose silence over hypocrisy."

With the publication of *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan directly challenged Kohlberg's theory. Amy, an 11-year-old girl in the book who says "it depends" when asked whether Heinz should steal the drug for his wife, has become well-known in academic circles and in popular culture. Nationally syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman—and Gilligan herself on National Public Radio—invoked Amy's answer in analyzing the reasoning of "traditional moralists" in Washington pursuing the impeachment of President Clinton, for instance. They both argued that Amy's emphasis on relationships would be helpful in analyzing not only Clinton's own explanations and defenses but also how the country should respond.

In Gilligan's view, Kohlberg's theory of moral development became "fossilized" and out of touch with a reality that includes the voices of women and people of color. Her questioning of Kohlberg's work, she says, has been nothing more and nothing less than one aspect of "a major cultural shift" taking place in society.

Kohlberg's Academic Influence

Like many of Kohlberg's contemporaries, however, Gilligan acknowledges that she has been deeply influenced by the late moral educator.

Gilligan says that what drew her back into psychology when she had all but abandoned the field in the mid-sixties were "two men whose voices had the ring of truth"—the psychologist Erik Erikson, and Kohlberg. She admired Kohlberg's conviction that, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, for psychologists to assume a stance of moral relativism was untenable. "I remember his courage, his determination to talk about moral values in psychology, his bravery in countering the claim that psychology was a value-neutral social science," she says.

Several days after meeting Kohlberg at a party in 1968, Gilligan received a phone call from him in which he asked if she would run a study about adolescents' reasoning about sexual decision-making. The two co-authored a paper and developed a friendship.

"We often went to the Sheraton to have a glass of wine at the end of the day.... We talked about Dostoyevsky and King Lear, our marriages, our lives."

But Gilligan became increasingly frustrated by the tenor of the public conversation "where I was talked about but not listened to or heard." So she left the "Kohlberg-Gilligan debate," which to Gilligan "sounded increasingly like one of those wars I had studied in history, the Franco-Prussian War." She says that Kohlberg had helped create characters in the public debate—"Kohlberg" and "Gilligan"—who were different from the real people whose names they shared.

Years later, however, accepting the invitation to speak at the 23rd annual conference of the Association for Moral Education seemed right to Gilligan. "I wanted to bring closure to that period of my work and my life," she says.

Bob Selman, a colleague in the Human Development and Psychology area, praises Gilligan's "courage" in pursuing her work and offers a theory of his own regarding her relationship with Kohlberg.

"Whose impact has been the largest in the department? Without a doubt, it's Carol's," says Selman. "But without 'Kohlberg,' there is no 'Gilligan.' She had the courage to go up against the leaders of human development in the seventies; with Kohlberg, she really had someone to go up against, and at very close range."

Selman also points out that Gilligan, unlike Kohlberg, has stayed focused on research. "Some would argue that Larry's attempt to go to practice weakened his academic work," Selman says.

But Bob Kegan disagrees.

"I don't think it's true that Larry's work became less productive in his later years," he says. "The time he spent building connections to high school faculties and students while implementing his ideas of 'just communities,' for instance, was a quite productive phase.

"The fact that poor black kids from the Bronx came and spoke at Larry's memorial service shows that he had made powerful connections during his 'practice' phase," Kegan continues. "And the ideas Larry had been developing about 'moral atmosphere'—the social context that supports moral development—came directly from practice and were very promising."

Kohlberg and Israel

A visit to an Israeli kibbutz in the summer of 1969 affected Kohlberg deeply. While conducting a study of the morality of adolescents living in the collective settlement, Kohlberg found that these poor, urban youths had achieved much higher stages of moral reasoning than similar youths who were not part of the kibbutz.

Unlike hippie-style schools in the United States that Kohlberg had studied and found wanting because of their romantic views of young people, the kibbutz combined informality with "a considerable amount of iron."

Finding the practices of the kibbutz youth group better than anything he had conceived from his theories, Kohlberg became convinced that he could never derive a model for moral education from psychological theory alone. In 1974, his desire to conduct moral discussions in schools coincided with the development of a new alternative school within Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School. The Cambridge superintendent of schools suggested that Kohlberg attend a planning meeting for this "school within a school" known as the Cluster School.

Elsa Wasserman, a former counselor at the Cluster School who today serves as a senior consultant for the National Center on Education and the Economy, remembers well the impact that Kohlberg had on the Cluster School planning meeting.

"Larry promoted the idea of a democratic, just-community school where each person—whether a student or staff member—had one vote in deciding school policies," she says. "He captivated parents and kids and teachers."

Wasserman adds with a laugh: "Larry was constantly at the school, helping us in lengthy meetings to figure out how to run the Cluster School as a just community."

At "community meetings," chaos sometimes reigned, such as the time when students voted that

"everyone could leave before the close of school if they did not like the [elective] courses offered" during the last period. But students also developed a sense of commitment to the school and to one another that was rare, Wasserman says.

Kohlberg helped several schools in Massachusetts and New York form just communities and also advised a just community at a women's prison in Connecticut. One European scholar, Frederick Oser of Switzerland, established a Kohlbergian just community at a high school in France.

Several weeks after police found Kohlberg's body in April 1987, Ann Higgins, a former HGSE instructor and Kohlberg's fiancée at the time of his death, gave a talk to the Society for Research in Child Development.

She ended her talk by quoting remarks made at Kohlberg's funeral by a student who belonged to a just community program for dropouts at Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx:

"I'm here to speak about Larry. He cared about us and loved us all in a special way. If he was here now he'd be so proud of us, of the progress we have been doing, passing our classes and staying in school.

"Larry was a nice, sweet, gentle person."

Kohlbergian Communities

Although the just communities with which Kohlberg had been involved during his life did not endure long after his death, Bob Selman believes that the intellectual ideas behind the communities were forerunners of the Risk and Prevention Program he heads at the Ed School.

A program that explores both the causes and the prevention of psychological, academic, social, and health problems of schoolchildren, "Risk and Prevention represents one attempt to carry out Kohlberg's agenda," says Selman.

Selman credits Kohlberg with "powerfully inspiring" his own practice-based research in psychology. "I was going straight back to practice [after postdoctoral work at HGSE] until I met Larry. Instead, I've been involved in a slow building of an intellectual framework all these years. "I was one of the many people Larry was generous to."

Gil Noam, a clinical and developmental psychologist who studies resilience in adolescents and adults and who directs a new after-school research and training center at HGSE, was also one of Kohlberg's mentees. He came to study with Kohlberg at HGSE while serving as a faculty member at Harvard Medical School in the early eighties.

"Despite the fact that I was quite critical of a stage-orientation approach to social development modeled after Piaget, Larry was very supportive," Noam recalls. "He gave me guidance on how to develop my own perspective."

Noam combined his developmental and educational research with becoming a psychoanalyst. He found that his interest in individual biography and transformation, in research that implies that people spend their lives transforming parts of themselves and not others, only partially fit with Kohlberg's basic notions. But Kohlberg's "unquestionable impact" on his work continues to impress Noam.

"What is so powerful is that while I have never seen myself as a Kohlbergian, I feel very influenced by his stance and approach," says Noam.

To Bob Kegan, Kohlberg's enduring impact is self-evident. "We have three members of our senior faculty alone whose intellectual work has a direct line to Kohlberg. I don't think there's another person, living or dead, about whom that could be said."

Like other mentees of Kohlberg's, Kegan found Kohlberg unusually generous. "He was such a *sweet* guy," Kegan says. "I never heard him engage in forms of personal attack against colleagues." Other words that come to mind about Kohlberg include "enthused and distracted," says Kegan.

"Kohlberg's personal style was like a caricature of the absent-minded professor. After his death, the number of uncashed checks on his desk equaled the total of unopened bills." Kegan also considered Kohlberg "a model of graceful suffering" who never complained about the pain he endured during the last years of his life. "I hope I do half as well in my own decline."

Remembering Larry Kohlberg

In her talk shortly after Kohlberg's death, Ann Higgins said that Kohlberg had contracted a

"parasitic infection" while doing cross-cultural work in Belize in 1971. "For the remaining 16 years of his life, Larry suffered more or less from pain.... [H]e lived with the ever-increasing awareness that the pain, familiar and awful, had become a part of his life."

During the last years of his life, Kohlberg tried all sorts of non-Western medications—"stuff that his doctors had never even heard of"—in the hopes of alleviating severe intestinal problems, Kegan says. "Sometimes during class, Larry would say, 'OK, I have to excuse myself for five minutes.' This contributed to his reputation of flakiness, although it was likely that he was embarrassed or didn't want to draw too much attention to himself," says Kegan.

That Kohlberg made himself available to almost anyone who shared his enthusiasms probably didn't help his health either. Bob Selman says. "Unwittingly perhaps, Larry got used by people. I think he knew this went on, but he was so impassioned about his work that he didn't mind."

Colleagues say that Kohlberg's availability extended to inviting people to his homes in Cambridge and on Cape Cod. "Anyone was welcome in his house anytime, which probably didn't always help his family life," says Kegan, who recalls digging in the sand for oysters and clams with Kohlberg on the Cape, talking about ideas all the while.

Toward the very end, Kohlberg was disheveled, even distraught. While on a day pass from a local hospital on January 19, 1987, Kohlberg drove to Winthrop, parked his car on a dead-end street, and plunged into the sea. He was 59 years old.

Catherine Walsh is a staff writer for the Harvard Educational Bulletin. This article appears with the courtesy of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Harvard University.