

Shifts in Moral Decision-Making Among College Students: A 15-Year Successive Independent Samples Study Utilizing a Real-Life Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

This study examines shifts in moral decision-making among college students over a 15-year period. Using a real-life ethical dilemma presented annually in an introductory child and adolescent development course at a U.S. college, the research explores how students respond to a scenario in which lawyers withhold information about an innocent man's wrongful imprisonment to protect their careers. The objectives were to assess changes in students' ethical attitudes and behaviors, as well as the underlying reasons for those changes. Methodologically, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to track trends in students' willingness to speak out against injustice. The results indicate a significant decline in students' readiness to challenge ethical wrongdoing, mirroring broader societal shifts in moral priorities. This transformation reflects not only a change in moral decision-making but also in the rationale behind students' choices. The findings suggest a need for further research to explore the societal influences and motivational factors driving these changes. The study's implications call for targeted interventions aimed at fostering ethical behavior and promoting integrity within educational and professional environments.

1. Introduction

Moral decision-making is fundamental to personal and professional development, influencing individuals' behavior, decision-making, and interaction within society. Understanding moral decision-making among youth and young adults, particularly college students, holds paramount importance for several compelling reasons. For instance, the college years represent a transformative period in an individual's life. During this time, young adults undergo significant cognitive, emotional, and social changes (Arnett, 2000). They are often exposed to diverse perspectives, ideologies, and ethical dilemmas that challenge their existing moral frameworks (King & Baxter, 2005). Understanding how college students navigate these challenges can provide insights into the processes and factors that shape moral reasoning and ethical behavior during a pivotal developmental stage (Hasegawa, 2016).

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The majority of existing studies on moral development and decision-making among young adults focus on intraindividual development processes. These studies typically examine how moral reasoning and decision-making evolve within individuals over time, drawing heavily on the foundational work of Lawrence Kohlberg (1976). Kohlberg's theory of moral development posits that individuals progress through a series of stages in their moral reasoning, from a pre-conventional level focused on self-interest and avoidance of punishment, to a conventional level where adherence to social rules and norms predominates, and ultimately to a post-conventional level characterized by abstract principles and the recognition of universal ethical values. Kohlberg's stage theory emphasizes the cognitive processes underlying moral reasoning, asserting that individuals move through these stages sequentially as they encounter and resolve moral dilemmas in increasingly complex ways.

Kohlberg's work has profoundly influenced the field, providing a framework for understanding how moral reasoning evolves throughout an individual's life, particularly during the critical years of young adulthood. Studies building on Kohlberg's model, such as those by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), have explored how higher education contributes to the development of moral reasoning. These studies demonstrate that college experiences, including exposure to diverse perspectives and engagement in complex social interactions, can facilitate progression through Kohlberg's stages of moral development. By focusing on intraindividual changes, these studies offer valuable insights into the cognitive and psychological mechanisms driving moral development within individuals.

While such research has significantly advanced our understanding of moral development, it often overlooks the broader, inter-cohort developmental changes that occur across different groups of students over successive years. These inter-cohort changes can provide important context for understanding how broader social, cultural, and educational shifts influence student decision-making. For instance, variations in societal norms, educational policies, and cultural trends can lead to differences in the moral development trajectories of successive cohorts of students.

The present study aims to address a critical gap in the literature by analyzing inter-cohort changes in moral decision-making, focusing on the influence of broader social, cultural, and educational shifts. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How have college students' moral reasoning and decision-making processes evolved over a 15-year period? (2) What societal, cultural, and educational factors contribute to these shifts? The study hypothesizes that, over time, students will show a decline in moral decision-making behaviors that prioritize speaking out against injustice, reflecting broader changes in societal values, social norms, and technological influences. By examining variations in moral reasoning across different student cohorts, this research offers both intraindividual and inter-cohort perspectives on moral development. The long-term, cohort-based approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of how macro-level societal changes—such as shifts in education systems, social norms, and digital landscapes—shape the moral decision-making processes of young adults. This dual focus complements earlier theories of moral development, such as Kohlberg's, by providing an updated view of how external influences shape moral choices over time.

2. Moral Development

Kohlberg's theory of moral development proposes a hierarchical sequence of moral reasoning stages, progressing from pre-conventional to conventional to post-conventional levels. According to Kohlberg (1976), individuals' moral reasoning evolves through these stages as they mature, with higher stages reflecting more complex and principled ethical reasoning. This theory provides a framework for understanding the cognitive processes underlying moral

decision-making and could serve as a basis for analyzing changes in moral reasoning among college students over time. Kohlberg's theory presents six stages of moral reasoning within the context of pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional levels.

- **Pre-Conventional Level**

- *Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation*—Individuals at this stage adhere to moral rules to avoid punishment and follow authority figures' directives.
- *Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange*—Moral decisions are based on self-interest and the understanding that different individuals may have conflicting viewpoints.

- **Conventional Level**

- *Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships*—Moral reasoning shifts towards seeking approval from others and conforming to societal norms to maintain positive relationships.
- *Stage 4: Maintaining the Social Order*—At this stage, individuals prioritize respect for authority and adherence to societal rules to ensure social stability.

- **Post-Conventional Level**

- *Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights*—Individuals question societal norms and laws, recognizing the importance of individual rights and democratic processes alongside social agreements.
- *Stage 6: Universal Principles*—Moral reasoning reaches its pinnacle with the development of individual ethical principles based on universal values, even if they conflict with societal laws.

It is important to note that Kohlberg's core analysis focused on how individuals reason through moral dilemmas, rather than the specific choices they make. The basis of their rationale determines the level of moral development they have reached (Kohlberg, 1976). For example, at Stage 1 (Punishment & Obedience), individuals resolve moral dilemmas by choosing actions that avoid punishment. This stage reflects a basic level of moral reasoning where obedience to authority such as parents, teachers, or supervisors and the consequences of actions are paramount. Another example is that at Stage 4 of Kohlberg's theory individuals prioritize maintaining the social order and respecting authority. In this stage, moral decisions are often made based on the consequences of actions within the framework of societal norms and laws. For instance, an individual facing a moral dilemma may choose not to engage in illegal activities to avoid the consequences of imprisonment or trouble with the law. This decision reflects the adherence to societal rules and the recognition of the importance of maintaining social order. At this stage, individuals weigh the potential repercussions of their actions on both themselves and society, demonstrating a higher level of moral reasoning compared to the earlier stages. The emphasis on respecting authority and upholding societal norms is characteristic of Stage 4, where individuals prioritize the stability and functioning of the social system in their moral decision-making process.

As individuals progress to higher stages, their reasoning becomes more sophisticated and principled, moving from considerations of social approval and law adherence (conventional levels) to abstract principles of justice and human rights (post-conventional levels) (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). This nuanced approach allows researchers to assess not just what decisions people make, but how and why they make them.

3. Methods

The impetus for this study arose from the author's experience teaching Kohlberg's theory within a large introductory human development course at a 4-year college in the United States. This course, which the author regularly teaches, includes a dedicated week focused on moral development. During this week, alongside the presentation of Kohlberg's theory, a real-life moral dilemma was introduced to the class. The real-life moral dilemma served as a practical application of the theoretical concepts discussed in Kohlberg's theory. By confronting students with a complex ethical scenario, they were challenged to apply the principles and stages of moral reasoning to a tangible situation. This hands-on approach encouraged active engagement and critical thinking among participants.

4. Sample

Participants in this study were students enrolled in a human development course at a U.S. four-year college, which was open to students of all majors and class standings. The course was required for some students as part of their liberal arts curriculum, and others enrolled as an elective. Over the 15-year period of data collection, the number of participants in each cohort varied annually, with class sizes ranging from 80 to 250 students, and an average of 147 students per year. In total, approximately 2,200 students participated in the study.

Demographically, the student population was diverse, with approximately 20% of participants identifying as male. The majority of students were in their first or second year of college. A significant portion (50%) of the participants majored in engineering or the sciences, as the course fulfilled a general education requirement for these fields. The remaining students came from a variety of disciplines, contributing to a heterogeneous group that reflected different academic backgrounds, class standings, and life experiences. This diversity enriched the study by providing a broad range of perspectives on moral decision-making.

Data were collected annually using the same ethical dilemma, which involved a scenario in which lawyers must choose between withholding information about an innocent man's wrongful imprisonment or protecting their careers. The dilemma served as the focal point for analyzing moral reasoning and decision-making. Participants' responses to the dilemma were recorded and analyzed quantitatively, and additional qualitative data were gathered through open-ended reflections on their decision-making process.

5.1 The Real-life Moral Dilemma

The real-life moral dilemma scenario introduced to the class during the Fall 2010 semester and subsequently used in small group discussions every academic year thereafter was inspired by a story reported on 60 Minutes in May 2010. This unique setting created the sampling structure for the present study, termed a 15-Year Successive Independent Samples study. Here is the real-life story:

In 1982, Alton Logan was wrongfully convicted of murdering a McDonald's security guard, a crime he did not commit. During the trial, Dale Coventry and Jamie Kunz, attorneys representing Andrew Wilson on unrelated charges involving the murder of two Chicago police officers, possessed knowledge of Logan's innocence. Wilson had confessed to them that he was the actual perpetrator of the McDonald's security guard murder. However, Coventry and Kunz opted to remain silent, citing their professional obligations to their client and the Illinois ethics code, which mandates attorney-client confidentiality unless disclosure is necessary to prevent harm. The attorneys reasoned that disclosing Wilson's confession would jeopardize their client's interests and violate legal ethics, potentially leading to inadmissible evidence in court.

and disciplinary measures against them. Additionally, they underscored the importance of maintaining trust and confidentiality between attorneys and their clients to ensure effective representation in future cases.

The ethical dilemma posed to students in the course is as follows: If you found yourself in the position of the two attorneys? Would you choose to maintain the confidentiality of your client's confession as Coventry and Kunz did? Or would you break confidentiality, knowing that doing so could result in the loss of your licensure as a lawyer?

The participants spent 15 minutes discussing with their group partners, then returned to the whole group to share their moral reasoning that led to their decision. Initially, the participants were asked to raise their hands based on their moral choice: either maintaining confidentiality or breaking it. The instructor, also the author of the present study, counted the number of hands raised. Following this, the instructor invited the students to freely express their rationale without fear of judgment.

At the conclusion of both the small and whole group discussions, the instructor finally revealed the real-life story: Alton Logan languished in prison for 26 years while two attorneys who knew he was innocent stayed silent. For 26 years, Coventry and Kunz upheld their client's confidentiality, while Alton Logan served his life sentence. Only after Wilson's death in 2008, with his prior approval, did the attorneys come forward with an affidavit detailing his confession. They had prepared this document more than two decades earlier, ensuring its credibility upon Wilson's passing. With their assistance, Logan was eventually exonerated and released from prison.

5. Results

Figure 1 illustrates the trends in the number of participants who chose to either maintain confidentiality or break confidentiality in the ethical dilemma. Over the 15-year period, a notable shift in decision-making emerged. In the first year (2010), approximately 80% of students chose to break confidentiality, reflecting a strong commitment to justice, personal integrity, and the moral imperative to prevent injustice. However, by the most recent cohort (2024), this trend reversed, with 100% of participants opting to maintain confidentiality.

5.2 Statistical Analysis

The shift in moral decision-making was analyzed using chi-square tests for trend to assess the significance of changes in participant responses over time. The results revealed a statistically significant decline in the proportion of students choosing to break confidentiality ($\chi^2(1, N = 2,200) = 58.12, p < 0.001$), indicating a trend towards greater adherence to professional ethics and a reduced willingness to challenge perceived legal obligations.

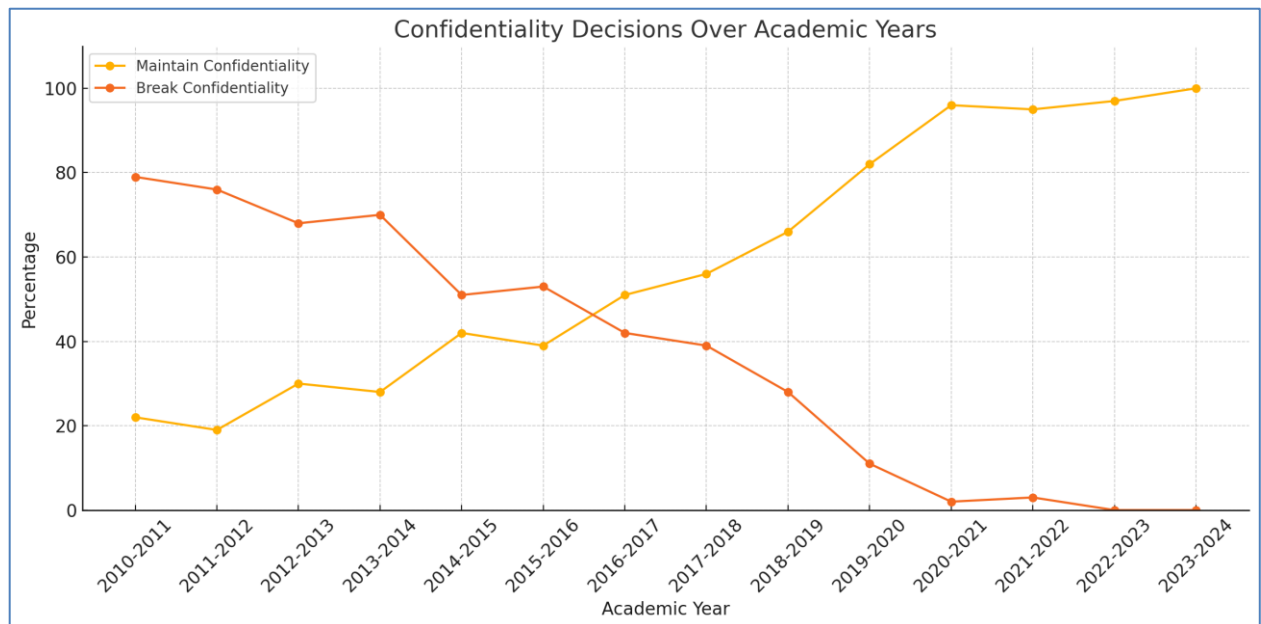


Figure 1. Trends in Confidentiality Decisions Among Students (2010-2024)

In the initial years of the study (2010-2015), approximately 75-85% of students favored breaking confidentiality. Over the next decade (2015-2024), this proportion gradually decreased, reaching a steady 0% of students willing to break confidentiality in the last two years. This steady decline was accompanied by an increase in students expressing concerns about professional responsibility, legal consequences, and the importance of maintaining client trust, which were emphasized in the most recent responses.

5.3 Qualitative Insights

Although the statistical data underscore a clear shift towards maintaining confidentiality, qualitative responses from participants highlighted the rationale behind this change. Early responses in the study often emphasized empathy and moral courage, with students asserting that personal integrity outweighed professional risks. These students typically expressed strong empathetic concerns, emphasizing the moral imperative to prevent injustice, even at the cost of professional repercussions. Their arguments often revolved around personal integrity, ethical responsibility, and the emotional burden of allowing an innocent person to suffer. Their responses reflected a deep-seated commitment to justice and a sense of personal responsibility for upholding moral principles, even at the expense of personal comfort or professional consequences. These students expressed a belief that it was incumbent upon them, as future members of society and potential agents of change, to speak out against injustice and advocate for the rights of the innocent. Here are some detailed elaborations on what students said.

- "As a lawyer, I understand the importance of client confidentiality, but my conscience wouldn't let me rest knowing that an innocent person is being punished because of it. I believe that justice and protecting the innocent should take precedence over strict professional rules in such extreme cases."
- "I couldn't sleep at night knowing that someone who didn't commit the crime is suffering because of my silence. The guilt and emotional burden of allowing such an injustice would be too heavy to bear. I would constantly think about the innocent person and their family, and it would haunt me."
- "I believe that being a lawyer isn't just about following rules but also about ensuring justice. In this scenario, I would feel morally obligated to come forward with the

truth, even if it meant facing consequences myself. To me, having the moral courage to prevent a grave injustice is more important than adhering to confidentiality."

- "Allowing an innocent person to be sentenced undermines the integrity of the legal system and erodes public trust. I would struggle to live with the knowledge that my silence contributed to such a miscarriage of justice. I would feel compelled to act in a way that promotes fairness and trust in the legal process."
- "I wouldn't be able to respect myself if I stayed silent and let an innocent person suffer. My sense of personal integrity and honor would compel me to reveal the truth, as living with the knowledge of my inaction would be intolerable."
- "The stress and anxiety of knowing that an innocent person is paying for a crime they didn't commit would be overwhelming. I would be constantly plagued by guilt and remorse, which would severely affect my mental health and well-being. I would need to act to alleviate this psychological burden."

As the study progressed, however, more students cited legal obligations, career risks, and the belief that the legal system, not the individual lawyer, should address issues of wrongful imprisonment. The most frequent sentiment expressed by students in recent years is a reluctance to intervene, often accompanied by the assertion that it is not their role to prosecute the guilty party. This opinion was held by less than 20% of those who participated in the same discussion during the initial phase of this study. Strong anecdotes from the participants in the most recent years include:

- "As a lawyer, my primary obligation is to uphold the confidentiality of my client. Breaching this confidentiality would violate the fundamental principles of the legal profession and could undermine the trust between lawyers and their clients. It's crucial to maintain this trust to ensure the integrity of the legal system."
- "It's not my job to prove someone else's innocence; that's the responsibility of the prosecution and the criminal justice system as a whole. My role is to advocate for my client, and breaking confidentiality would not only betray my client but also blur the lines of professional responsibility."
- "If I breach confidentiality, I risk losing my job, damaging my reputation, and potentially facing legal consequences myself. These risks are too significant to take on a responsibility that isn't mine. I need to think about my career and my ability to continue helping other clients in the future."
- "Confidentiality is a cornerstone of the legal profession. If lawyers start breaking this principle, it could lead to a slippery slope where clients no longer feel safe sharing information with their lawyers. This could fundamentally disrupt the attorney-client relationship and the effectiveness of legal advocacy."
- "While it's unfortunate that an innocent person might be wrongfully convicted, there are legal processes and appeals in place to address such issues. It's not appropriate for me to take the law into my own hands and disrupt these processes. I trust that the system will ultimately correct the mistake."
- "As a lawyer, I need to separate my personal feelings from my professional responsibilities. Allowing my emotions to dictate my actions could lead to biased decision-making and harm my client's interests. Maintaining objectivity is crucial for providing effective legal representation."

This change in perspective suggests a growing detachment from personal responsibility and a tendency to defer ethical judgment to legal authorities or institutional systems. Students may feel overwhelmed by the perceived complexity and ambiguity of the situation, leading them to adopt a more passive stance and prioritize self-preservation over moral duty. It should be noted that recent observations reveal that none of the students in current cohorts are willing to break

confidentiality. This uniformity in decision-making highlights a significant shift towards a strict adherence to professional ethics and a growing emphasis on role clarity and legal obligations. Students today argue that maintaining confidentiality is paramount, citing the importance of trust in the attorney-client relationship, potential career risks, and the belief that it is not the lawyer's job to intervene in proving someone's innocence.

These findings illuminate the delicate balance between individual moral convictions and the ethical responsibilities inherent in one's profession. They emphasize the significance of upholding established legal standards and the potential consequences of failing to meet professional obligations. Moreover, they underscore the role of the legal framework in addressing instances of injustice. Through the meticulous documentation and analysis of divergent perspectives, the results of this study offer a deeper understanding of how college students grapple with intricate ethical quandaries and the myriad factors that shape their decision-making processes.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a significant shift in moral reasoning among college students over the past two decades, as evidenced by their responses to a real-life ethical dilemma. This shift, characterized by a move from prioritizing justice and personal integrity to emphasizing professional ethics and self-preservation, raises important questions about the broader societal, educational, and psychological factors influencing moral development. While individual cognitive development may play a role, it is clear that societal changes, institutional influences, and the complexities of modern life are integral to understanding these shifts.

5.4 Socio-Cultural Factors: A Changing Landscape of Ethical Responsibility

One plausible explanation for the observed shift is the broader cultural and societal changes in attitudes toward individual responsibility and ethical behavior. Over the past two decades, there has been a noticeable shift in how society views the role of individuals in addressing moral wrongs. The decline in students' willingness to act on personal moral convictions and their increasing reliance on institutional mechanisms for addressing injustice may reflect a growing societal tendency to defer responsibility to larger systems. As societal challenges, such as global inequality, climate change, and political polarization, have become more complex, individuals may feel less empowered to act independently (e.g., Ladd, 2018). This growing sense of powerlessness and reliance on systems may be manifesting in students' decision-making, with an increasing emphasis on professional and institutional boundaries over personal moral agency. Moreover, this shift aligns with findings in contemporary moral philosophy that highlight a trend toward collectivism and the prioritization of institutional roles in solving ethical problems (MacIntyre, 2016; Callahan, 2021).

Furthermore, the changing dynamics of social justice discourse over the past two decades may have shaped students' attitudes. While earlier generations of students may have been more influenced by ideals of justice and activism, contemporary students appear to place greater importance on systemic processes, legal frameworks, and professional ethics (Chen, Liu, Dai, & Wang, 2023). This reflects broader cultural trends, including a focus on institutional reforms and collective responsibility rather than individual action, particularly within legal, corporate, and healthcare professions. The rise of digital activism and reliance on formal legal and institutional systems for addressing social justice issues may also contribute to this trend.

5.5 Institutional Influences: The Role of Education and Professional Ethics

The changes observed in students' ethical decision-making may also be attributed to shifts in the structure and content of higher education, particularly within fields that emphasize ethical conduct and professional behavior, such as law, business, and healthcare. Over the past 15 years, many academic programs have placed a greater emphasis on professional ethics, risk management, and career readiness (Chen et al., 2023). In fields like law, where professional responsibility and legal ethics are central to the curriculum, students are increasingly socialized into the idea that adherence to institutional and professional standards is paramount.

The strong emphasis on legal ethics and the importance of confidentiality in legal education may have heightened students' awareness of the risks associated with deviating from professional conduct. This institutional socialization could explain the shift toward a more conservative approach to ethical dilemmas, as students prioritize professional guidelines over moral intuitions. Moreover, the increasing pressure on students to conform to professional norms and safeguard their future careers may discourage risk-taking in moral decision-making, reinforcing the trend of prioritizing institutional adherence.

5.6 Psychological and Social Dynamics: The Influence of Risk Aversion and Social Expectations

Psychological factors, including the growing aversion to risk and a heightened sense of career insecurity, may also explain the shift in students' moral reasoning. Recent generations have faced unprecedented economic challenges, including the 2008 financial crisis and the volatility of the job market. These pressures, combined with mounting student debt and uncertain career prospects, may have led to a more risk-averse mindset among students. This shift toward professional caution may make students less inclined to engage in actions that could jeopardize their careers, even if those actions align with their personal sense of justice.

Additionally, social dynamics such as peer influence, the desire to conform to group norms, and the growing importance of professional networking may also play a role in shaping moral decision-making (e.g., Li, Zhang, Li, & Wang, 2019). In an increasingly competitive academic and professional environment, students may feel pressured to align their decisions with the expectations of their peers, professors, and future employers. This pressure to conform to social and professional expectations may discourage dissent and moral courage, resulting in decisions that prioritize conformity over individual ethical judgment.

5.7 Technological Influences: The Role of Digital Culture and the Bystander Effect

Technological changes, particularly the rise of social media and digital communication, may also be exacerbating the trend toward passivity and the reluctance to intervene in moral dilemmas. The proliferation of social media platforms has shifted the way young adults interact with moral issues. Rather than engaging directly in action, many students may feel compelled to express their opinions through online channels or share information rather than take concrete action in real-life situations. This may reflect the influence of the bystander effect, where individuals are less likely to intervene in an ethical situation when others are present, or when the action can be mediated through digital or public channels (Hortensius & de Gelder, 2018).

The fear of backlash, online shaming, or reputational damage may further contribute to students' reluctance to take moral action, especially in situations where personal risk is involved. The anonymity and distance provided by digital platforms may foster a sense of detachment from real-world consequences, encouraging students to prioritize career preservation and social conformity over personal ethical action (van Bommel, van Prooijen,

Elffers, & van Lange, 2012). This trend aligns with broader shifts in how younger generations approach responsibility and activism, often opting for digital advocacy rather than on-the-ground engagement.

7. Conclusion: A Multifaceted Approach to Understanding Moral Development

While the observed shift in moral decision-making among college students is striking, it is crucial to recognize that this phenomenon is shaped by a complex interplay of societal, institutional, psychological, and technological factors. The changes in students' responses may not be solely attributable to cognitive development or a decline in moral values but must be understood within the broader context of an evolving social and educational landscape.

Future research should take a multifaceted approach to exploring the underlying mechanisms driving these shifts. This includes examining the impact of educational practices, societal norms, career pressures, and technological influences on moral reasoning (Chen et al., 2023; Nather, 2013). By considering these factors in concert, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how young adults navigate ethical dilemmas in an increasingly complex world and develop strategies to foster ethical engagement, moral courage, and social responsibility within educational contexts and beyond.

In conclusion, while the shift in moral decision-making among college students highlights the evolving nature of ethical reasoning, it also underscores the importance of fostering a culture of integrity, responsibility, and moral courage in educational settings. By encouraging students to engage with ethical challenges in a thoughtful, informed, and courageous manner, we can help prepare them to navigate the complexities of professional and societal life in ways that promote justice, fairness, and collective well-being.

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