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Research Development Project

This project proposes to investigate possible connections between the moral education that is given within a church community and the collective identity that is held by that same community.  The model that serves as the foundation of this project shows the proposed relationship between moral instruction and the understanding of that church or faith tradition’s community-based identity; this model is based on the context of a church community.  The problem that this model illustrates is the influence of moral instruction for a church community on that community’s identity.  In other words, does the moral education of a church community contribute to a sense of identification by that community as a group?

In thinking more deeply about this problem, it seems likely that the relationship between moral education and community identity may be reciprocal:  they influence each other.  It seems plausible that the ways in which a community sees and identifies itself would have an effect on the way that that community seeks to educate people in its tradition.  Taking this a step further, community identity of a church group would likely contribute to the ways in which that group designs and implements its moral education programming.  It is possible that a sense of identification by a church community may contribute to the moral education of that community, and, vice versa, that the moral education experienced by the members of a given community contributes to a sense of collective identity within that community.

In this model, a church is viewed as a classroom in which the “students” (parishioners) are potentially lifelong members.  The aspect of time is especially important in the area of moral education, as research has shown that imparting moral standards takes time (Narvaez, Bock, Endicott, & Lies, 2004).  It has proven difficult to find any research at all on collective identity.  For the purposes of this project, community identity is the sense that a group of people, who have something in common, has of being a unified group because of the principles of the aspect that they hold in common.  In this case, the community identity would be the way that a group of parishioners connect with each other around the principles of that particular faith tradition.  Thus, the impact of the moral education of any given community and the community identity are both important constructs.

This research as a whole is important because the connections between moral education and community identity have not been studied previously.  Examining churches (and other houses of worship) as “classrooms” and parishioners as “students” is a new concept.  Looking at this problem through this lens could lead to a greater sense of awareness of the contributions of houses of worship to the moral development of their members.

This study takes its understanding of moral education to mean developmentally appropriate progress through Kohlberg’s stages of moral judgment (1958; Colby et. al., 1983).  Kohlberg’s doctoral dissertation proposed six stages of moral development based on nearly 100 interviews which asked participants to solve the Heinz dilemma (1958).  In this situation, a man named Heinz needs medication to save his wife’s life but cannot afford it.  Participants are asked what Heinz should do and why; based on the responses to this scenario, Kohlberg proposed his stages of moral development, five of the six of which have been subsequently verified through further research using the Heinz and other dilemmas (Colby et. al., 1983).  Kohlberg’s stages are not moral ideals but rather are cognitive-developmental stages which correspond to changes in the brain (Nucci, Krettenauer, & Narvaez, 2008).

Some of Kohlberg’s work in applied settings is relevant here.  Kohlberg became interested in the application of his work to moral education within schools and began to instruct teachers in how to use dilemmas such as he used in his research to facilitate classroom discussions (Nucci, et. al., 2008).  In 1974 he was one of the founders of the first Just Community School, a school in which the students would achieve moral growth through a balance of justice and community (Nucci, et. al., 2008).  A more thorough treatment of the history of Just Community schools can be found elsewhere, but the development of the Just Community schools illustrates the tie between moral development happening in the context of a community (Nucci, et. al., 2008).  Members of these communities committed to a specific set of moral values in a way that led to solidarity and group identification (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989).  Additionally, Kohlberg felt that the ways in which the community interacted (direct democracy) had an impact on the moral development of the community (Nucci et al., 2008).  Power (2004) argued that this approach of direct democracy actually incorporates community membership into one’s identity.

Further connections between moral and identity development can be seen through the work of Augusto Blasi.  Blasi theorized that the creation of self-identity is based off of moral commitments (Blasi, 1984).  These moral commitments show who people are and are essential to self-understanding.  Power (2004) brings the social dimension to this theory by hypothesizing that the self includes a social component in the form of a moral or just community.  Moral self-identity becomes internalized as group identification and a common commitment to the values of the community (Power, 2004).

While this project proposes a new vein of research, prior empirical studies have shown that there are connections between moral education and individual identity development.  Religious identity has been shown to have an effect on psychological well-being, service attendance, and higher levels of life satisfaction (Greenfield & Marks, 2007).  Further, community involvement has been shown to impact moral decision-making later, and, more importantly, moral decisions were made after engagement within a community, rather than the other way around (Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, & Alisat, 2003).  Additionally, research has shown that morality becomes more important as moral reasoning is developed (Maclean, Walker, & Matsuba, 2004).  That same study also found that identity integration may measure the internalization of moral reasoning and identity (Maclean et. al., 2004).  Finally, research has shown that people who act morally have a greater sense of stability in their identity and that their moral actions are related to their sense of self (Hart & Fegley, 1995).

In other words, as people come to consolidate their identities, they may have a growing and deepening internalization of moral reasoning and moral identity.  Community involvement is seen as an indicator of future moral decision-making, and people who act morally have a greater sense of identity.  Given this research, it is reasonable to hypothesize that moral education and a church’s collective identity influence each other.  Through this proposed research, information may be gathered about the impact of moral education on a church community’s ability to successfully build its identity, and, conversely, about the impacts that community identity may have on the moral education taking place within a church community.

It is possible that this research could provide church communities with information that will allow them to grow their sense of community identity; it may also help them to create, adjust, or maintain their curricula for moral education.  Given the aforementioned research, it is clear that it is significant that people learn morality within the context of a community and that that morality contributes to their sense of individual identity.  Substituting a church as the setting for this research opens up a new source of inquiry and leads to new questions:

1. What effects does the moral instruction of a faith community have on that community’s identity development?
2. What effects does a faith community’s identity have on the moral education of its members?

To answer these questions, a convenience sample will be used for this first, exploratory study.  The sample for this study will be drawn from the parishioners who are registered in a large, urban Christian (Catholic) church.  According to a survey conducted in 2006, members of this congregation are predominantly white, mostly middle or upper class, and are likely to possess at least some graduate education (St. Ignatius Parish Survey, 2006).  As the church is situated near a university, many of those who attend are in some way affiliated with the university.  Additionally, the church is staffed by members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits); some people choose to attend the parish because of their previous involvement with Jesuit ministries or universities.  Finally, parishioners in this congregation range in age from newborn infants to one parishioner who is 97 (St. Ignatius Parish Survey, 2006).

The desired sample size for this project is 40 participants, the largest sample size one could reasonably draw from the numbers of participants who have completed the moral education program recently..  These participants will be split evenly into two groups, one which has completed a program in moral education at the church and one which has not; this program is already currently in place and there are records which are kept to indicate the previous and current participants.  In order to control for some of the many variables that exist within this congregation, the study will be limited to adolescent participants aged 16-18.  This provides the greatest likelihood of accessing members of the congregation who have completed the moral education program because the program ends for most participants when they are between 16 and 18.

Every registered parishioner at this parish is assigned a unique parish identification number by the computerized parish database.  Using the parish database, participants will be selected at random using each person’s parish member identification number.  This random selection will hopefully control for the diversity of geographic locations from which the participants come as well as other differences among participants (school attended, number of years in the parish, etc.).  The participant number will then be checked against attendance in the moral education program.  This selection will continue until the desired number of participants has been reached.  Data will be collected in the parish office building, an area familiar to most of the people in the parish.  Participants will not be compensated for their time or participation in the study.

The research design for this study will be an observational study.  The participants will be interviewed about their participation in the moral education program, if applicable, and about their understanding of community and sense of community identity within the parish.  Participants will be asked questions based on their previous experience within the moral education program at this church.  No conditions will be manipulated and there will be no intervention or treatment offered as a part of this study, as the intervention has already happened naturally within the community of the parish.  There will be two groups for the point of comparison between those participants who attended a moral education program and those who did not.

     Participants will be asked a series of questions regardless of which group they are in, and their responses will be audiotaped to allow the interviewer to focus on the questions s/he is asking.  Audiotaping the interviews will also allow for a more complete analysis after all of the interviews are concluded.  The interviews will take place in the parish office building, a site familiar to parishioners as it houses any parish gathering outside of liturgy.  All participants will be asked for demographic information about themselves, which will be checked against the information in the parish database.  Each participant will be asked if they attended the moral education program at the parish; this, too, will be checked against parish records.  If they attended the program, they will be asked how much time (in years) they spent in the program and if that program affected who they are in any way.  Both groups will be asked what their perceptions of the program are.

Subsequently, each participant will be asked how they define the term “community”.  Further questions will include:  do you feel a sense of community at this parish?  What allows or prevents you from feeling that sense of community belonging?  Do you feel that part of who you are as a person comes from your involvement in this parish?  Can you explain why or why not?  What qualities would a person who attends this parish have?  Do you have any of those qualities?  Do you think there is a sense of community identity at this parish?  Why or why not?

Finally, a short series of questions connecting community identity and moral education will be asked of participants.  These questions will begin with:  Do you see the characteristics of what you see as community present in the moral education program of the parish?  Do you think that the community’s identity has had an impact on the moral education program at the parish?  To what extent have you been able to see aspects of community identity in the moral education program?

As with most research, there are a number of limitations to this proposed study.  Firstly, only gathering data from one church community makes the study manageable, especially for a type of study which has not been previously conducted, but it also makes the results less generalizable.  This parish is not very diverse racially or socioeconomically, which also limits generalizability to the greater population.  Further, there is a degree of intentionality with which people choose to attend this parish over a local geographic parish.  This may function in a similar fashion to volunteer bias, in which the people who attend this parish are more likely to be involved and thus are seeking out a community.  Those who attend this parish may also be more likely to be engaged in parish life and thus more likely to see and participate in this community.  Finally, this church is in an urban area; results may be significantly different here than in a suburban or rural area.  This sample is convenient and will provide some information about a problem that has not been previously researched, but its generalizability to a greater population of church-goers is limited.

Another limitation is that this project only proposes to examine members of a Catholic church.  At this point there is no data on these questions to determine whether different faith traditions would experience the connections between community identity and moral education differently, but the results may change based on the denomination or faith tradition.

The study is limited in another way by the use of an interview.  The participants’ responses could be skewed towards what their perception of either the correct answer or the answer that the interviewer desires.  Given that the interviews in a way are self-reported, there is no way to verify the participants’ responses to the questions about community in the same way that their responses to the demographic and, to some degree, moral education can be validated through the use of the parish database.

Lastly, the study is limited in its use of participants who are only between the ages of 16-18.  While this age group is the logical focus of this project given the age at which the moral development program ends, it also limits the generalizability of the study to those who have recently completed a moral education program.  Those who are still in the moral education program are not being sampled; neither are those who have completed the moral education program less recently and who are therefore older than 18.  Further, given the ages of the participants, they will be in the middle of developing their own individual identities.  This may limit the study because  the development of individual identities may impede the participants’ ability to analyze the community’s identity and its impact on moral education.

This study is delimited in several ways.  First, there is a body of literature on moral development and moral education that uses the work of researchers other than Kohlberg.  These researchers and theorists have furthered the field, but their work does not tie in to the idea of moral education within a community setting as Kohlberg’s Just Community schools.  Similarly, there are also researchers and theorists who have produced work in identity development other than Blasi, but again their foci are broader than Blasi’s understanding of the moral aspects of identity.  It is more germane to the nature of this study to use Blasi’s constructs of identity and moral development than to use other theorists’ work.

Another delimitation is the population that is being studied here.  This study proposes to examine the experience of adolescents at one church in an urban area.  Adolescents were chosen as a population because of the timing of the moral education program at this particular church; adolescents will either just be finishing or will have just completed the program.  At the same time, there are adolescents in the parish who have not been involved in the moral education program at all, which serves as a comparison group for the purposes of this study.  Choosing a different population from the parish would either attract people who are too young to see the possible effects of the moral education program or older people in the parish for whom there may not be a large enough group who have completed the moral education program for this study.

Finally, it would be reasonable to expect some sort of objective measure by which to judge community identity beyond just the interviews conducted in this study.  As no such construct could be found, it is thought that for this first study interviews would be the best way in which to garner information.  It is hoped that these interviews will provide data which will lead to the creation of such a construct.

This research has the potential to have significance for both practitioners and scholars.  This study could provide evidence that further supports Blasi’s work with moral identity and the identity of the self.  Moreover, this project could expand Kohlberg’s connection of moral development and community as seen in the Just Community schools to include another setting:  churches.  The significance here is considerable:  the work that has been done by these two scholars has been in the areas of individual moral development and the development of secular communities.  Adding houses of worship to this strand of research could open up a new line of thinking into moral development and its effects on community.

In terms of future research, it is hoped that the interviews conducted in this study will provide information to develop a construct for community identity.  This is an important measure which has yet to be articulated but which may have great promise not only in the field of moral education or within the setting of churches but beyond and into school and community settings.  If such a measure is achieved, it would be beneficial to conduct more research in different church settings to replicate the outcomes of this study, bolster the community identity construct, and then to see if that construct is supported by other church and secular communities.

In terms of practice, if it is shown that moral education and community identity influence each other and that it is desirable that this should be happening, there are implications for the “curricula” of moral education programs.  Of course there would be implications for the formal moral education programs that take place within churches, but beyond that there would be possible avenues for the many other implicit and explicit ways in which the moral expectations of a church community are communicated to its members (sermons/homilies, service opportunities, etc.).  If this research shows that the moral education of church members helps members to feel that they are more included in the church community, one would think that churches would want to increase their moral education programming in order to build stronger communities.

In sum, this research has the potential to be of substantial value to the scholarly field of moral education and collective identity development, but it also has implications for the practice of moral education as situated in church communities.  In a broader sense, creating a construct of community identity would be applicable beyond church communities, with the end goal of having people feeling more attached to their communities and living as the beneficiaries of moral education.

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