

# A feminist perspective on morality development and transition markers of young wo...

[Sociology](#), [Moral Development](#)



## **Abstract**

While the field of developmental psychology has done extensive research on adolescent development, many of these theories emerged in a patriarchal society and do not take into account the unique experience of young women. This paper explores two feminist perspectives on topics related to the development of adolescent young women. The first article discussed takes a look at the work of Carol Gilligan, who pioneered a study of morality development that takes into account the different moral experiences and values of boys and girls in today's society. Her proposed theory of morality development is centered around the socialization of care into young women. The second piece viewed is a study conducted by Pamela Aronson that gathered information about the subjective experience of young women reflecting on what has previously been labeled objective markers of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Findings suggest that the feminist movements have helped expand women's roles in society and therefore changed the markers of the transition from adolescence to adulthood to be less limited.

### A Feminist Perspective on Morality Development and Transition Markers of Young Women

For decades, developmental psychologists like Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg have been studying how human beings develop and change over the course of a lifetime. This work was done in a society that imposed a sort of patriarchal lens to their work. Young women were often seen as lower

scoring when viewed with measurements centered around the male experience of development, when in fact, newer and better tools were needed to more accurately view their development and their understandings of it. As the impacts of feminism moved throughout Western society, newer scientific perspectives on understand the whole of human experience and development emerged, with work surfacing from pioneers like Carol Gilligan, who created a new measure for moral development that took into account the different societal messages being sent to young women about who they should be. Her theory of moral development contrasts a feminine ethic of care with a masculine ethic of justice. These differences, she believes, are due to contrasting images of self among the two genders as socialized by society (Fair & Care, 1991).

The very defining characteristics of development has shifted as the feminist movement has expanded what role a woman has in society. While in the past, certain transitory markers have existed to measure the development of a woman's life (marriage, child-bearing, etc.), now young women are more free to define themselves through additional characteristics of their idea of adulthood (Aronson, 2008). In exploring each of these topics related to development through a feminist lens, a more complete and progressive understanding of the development of young women can emerge.

### Moral Development

Morality refers to the way people choose to live their lives based on certain codes of conduct related to right and wrong or good and bad behavior.

Morality“ carries the concepts of: (1) moral standards, with regard to behavior; (2) moral responsibility, referring to our conscience; and (3) a moral identity, or one who is capable of right or wrong action. Commonly used synonyms for morality include ethics, principles, virtue, and goodness.” (allaboutphilosophy. org). As young people’s emotional, social, and cognitive development continues to expand, the understanding of morality also grows as their behavior becomes more informed by their beliefs, and vice versa. Thinking more abstractly allows youth to question rules and absolute authority of schools, government, parents, and other institutions. Because they are no longer children dependent only on family, culture, or religion, teens began to grapple with making moral judgements in their day to day lives. Psychologists over the years have attempted to apprehend moral development in adolescents, with many major studies privileging young males’ development and holding it as the standard (Kohlberg, 1984). Young women were often ranked as being less developed when ranked according to the scales based on their male counterparts. However, to quote Albert Einstein, “ Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid” (quoteinvestigator. com). It wasn’t until Kohlberg’s former study partner and critic of his male-centered approach, Carol Gilligan, published her 1982 book *In a Different Voice*, that the female experience was taken into account and offered as an equally valued perspective.

Gilligan touches on her perceived differences between the ethics of men and women. She says that “ under an ethic of justice, men judge themselves

guilty if they do something wrong. Under an ethic of care, women who allow others to feel pain hold themselves responsible for not doing something to prevent or alleviate the hurt" (Gilligan, 1982). Rather than taking a "we versus they" perspective, she sees two separate but noncompeting ways to conceptualize moral problems. One is typically associated with men, the other women. She believes that the tendency for women's greater need for relationships is due to a "distinct feminine identity" formed early in gender socialization. This in turn leads to an ethic of care (Fair & Care, 1991).

Similarly to Kohlberg, Gilligan found evidence for a certain sequence of moral development in relation to care; Orientation to Individual Survival (Preconventional Morality), Goodness as Self-Sacrifice (Conventional Morality), and Responsibility for Consequences of Choice (Postconventional Morality). These results were found after interviews with 24 women who were in the first trimester of their pregnancy and panning or considering an abortion. As Gilligan predicted, the women discussed their choice within a care orientation rather than a justice orientation. The words "selfish" and "responsibility" came up often as they explained their thinking. Responsibility was understood as exercising care and not being selfish was understood as not causing hurt (1991).

Understanding the social and culture voices being put on young women is critical to understanding their conceptualization of self and the morality that emerges within these interlaced forces (Fabes, 1999) . As discussed by Crawford and Unger (2004), girls, more than boys, are socialized to value relationships. On the other hand, young men tend to form their

understanding of their “ selves” more independently, relying on morality that is concerned more with a concept of justice or what is right. The prince in fairy tales sets out on heroic journeys to right what is wrong- to reestablish a sense of good in the world. The princess, however, tries to win the prince. She awaits in slumber for the prince’s kiss to wake her, she falls in love at the ball. She tames a beast and teaches him how to love. The underlying message in these is that the self and its goodness is defined not only in relation to others, but possibly by others- caring for them, sacrificing the self for their good, also understood as Conventional Morality by Gilligan. This is seen as a step up from Preconventional Morality, which Gilligan calls “ moral nihilism”. There is not feeling of should, but rather a basic need for individual survival. Interestingly enough, the prospective motherhood in young people can often bring a change in self-concept. A sense of connectedness with the fetus, the father, or with other mothers may spur an internal dialogue contrasting “ the selfishness of a willful decision and the responsibility of moral choice” (Fair & Care, 1991). This kind of thinking, in relation to others, marks the transition from the first to second level of ethical thinking.

The third level, Postconventional morality or “ responsibility for consequences of choice” is more difficult to reach. While most women in Gilligan’s study did not reach this level, those who did understood that there were no easy answers and that great hurt was inevitable no matter what they decided. In the framework of care, Gilligan states that the “ essence of moral decision is the exercise of choice and the willingness to take responsibility for that choice.” This practice of transcending selflessness is

not one often socialized into young women when it comes to gender roles. Women at the first level cared only for themselves. Women at the second level saw the importance of caring for others. Women on level 3 saw care “ as a universal imperative and were able to assert a moral equality between caring for self and others” (1991). As quoted by Fair and Care, Elizabeth Cady Stanton proclaimed: “ Self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice”(1991).

Although the cultural voices of what a woman should and shouldn't be are loud in western society, individuals' experience of gender can be much like black and white, or male or female. An important part of any young person's development is navigating where they fit on the gender spectrum, with most people having both traditionally male and female characteristics. Gilligan's perspective on female moral development does allow for some room for men and male characteristics to exist in her proposed ethics of care. She holds out that in postconventional morality, justice and care can and should both exist and inform moral decisions. Must like the spectrum of gender, a spectrum of morality should be further explored to more accurately explain the experience of young people as they develop their own personal morals.

#### Youth Perception of Transitory Markers

While morality development is one alternative to the traditional understandings of social, emotional, and mental development of adolescents, traditional markers of growing up are being challenged as psychologists try to track young women's transition from adolescence to

adulthood in a society where gender roles are ever changing and expanding. Women are no longer limited to judging the success and development of their life by if they are married, have children, and are home makers. Generations growing up in the shadow of the women's movement are more free in how they think about their life course transitions. Although there is extensive research on objective markers of adulthood, there is little known about how young women themselves, especially in more recent generations, perceive these markers.

Research conducted by P. Aronson at the University of Michigan aimed to do just this and provided a valuable picture of the subjective experience of the "twixter" generation. Twixter is a neologism that describes a new generation of Americans who are trapped "betwixt" adolescence and adulthood. The study aimed to examine the gender and class based dimensions of the transition to adulthood. The implications of the women's movement on the way young women view themselves and how they give meaning to their experience was explored. This was done by interviewing participants' thoughts on the previously understood objective markers of the transition to adulthood, like moving away, getting married, etc. Their subjective view on these markers helps illuminate the impact of the women's movement on development of young women.

Young women's life decisions take place in a collection of paradoxes; increased opportunities yet continuing discrimination, a range of choices yet a lack of social and political support for these choices, and a backlash against feminism yet the incorporation of feminist principles into people's



lives (Stacey, 1991). Despite these paradoxes, young women are coming to define themselves in ways that defy traditional gender expectations (Gerson, 2002). Young women growing up in today's society are experiencing the effects of the feminist movement in how they incorporate its principles into their lives as they transition to adulthood through work, marriage, and parenthood.

Three main subjective themes emerged as the young women who participated in Aronson's study reflected on the objective markers usually associated with development into adulthood: independence/self-reliance, self-development, and uncertainty (Aronson, 2008). As the young women reflected on financial independence, marriage, and becoming a parent, the first theme of independence/self-reliance emerged. The young women planned on establishing themselves financially apart from parents or depending on a man through marriage. This shows the impact of the feminist movement on women's view of financial independence and power. The traditional family model placed women as stay at home caretakers, dependent on men to provide financially. The young women also expressed a desire to follow their own goals despite romantic relationships, and many viewed marriage as optional. Single mothers interviewed emphasized that their decision to have a child was made independent of the baby's father.

Self-development emerged as the second theme among the middle class women who pursued four-year colleges as they discussed exploring their interests, talents, and identities. Interviewees who identified as heterosexual expressed self-development in terms of the lack of centrality of

marriage in their lives. Uncertainty, the third theme, emerged as the young women discussed their experience with full-time work and the middle-class experience of postsecondary education (2008).

Aronson argues that taken together, these subjective accounts of objective development markers illustrate the way young women are now “living feminism” by incorporating feminist ideologies into their life course plan and expectations. She argues that young women make sense of their lives through perspectives absorbed from the women’s movement. “Feminism becomes an active part of their worldviews as they incorporate aspects of its ideologies into what it means to become an adult woman” (2008).

## Discussion

What these two articles demonstrate and reinforce is the importance of incorporating feminist theory into understanding different aspects of young women’s development. The feminist movement has helped today’s society acknowledge that the experience of young women is different than that of young men, primarily because of how gender is taught and socialized in our culture. Not acknowledging the discrepancy between the two and how it can best inform our understanding of adolescent development harms the science of psychology and misinforms those who consult it to further their understanding of experience. In applying a feminist lens to concepts such as morality development and the youth’s perspective of transitory markers from adolescence to adulthood, we can better define and understand

concepts in a way that is more informed by the sociocultural experience of our youth.

## References

- Aronson, P. (2008). The Markers and Meanings of Growing Up: Contemporary Young Women's Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood. *Gender and Society*, 22 (1), 56-82. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27641038>
- Crawford, M., & Unger, R. (2004). *Women and gender: A feminist psychology*. McGraw-Hill.
- Fabes, R. A., Carlo, G., Kupanoff, K., & Laible, D. (1999). Early adolescence and prosocial/moral behavior I: The role of individual processes. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 19(1), 5-16.
- Fair, M. & Care, W. (1991) A Different Voice of Carol Gilligan.
- Gerson, K. (2002). Moral dilemmas, moral strategies, and the transformation of gender: Lessons from two generations of work and family change. *Gender & Society*, 16 (1), 8-28.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice*. Harvard University Press.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *Essays on moral development: Vol. 2. The psychology of moral development: Moral stages, their nature and validity*.
- Morality. (n. d.). Retrieved from <https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/morality.htm>

- (n. d.). Everybody is a Genius. But If You Judge a Fish by Its Ability to Climb a Tree, It Will Live Its Whole Life Believing that It is Stupid. Retrieved from <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/04/06/fish-climb/>
- Stacey, J. (1998). *Brave new families: Stories of domestic upheaval in late-twentieth-century America*. Univ of California Press.