

3-2019

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### Recommended Citation

Rostami, Shima (2019) "Ethics of Care in Action: A Review After Its 30 Years of Establishment," *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/ela/vol6/iss1/3>

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# ETHICS OF CARE IN ACTION: A REVIEW AFTER ITS 30 YEARS OF ESTABLISHMENT

Article by Shima Rostami

## Abstract

Using a narrow sample in his study of moral development, Lawrence Kohlberg in developing his theory of Ethics of Justice defined the “moral as the realm of abstract universal principles formulated by disembodied subjects” (Hekman, 2013, p. 101). Kohlberg resulted that women’s level of what is ethically normal is less than what is in men. Consequently, “more often influenced in their judgments by their feeling, women show less sense of justice than men” (Freud, 1925, pp. 257-258). To challenge Kohlberg’s Ethics of Justice, in 1982 *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan shifted the voice of moral psychology by pointing that what Kohlberg identified as problems in women were in fact problems in the framework of interpretation. Gilligan (1982) responded to Kohlberg by emphasizing that “women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care” (p. 17). More importantly, by developing her theory based on theme rather than characterizing it by gender, Gilligan called her theory of Ethics of Care as the ethics of human and avoided making “care” as a feminine element and/or “justice” as a masculine factor only. Then Robert Greenleaf brings Carol Gilligan’s care perspective in action by creating opportunities for servant leaders to seek a positive systemic change in the higher education system or any other institutions. Consequently, under the supervision of a different leadership that “manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 6), the journey of developing just citizens who care about the world around them just begins. Then, to implement and practice the care perspective, the Servant Leader might engage Character Education (CE) programs defined under moral psychology by care perspective and its followers.

*Keywords:* Ethics of Care, Servant Leadership, Character Education

## Introduction

When she first developed Ethics of Care theory, *In a Different Voice* in 1982, Carol Gilligan challenged Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Developing her theory based on a psychological perspective, Gilligan responded to her mentor colleague-Lawrence Kohlberg- who defined the "moral as the realm of abstract universal principles formulated by disembodied subjects" (Hekman, 2013, p. 101). Kohlberg used "white, middle to upper class, predominantly Protestant males, who were in good educational systems" (Wood, 1992, p. 4). The narrow sample that Kohlberg used in his work and then expanded the result to the whole made Gilligan think of how accurate and efficient it might be to generalize such a result to everyone. Consequently, in her book, Gilligan recorded different modes of thinking with male and female voices. As Gilligan (1982) explained,

Relationships, and particularly issues of dependency, are experienced differently by women and men. Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. (p. 8)

As a result, women "show less sense of justice than men, that they [women] are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility" (Freud, 1925, pp. 257-258). Accordingly, "women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care" (Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 1982, p. 17). This special viewpoint caused women to be considered as care-centered by nature, meaning care is something that women have known from the beginning. Thus, "women are pushed into being nurturing, and men are pushed into and perceived as being righteous" (Stoltzfus-Brown, 2018, p. 8).

Gilligan clearly noted that in her theory "no claims are made about the origins of the differences described or their distribution in a wider population, across cultures, or through time" (*In a Different Voice*, 1982, p. 2). More importantly, she did not mean to make 'care' as a feminine element and/or 'justice' as a masculine factor only. Some criticized her for introducing the Ethics of Care as a feminine philosophy; however, Gilligan mentioned that the different voice she described was "characterized not by gender but theme" (p. 2, para. 2). As a matter of fact, she clearly showed "these differences arise in a social context where factors of social status and power combine with reproductive biology to shape the experience of males and females and the relationships between sexes" (p. 2, para. 2). By challenging Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Gilligan started a revolution beyond gender or sex. She was "arguing that the patriarchy had deliberately set out to ignore the voice of women and to establish parameters that stifled people's deepest feelings" (Camps, 2013, p. 7).

To better understand the motivation behind any social movement, it is wise for one to consider the social context in which any idea arises. In this case, Carol Gilligan wrote about different voices in 1982 around the time that racial and sexual movements by women or against women were popular. In other words, in the time of civil revolutions of fighting for the equal rights of women- to remind people that to have a more moral and

just world they needed to look beyond the surface of gender or sexuality- Gilligan had no other option but “continue to emphasize in order to prevent others from misinterpreting her [that] care is not a women’s issue but rather a question of human interests” (Camps, 2013, p. 8). In 2013, 30 years after *In a Different Voice* altered the conversation about self and morality, Carol Gilligan said,

I wrote *In a Different Voice* in part to show that what psychologists identified as problems in women were problems in the framework of interpretation. What had been perceived as limitations in women’s development (a concern with feelings and with relationships, an intelligence that was emotional as well as rational) are in fact human strengths. (Gilligan 2013, p. 13, para. 3)

Therefore, to better understand the philosophy of the Ethics of Care, it is important to first review the social and cultural resources in the era during which Gilligan developed her theory since cultural capitals play a significant role in one’s development.

## Gilligan’s Cultural Capitals

Cultural capital “consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society” (Sullivan, 2002, p. 145). Additionally, “Cultural capital, transferred over generations and possessed by families and individuals, is an important resource that contributes to individuals’ educational success” (Jæger, 2011, p. 2) and their path in life. On this note, it is important to remember that Gilligan was a well-educated researcher who was working at Harvard University with Kohlberg. In addition to her personal life and work circumstances, Gilligan wrote her book in an era identified as *culture war* in the United States- the time that democratic ideals and values were to get a new direction. As mentioned, Gilligan tried to direct attention to the misinterpretation of what psychologists identified as problems in women.

The culture war, of the 1980s and 1990s, is known as a period that various social justice issues were at the core of many movements. It is mentioned that “a religious war [was] going on in our country for the soul of America” (Henretta, 2016, p. 919) in that period. Several issues were at the core of such a cultural war, including homosexuality, abortion, and women’s rights that fed a liberal movement in society. Particularly, “the decade of the 1990s was noted for the ascendance of cultural issues to the forefront of American politics and a growing political division between those that hold traditional versus progressive moral values” (Kaufmann, 2002, p. 283). In fact, Carol Gilligan explained the political and cultural motivation behind developing her theory. She stated, “by naming and changing the voice of psychological and moral theory, *In a Different Voice* shifted the framework, and with this shift, the different voice no longer sounds different. It is, simply, a human voice” (Gilligan, 2013, p. 13).

Gilligan expressed her observation of the world around her – the world she grew up in, that shaped her development as a human- in a different voice. Since the 1960s,

White men, who had been moving in ever-growing numbers to the Republican party, continue to do so; however, white women, who had also become somewhat more Republican in prior decades (especially during the Reagan years), have taken a distinctive change of course. Beginning in 1992, substantial numbers of white women left the Republican Party while growing numbers identified with the Democrats. (Kaufmann, 2002, p. 284)

On this note, Gilligan clearly expressed her opinion that Ethics of Care was not about making a separation by women of care and men of justice but it was about understanding that “justice must be complemented by care” (Camps, 2013, p. 8). Additionally, Gilligan mentioned this era of culture war as a moral injury that needed to be healed. She stated that the culture wars are a fight between democracy and patriarchy when she describes that “the Love Laws are a mainstay of patriarchy. The ethic of care in its concern with voice and relationships is the ethic of love and of democratic citizenship. It is also the ethic of resistance to moral injury” (Gilligan, 2013, p. 14).

## Servant Leadership: A practice of Ethics of Care

Robert Greenleaf developed the Servant Leadership based on *Hesse's Journey to the East*, a short novel by German author Hermann Hesse. In this story, the central figure is a character named Leo who attends the party “as the *servant* who does their menial chores, but who also sustains them with his spirit and his song” (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 2). To explain how this story led Greenleaf to develop Servant Leadership, he said,

The great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness. Leo was actually the leader all of the time, but he was servant first because that was what he was, deep down inside. (p. 2, para. 3)

Regarding the power of his movement and encouraging servant-leaders, Greenleaf mentioned that he was “mindful of the long road ahead before these trends, which I [Greenleaf] see so clearly, become a major society-shaping force. We are not there yet. But I [Greenleaf] see encouraging movement on the horizon” (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 4).

More interestingly, by taking a deeper look at the foundation of the Ethics of Care by Gilligan in 1982 and Servant Leadership by Greenleaf in the 1970s, it should be noted that both developed during the same culture wars. In this respect, this era has been also described as the crisis of leadership in which humanity has been morally struggling with leadership. “There is a tendency today to absolve individuals of moral responsibility and treat them as victims of social circumstances. You buy that and you pay with your soul. What limits people is lack of character” (Robbins, 2003, p. 110). This leadership crisis “is the mediocrity or irresponsibility of so many of the men and women in power” (Burns, 1978, p. 1). Thus, it has been very critical to develop leadership strategies and programs to focus on and cope with this crisis.

When Gilligan referred to “moral injury” and “resisting injustice”, she particularly emphasized “the need for a paradigm shift if we are to keep sight of something as important to the well-being of the individual and of society as the capacity to love and to generate mutual trust” (Camps, 2013, p. 7). On the other hand, in respect to what direction his movement would take, Greenleaf (1991) responded,

Much depends on whether those who stir the ferment will come to grips with the age-old problem of how to live in a human society. I say this because so many, having made their awesome decision for autonomy and independence from tradition, and having taken their firm stand against injustice and hypocrisy, find it hard to convert themselves into *affirmative builders* of a better society. (p. 4)

It should be noted that Servant Leadership is not a theory; however, it is a strategy or a leadership style. By reviewing Greenleaf’s memos and articles, it appears that he developed this strategy with a care perspective. There are different parts in Greenleaf’s memos that he mentioned to have a strong society the community needs to care for people and spread the unconditional love to our communities. Regarding the *school* and education system, Greenleaf (1991) stated that, “the school, on which we pinned so much of our hopes for a better society, has become too much a social-upgrading mechanism that destroys community” (p. 21). Then he complained that much of our time is wasted on the purposeless items “at the door, *not of education*, but of the *school*” (p. 21, para. 4). Shortly after, referring to several other activities (besides the school system) that presents our failure for providing better services to our community- because society learned to make it mechanism rather than focusing on care-, his conclusion statement about love is remarkable. He said,

Love is an undefinable term, and its manifestations are both subtle and infinite. But it begins, I believe, with one absolute condition: unlimited liability! As soon as one’s liability for another is qualified to any degree, love is diminished by that much. (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 21, para. 8)

On the other hand, moral injury that Gilligan described recently “consists of the destruction of trust and the loss of the capacity to love” (Camps, 2013, p. 9). Gilligan (2013) completed her point more clearly when she said, “the Ethic of Care in its concern with voice and relationships is the ethic of love and of democratic citizenship. It is also the ethic of resistance to moral injury” (p. 14).

In addition to finding common roots that suggest Servant Leadership could be considered as the practice of Ethics of Care, there are a number of theorists suggesting that Servant Leadership might be a potential response to the crisis of leadership the world is experiencing in our time (Greenleaf, 1977; Northouse, 2004; Spears, 1995). Lastly, this final statement from Greenleaf stated very well that Servant Leadership could be considered as the practice of the Ethics of Care when he said:

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to

administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1991, p. 6)

## Character Education: The Strategy of a Servant Leader in Higher Education?

It should be considered that for “societies to flourish, their citizens must demonstrate good character and a moral commitment to improving both their own well-being as well as that of their communities, and more broadly, civil society” (Brown Urban et al., 2018, p. 104). The care perspective challenge has been not only to consider care as an ideology but also how to implement and practice this care as a part of their life. In other words, “care reasoner view action as responsive and assume caring as a moral mandate” (Sherblom, 2008, p. 89). On this note, the footprint and efforts of care reasoners could be found clearly in the field of education- secondary and/or higher education system. Efforts should be focused on establishing programs and methods to develop and engage more just citizens who care about the human being. In this regard, “a wide range of approaches to ‘healthy’ or ‘positive’ youth development have either adopted foundational aspects of the care perspective on moral values and relational psychology or have conceptually evolved to a very similar place” (p. 91).

One of the important approaches adopted by care reasoners to engage youth in different programs to develop moral education is Character Education which is “an umbrella term for a host of approaches to positive youth development in educational community settings” (Sherblom, 2008, p. 92). It is important to understand that “both performance character and moral character (respect, fairness, kindness, honesty, etc.) are needed for and developed from every area of academic work” (Davidson, Khmelcov, & Lickona, 2014, p. 297). In this regard, character education theorists avoid the existing debates between the justice and care reasoners. Instead, “emphasizing the process of moral decision making and the importance of individual freedom and autonomy” (Murphy, 2002, p. 31) is the basis of approaches in Character Education programs.

“Character education is both popular and controversial” (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2007, p. 248). To define character education in youth engagement programs, it should be noted that “character Educators demonstrates a close match to the moral psychology advocated by the care perspective, both in emphasis on the moral aspects of relationships and community and in a more holistic conception of deliberation and oral engagement” (Sherblom, 2008, p. 93). In respect to how to engage Character Education in school run programs, Alan Lockwood (1997) has mentioned that “any school-instituted program, designed in cooperation with other community institutions, to shape directly and systematically the behavior of young people by influencing explicitly the non-relativistic values believed directly to bring about that behavior” ( p. 179).

Furthermore, to better demonstrate the significant role of such a practice in school environments, it should be noted that Character Education is “about developing virtues-good habits and dispositions which lead students to responsible and mature adulthood” (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999, p. 190). Under consideration of such an approach by school systems the society has taken a positive step toward making just and caring citizens for the future,

For the good of our civilizations, (Character Education programs) are very worth pursuing, because if the moral and social development of our children are not as worthy of attention as our drive for academic success in the service of economic productivity, we will foster the kind of cultural improvement and ethical misconduct that undermine our ability to thrive as a nation. (Brown, 2009, p. 131)

Lastly, it is worth saying that “character education is the explicit teaching of positive values by teachers, which is supported by the school. Currently, there is a lack of research on character education regarding pre-service teachers” (Beachum, McCray, Yawn, & Obiakor, 2013, p. 470). Consequently, this question comes up in respect to the types of leadership style that teachers or administrations should possibly consider adopting and implementing the Character Education at its high capacity. Based on previous conversations on this paper, the common roots between the Ethics of Care and the Servant Leadership indicated that, it is worth the effort of research on the relationship between Servant Leadership and the outcome of Character Education programs in school projects. In other words, it is important to know if practicing Servant Leadership could increase the outcome of Character Education programs; especially in the school system. Sadly, such research is beyond the scope of this article but could be the focus for future research studies.

## Conclusion

The common roots and combination of care perspective of what Carol Gilligan developed in her study with the work of Robert Greenleaf might suggest that these two perspectives could complete each other in a way that Servant Leadership could be the practice of a leader who is a care-reasoner in ideology. Then, a Servant leader who is a care-r can engage Character Education as a strategy to practice and bring his/her believes in action. On this note, “a wide range of approaches to ‘healthy’ or ‘positive’ youth development have either adopted foundational aspects of the care perspective on moral values and relational psychology or have conceptually evolved to a very similar place” (Sherblom, 2008, p. 91). Thus, Character Education was suggested as one of the care perspective approaches for a servant leader to practice. That is because as Sherblom noted, “character educators demonstrate a close match to the moral psychology advocated by the care perspective” (p. 93).

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