

Moral Reasoning of Adolescent Male Offenders: Comparison of Sexual and Nonsexual
Offenders

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Abstract

This study compared the moral reasoning abilities of juvenile sex and non-sex offenders using a novel methodology that explored their responses to moral questions in a variety of offending contexts. Seven sexual and nine nonsexual adolescent male offenders from a maximum security detention facility in New South Wales, Australia, were presented with a variety of hypothetical offending situations involving sexual and non sexual offences and asked to discuss these. It was hypothesised that the quality of moral reasoning employed by offenders would be impaired in those offending contexts in which they had prior experience. Responses were assessed using a modified version of the Moral Judgment Interview Standard Issue Scoring Manual (MJI; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). Assigned levels of moral reasoning ability were verified independently by two expert raters. Responses by sexual offenders in sexual offending contexts and by nonsexual offenders in nonsexual offending contexts were dominated by preconventional reasoning. Both groups employed a greater use of conventional reasoning in non-congruent offending contexts.

Keywords: Moral development; moral reasoning; adolescent offenders; sexual offenders; nonsexual offenders

Moral development takes place within a social context. It is promoted by social experiences that provide the opportunity for perspective taking and that produce cognitive conflict (Speicher, 1992). Social interaction with parents, family, and peers plays an important role. Once formed, moral standards serve as guides or deterrents for action (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). According to cognitive developmental perspectives, moral development evolves through a regular sequence of stages, whereby the overall organization or structure of thought guides the type of moral reasoning employed at each stage. Emphasis is placed on the qualitative form of moral reasoning and on developmental changes in that reasoning (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). Moral development is analogous to cognitive development in that each new stage represents a qualitative reorganisation of the individual's approach towards moral reasoning, with each new reorganisation integrating the insights achieved at prior stages within a broader cognitive-developmental perspective (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). Kohlberg (1958; 1978) articulates a six-stage cognitive-developmental model of moral reasoning, which he groups into three levels. Preconventional moral reasoning (Stages 1 and 2) is characterised by egocentricity and self-interest (concrete individual perspective). Individuals reasoning at this level are essentially unaware of socially shared moral norms and expectations. Conventional moral reasoning (Stages 3 and 4) is characterised by social awareness and social conformity (member of society perspective). At this level, individual need is subordinated to the needs of socially shared relationships and the wider society. At the postconventional level (Stages 5 and 6) moral reasoning is characterised by principled thinking. Universal principles that promote individual autonomy and uphold human rights are applied to moral conflicts, even when these run counter to social norms and values (prior to society perspective). Children under the age of nine years typically reason at the preconventional level and adolescents and adults typically reason at the conventional level. A minority of the adult population reasons at

the postconventional level, but this rarely occurs before the ages of 20-25 years. Adolescent and adult offenders typically reason at the preconventional level (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

Moral Reasoning and Offending Behaviour

Researchers have employed a variety of research designs to quantify and describe moral reasoning ability in offending populations. Most have involved between group comparisons with non-offending control groups that have been matched on one or more of a number of demographic variables. In nearly all cases, participants are presented with hypothetical dilemmas, and asked to articulate a suitable response. Both production (i.e., the participant is required to articulate an open ended response to a moral dilemma) and recognition (i.e., the participant is required to articulate a response based on a fixed choice response format) instruments have been used. The Moral Judgment Interview (MJI; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987) and Sociomoral Reflection Measure-Short Form (SRM-SF; Gibbs, Basinger, & Fuller, 1992) are two of the more commonly used production based instruments, and the Defining Issues Test (DIT; Rest, 1979, 1993) is one of the more commonly used recognition based instruments. Each is based on Kohlberg's six-stage theory of moral development, and each reflects a strong cognitive-developmental perspective. This research demonstrates that offenders are arrested in their moral development and reason at lower levels than non-offenders (Bartek, Krebs, & Taylor, 1993; Chandler & Moran, 1990; Lee & Prentice, 1988; Nelson, Smith, & Dodd, 1990; Trevethan & Walker, 1989). A hypothesis arising from these findings is that offending behaviour can be reduced by enhancing the moral reasoning abilities of offenders. This hypothesis remains largely unsupported however (Armstrong, 2003; Claypoole, Moody, & Peace, 2000). One possible reason for this is that offenders are not homogenous in terms of their offending behaviours. Offenders exhibit a variety of offender characteristics (e.g., antisocial, psychopathic, impulsive, hyperactive), commit a variety of offence types (e.g., homicide, assault, sexual assault, robbery), and are influenced

by different offending contexts (e.g., poverty, substance dependence, acculturation). Research in fact demonstrates that all not all offenders are equal in terms of their moral reasoning abilities, and that not all offenders employ levels of moral reasoning below that of their non-offending counterparts. For example, Valliant, Gauthier, Pottier, and Kosmyna (2000) compared the moral reasoning abilities of sexual offenders (rapists, incest offenders, child molesters), general offenders, and non-offenders. Results demonstrated that the rapist and child molester groups employed higher levels of moral reasoning than the incest offender, general offender, and non-offender groups. Research also demonstrates that offenders are more likely to engage in lower levels of moral reasoning over real life, as opposed to hypothetical dilemmas (Trevethan & Walker, 1989), and over offence related, as opposed to offence non-related dilemmas (Palmer & Hollin, 1998). Others have suggested that the quality of moral reasoning employed by offenders will be impaired in those offending contexts in which they have had prior experience (Bartek et al., 1993).

The primary aim of the current study, therefore, was to compare the moral reasoning abilities of different offender types within different offending contexts. The moral reasoning abilities of sexual and nonsexual adolescent offenders were compared within a variety of offending contexts. It was hypothesised that the quality of moral reasoning employed by offenders would be impaired in those offending contexts in which they had prior experience, such that the moral reasoning abilities of sexual offenders would be impaired in sexual offending contexts, and the moral reasoning abilities of nonsexual offenders would be impaired in nonsexual offending contexts.

Method

Participants

Participants were 16 incarcerated male offenders from a maximum security adolescent detention facility administered by the New South Wales Department of Juvenile

Justice. Participants ranged in age from 16-19 years ($M = 17.95$ years, $SD = 1.14$ years). Seven participants had been convicted of, or were being held on remand for sexually based offences ($n = 3$ and 4 respectively: sexual offender group) and nine participants had been convicted of, or were being held on remand for serious nonsexual offences ($n = 7$ and 2 respectively: nonsexual offender group). Eleven participants had prior convictions for property offences and five participants had prior convictions for person offences. No participants from the nonsexual offender group had prior convictions for sexually based offences. There were eight Australian/Caucasians, four Indigenous Australians, two from the Middle East, and one each from the Pacific Islands and Asia. All participants were fluent in English.

Measures

Interview schedule. The interview schedule was designed to examine the moral reasoning in serious and repeat young offenders. Participants were asked about the importance of obeying the law, and whether there was a difference between: (a) stealing from a shop and stealing from a person; (b) stealing from an old person and stealing from a young person; (c) stealing from a poor person and stealing from a rich person; (d) assaulting a man and assaulting a woman; and (e) assault and sexual assault? Participants' responses to these questions provided the primary data for the current study.

Moral Judgment Interview (MJI) Standard Issue Scoring Manual. The Moral Judgment Interview Standard Issue Scoring Manual (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987) assesses and quantifies the developmental level of moral reasoning. It is a production-based measure of moral reasoning ability that yields rich qualitative responses that cannot be obtained with forced choice questionnaires, such as the DIT. The MJI provides a theory based assessment procedure that measures the quality of an individual's moral reasoning on the developmental

sequence postulated by Kohlberg's six stage theory of moral development, and offers a structured method of analysis that minimises subjectivity.

Procedure

Sample selection. Potential participants were screened for suitability via a departmental information database. Extreme case sampling was employed to identify serious and/or repeat offenders, and purposeful sampling was employed to identify sexual and nonsexual offenders. Detention centre clinical staff were presented with a list of possible participants for the study and asked to identify those most appropriate on the basis of the following exclusion criteria: (a) untreated psychosis; (b) substance withdrawal (excluding nicotine and cannabis); and (c) recent history of self-harming or suicidal behaviour. A total of 19 candidates were approached. All but one expressed interest in participating in the study.

Data collection. Interviews were conducted between August 2003 and January 2004 in an office in the detention centre. Signed informed consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. Interviews ranged in length between ninety minutes and three hours and were recorded on audiocassette. Data from one participant was lost through faulty recording and one participant discontinued the interview after 30 minutes, leaving a total of 16 completed interviews for data analysis. Neutral probes were used to encourage participants to provide detailed responses where necessary (e.g., Can you tell me more about that? What do you think the difference is? How are they different?). Participants were debriefed at the conclusion of the interview and given the opportunity to ask questions. Interviews were later transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Scoring. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts and scoring was conducted blindly with respect to offence type. Participants' responses were scored independently by the first author and by a second researcher and scored according to the scoring criteria outlined in the Moral Judgment Interview Standard Issue Scoring Manual

(Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). Because the scoring criteria in this manual reflect particular moral dilemmas and moral issues, and because few of the questions used in this study were exactly represented in the manual, the scoring required modification of the usual procedure. The procedure employed by Trevethan and Walker (1989) was employed. Rather than focusing on particular critical indicators (that are dilemma specific) scoring relied on the stage structure definitions for each response. In order to be scorable, a reason had to be provided (either explicitly or implicitly) for the response given. If a reason was not provided after probing, the participant was assumed unable to provide a reasoned response to the question, and the response was scored “Stage 1”. Thirteen of the 96 responses (13.5%) were provided without a discernible reason and were scored as Stage 1 responses. For all other responses, scores were assigned for every reason that matched a stage structure definition anywhere in the manual, regardless of the dilemma. Inter rater reliability was measured as the number of corresponding scores out of a total of 96 responses, resulting in 81.3% agreement. Discrepant scores were subsequently resolved through discussion between the first and second authors.

Results

Qualitative Description of Participants’ Responses

Obeying the law. All but one participant indicated that it was important to obey the law. Typical responses included “it’s important to a certain extent”, “it’s important”, “it’s pretty important”, “it’s very important”, and “it’s really really important”. The dissenting participant assumed a more questioning stance by responding, “it depends what the law is”.

Stealing from a shop/person. When asked if there was a difference between stealing from a shop and stealing from a person, participants were evenly divided in their responses. Eight participants answered in the affirmative and eight in the negative. Affirmative responses were grounded in a sense of “loss” or “consequence” to the victim, and all

indicated a preference for stealing from a shop. Typical affirmative responses included, “insurance covers for all those things in the shop”, “people have to struggle to get it back”, “you could steal a thousand dollars from a bank and they wouldn’t notice”, and “if it’s from a shop you know it’s just another chocolate bar on the rack”. Typical negative responses (i.e., indicating an opinion of no difference) included, “stealing is stealing”, and “it’s the same crime”, while one respondent replied, “I just think money brother, as long as it makes money I’ll get it”.

Stealing from the old/young. Most participants indicated that there was a difference between stealing from an old person and stealing from a young person. Only two answered in the negative. All affirmative responses revealed a negative attitude towards stealing from an old person, and were grounded in a sense of “vulnerability” and “respect”. Typical responses included, “an old lady, she can’t defend herself”, “ [old people] they’re defenceless...they can’t protect themselves”, “I don’t rort pensioners, old people, I rort young kids, the hard cunts”, “it could cause them to have a heart attack”, and “you respect ya elders bra, you don’t fuckin’ go robbin’ old people, they got no, like no chance of you know, like fightin’ you or anythink”. Negative responses were again based on the notion that “stealing is stealing”.

Stealing from the poor/rich. Participants were more evenly divided in their opinions when asked if there was a difference between stealing from a poor person and stealing from a rich person. Seven participants answered in the affirmative, seven in the negative, and two replied, “it depends”. All of the affirmative responses indicated a preference for stealing from the rich, and were grounded in a sense of “need” or “deservingness”. Typical responses included, “they’ve got lots of money”, “if their TV’s missing I’m sure they’re gonna be able to get another one”, “they pull money outta their arse”, “they go down the bank, they pull out money straight away, they don’t care”, “the rich person deserves to be rorted, he needs to be rorted”, and “‘cause they think they’re so good and stuck up, their nose is always in the air”.

Ambivalent responses were also grounded in a sense of “deservingness” and included, “it depends if the rich person is like greedy you know” and “but what sort of rich person, like a fuckin’ bad rich person, good rich person?” Once again, negative responses were grounded in the notion that “stealing is stealing”.

Assault man/woman. Fourteen participants responded in the affirmative when asked if there was a difference between assaulting a man and assaulting a woman. Only one participant responded in the negative, while another took an ambivalent stance. All of the affirmative responses indicated a negative attitude towards the assault of women, and were generally grounded in a sense of “vulnerability” or “social convention”. Typical responses included, “a man can take more than a woman”, “a woman’s more defenceless than a man”, “a man’s a man, a woman’s a woman, it’s no victory hittin’ a woman”, “I been brought up never to hit any woman”, “you don’t hit females”, and “it’s just the way society is, you don’t hit women”. The ambivalent response was also grounded in a sense of “vulnerability” but this was also seen to apply to men: “(a man) could sorta defend their selves sometimes, but the woman can’t...I dunno, it’s still the same but it’s not”. In contrast to many of the affirmative responses, the negative response was grounded in a sense of “sameness”; “they’re both the same...they both have blood running through their system, they both have feelings”.

Assault/sexual assault. When asked if there was a difference between assault and sexual assault, all but one participant responded in the affirmative. Thirteen of the affirmative responses indicated that sexual assault was worse than assault, whereas two simply indicated that there was a difference. Affirmative responses were generally grounded in a sense of “personal violation” and “emotional damage”. Typical responses included, “a sexual assault is an intimate”, “you’ve invaded somebody’s personal space”, “sex is private”, “if you rape a girl, they’re fucked for life bra”, and “if you sexually assault someone, it’s their physical and their emotion too, inside of them too”. The single negative response was grounded in a sense

of “sameness”: “in assault you could be hurt...and sexual assault is about the same ‘cause can be bashed and sexually assaulted”.

Participants’ Stage Scores

Of the 16 participants, 13 showed evidence of Stage 1 reasoning, 16 showed evidence of Stage 2 reasoning, and 13 showed evidence of Stage 3 reasoning. None showed evidence of Stage 4 or 5 reasoning. The majority of participants (i.e., 14) had one modal score. That is, they demonstrated a distinct trend towards a single stage of moral reasoning. Five participants reasoned predominantly at Stage 1, eight predominantly at Stage 2, and one predominantly at Stage 3. Of the two participants with more than one modal score, both demonstrated codominant trends on adjacent stages (i.e., Stages 1 and 2 or Stages 2 and 3).

Distribution of Stage Scores

Frequency distributions of participants’ stage scores and sexual and nonsexual group distributions of stage scores for each of the moral reasoning questions are presented in Table 1. These show that 75% of all responses are characterised by pre-conventional reasoning (Stage 1 or 2). The remaining 25% of responses are characterised by lower level (Stage 3) conventional reasoning. Stage 1, 2, and 3 responses are observed in relatively equal distributions for the group as a whole, however Stage 2 reasoning dominated.

. Responses for both sexual and non-sexual offender groups are characterised by pre-conventional (Stage 1 and 2) reasoning. The remaining responses for both groups are characterised by lower level (Stage 3) conventional reasoning. Stage 2 reasoning was the dominant response for both groups, followed by Stage 1 reasoning and by Stage 3 reasoning.

Overall distributions. Responses to all questions were dominated by pre-conventional (Stage 1 and 2) reasoning. This effect was strongest among the “poor/rich” and “shop/person” questions, with no Stage 3 responses for the former, and only 1 for the latter.

In contrast, preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) and conventional (Stage 3) reasoning were more or less codominant for the “assault/sexual assault” question, with only one Stage 1 response.

Sexual and nonsexual group distributions. No differences were observed between the sexual and nonsexual offending groups on the “shop/person”, “old/young”, and “poor/rich” questions. Responses to each of these questions were dominated by preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) reasoning for both groups. However, differences were observed between groups on all other questions. Preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) reasoning was dominant among the sexual offender group on the “obey law” question, whereas preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) and lower level conventional (Stage 3) reasoning were more or less codominant among the nonsexual offender group. On the “man/woman” question, preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) reasoning dominated among the nonsexual offender group whereas preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) and lower level conventional (Stage 3) reasoning were more or less codominant among the sexual offender group. In contrast, for the “assault/sexual assault” question, preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) reasoning dominated among the sexual offender group whereas preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) and lower level conventional (Stage 3) reasoning were more or less codominant among the nonsexual offender group.

Insert Table 1

Discussion

Moral Reasoning and Offending Behaviour

This study replicates previous findings that offenders are arrested in their moral development and reason predominantly at the preconventional level. It extends previous research in that it examined moral reasoning in offending contexts in which these serious young offenders had prior experience. Given the very low levels of moral reasoning identified in this group, the development of interventions to enhance the moral reasoning

abilities of offenders appears warranted even though the link between moral reasoning ability and moral behaviour has not yet been empirically demonstrated.

No differences in moral reasoning ability were found between sexual and nonsexual offenders in this study. These findings are broadly consistent with those of other studies (see Priest, Kordinak, & Wynkoop, 1991; Wilson, Goodwin, & Beck, 2002), although the convergent validity of these findings is difficult to ascertain because the sample characteristics and measures of moral reasoning varied between studies. For example, Priest et al. and Wilson et al. used the DIT to measure the quality of moral reasoning. The DIT is a fixed choice response based measure of moral reasoning ability designed to evaluate the use of principled moral reasoning. Analyses in those studies were based on the extent to which postconventional (Stage 5 and 6) reasoning (P score) was employed. In contrast, this study used the MJI, a production-based measure of moral reasoning ability that yields rich qualitative responses that cannot be obtained with forced choice questionnaires. Findings from this study suggest that measures of postconventional reasoning are unlikely to discriminate between different offending groups because offenders do not engage in postconventional reasoning. It is therefore possible that the DIT may not adequately assess the moral reasoning abilities of offenders (Claypoole et al., 2000) or discriminate between offender and offence characteristics. When Wilson et al. considered group differences in scores reflecting preconventional (Stage 2) and conventional (Stage 3 and 4) reasoning (by summing responses within stories that reflect decision making at each of the levels), differences in the quality of moral reasoning employed by armed robbers and rapists emerged, with the armed robbers demonstrating a greater use of Stage 3 reasoning than the rapists. Such group differences are lost in studies that employ the DIT. Concerns such as these raise serious doubts about the validity of findings from studies that employ the DIT

within offending populations, and indicate that production based instruments may be more valid for these populations.

Moral Reasoning and Offending Context

The current study demonstrated that the quality of moral reasoning employed by offenders varies as a function of the offending context. While responses to all questions were dominated by preconventional (Stage 1 and 2) reasoning, questions related to property offending (i.e., the “shop/person”, “old/young” and “poor/rich” questions) showed the most consistent use of the lowest level of moral reasoning. In contrast, there was a stronger presence of conventional (Stage 3) reasoning among the person offending contexts (i.e., the “man/woman” and “assault/sexual assault” questions), with only one Stage 1 response provided to the “assault/sexual assault” question. These findings suggest that offenders are less likely to engage in conventional reasoning in property offending contexts, and more likely to engage in conventional reasoning in person offending contexts. Krebs, Vermeulen, and Denton (1991) have suggested that the quality of moral reasoning employed by individuals is determined by an interaction between person-related (level of moral competence) and situational (type of moral dilemma) variables. Findings from this study support this contention. To date however, little other research has examined the moral reasoning abilities of offenders within different offending contexts. For example, although Palmer and Hollin (1998) found the quality of offenders’ moral reasoning to be lower in offending contexts than in non-offending contexts, they did not examine the quality of moral reasoning employed by offenders in different offending contexts. Findings from the Palmer and Hollin study the current findings, and provide convergent validity for the notion that moral reasoning is influenced by the offending context.

This study also compared the quality of moral reasoning employed by sexual and nonsexual offender groups within each of the offending contexts. The quality of moral

reasoning employed by offenders was hypothesised to be impaired in those offending contexts in which they had prior experience. This hypothesis predicted that the quality of moral reasoning employed by the sexual offender group would be lower in sexual offending contexts (i.e., “assault/sexual assault”) and that the quality of moral reasoning employed by the nonsexual offender group would be lower in nonsexual offending contexts (i.e., the three property offending contexts and the “man/woman” question). While no differences were observed between sexual and nonsexual offender groups within any of the property offending contexts (i.e., “shop/person”, “old/young”, and “poor/rich” questions) the person offending contexts appeared to promote a greater use of conventional reasoning among the sexual offender group for the “man/woman” question, and a greater use of conventional reasoning among the nonsexual offender group for the “assault/sexual assault” question. Responses within the sexual offending context (i.e., “assault/sexual assault”) were dominated by pre-conventional reasoning among the sexual offender group, and responses within the nonsexual offending contexts (i.e., property offending contexts and the “man/woman” question) were dominated by pre-conventional reasoning among the nonsexual offender group. Moreover, the sexual offending group was found to employ a greater use of conventional reasoning in a nonsexual offending context (i.e., “man/woman”) and the nonsexual offender group was found to employ a greater use of conventional reasoning in the sexual offending context. Whether a cause or a consequence of their offending experiences, these findings suggest that offenders are likely to have offence specific moral reasoning deficits that are more pronounced than their global reasoning deficits. Interventions aimed at reducing offending behaviour by enhancing moral development may therefore need to target offence specific moral reasoning deficits in order to be effective.

Theoretical Implications

Kohlberg's (1958, 1978) theory of moral development states that moral reasoning changes over time in predictable stages moving from the simple (low) to the complex (high) and that the complex, or higher stages are more adaptive and different from the simple, lower stages (Buttell, 2002). According to the theory, moral development determines the quality of the underlying logic employed across situations, and allows individuals to comprehend all stages below and one stage above their diagnosed stage of reasoning. Kohlberg suggests that individuals typically reason at their highest level of ability (i.e., moral competence) because moral issues are resolved more effectively at the higher stages. Lower levels of moral reasoning are only employed "in situations with a significant downward press" (i.e., under suboptimal conditions) (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; p. 8). Findings from this study support this theory. Even though stage scores ranged between Stage 1 and Stage 3 for the majority of the adolescent offenders in the current study (i.e., 10), the vast majority (i.e., 14) had only one modal score, demonstrating a distinct trend towards a single stage of moral reasoning. Of the two offenders with more than one modal score, both demonstrated codominant trends on adjacent stages. That is, the adolescent offenders in the current study appeared to use a coherent structural orientation when reasoning about the questions. These findings support the notion that moral development determines the quality of the underlying logic employed across situations, and lend support to this aspect of Kohlberg's theory.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore, for the first time, the moral reasoning abilities of very serious adolescent male offenders. A qualitative approach produces rich and detailed information but is suitable for smaller sample sizes because of the very labor intensive transcription and analysis it requires. The current findings may not generalise to larger populations of (sexual and nonsexual) adolescent offenders, and are

limited to the particular characteristics (including gender) of the sample used in this study. Further, while the data from this study were coded and quantified according to the methodology and procedures outlined in the MJI Standard Issue Scoring Manual (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987), the scoring procedure was necessarily modified to allow for the scoring of questions that were not represented in the manual. While the approach used in this study has been used successfully in previous research (see Trevethan & Walker, 1989), deviation from the standardised procedure may compromise the validity of these findings, and make it difficult to make direct comparisons with other studies. Finally, small sample size prevented the use of statistical procedures to establish “statistically significant” differences between the groups and the offending contexts. Findings are based on the relative distributions of stage scores.

Conclusion

Findings from the current study demonstrate that offenders are arrested in their moral development, and reason at the preconventional level. No differences in moral reasoning ability were found between sexual and nonsexual offender groups in this study. The relationship between moral reasoning ability and offender type remains unclear and further research in this area is warranted. Findings suggest that the quality of moral reasoning employed by offenders varies as a function of the offending context. Moreover, they suggest that moral reasoning is impaired in those offending contexts in which offenders have had prior experience, and that offenders have offence specific moral reasoning deficits. Despite these deficits, offenders appear to employ a coherent structural orientation when engaging in moral reasoning and level of moral development appears to determine the quality of the underlying logic employed across different offending situations. Research in this area needs to shift its focus beyond the “offender/non-offender” dichotomy and address the factors that both undermine and enhance the quality of moral reasoning employed by offenders in

different offending contexts. Research is yet to establish the link between moral reasoning ability, moral behaviour, and offending behaviour, to identify the conditions that allow offenders to reason at their lowest and highest potentials, and the circumstances under which moral reasoning is most likely to influence offending behaviour.

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Table 4. Relative distributions (%) of stage scores for the sexual and nonsexual offender groups

Level Stage	Sexual (n=7)				Nonsexual (n=9)				χ^2	p	
	Pre 1	2	Total	Con 3	Pre 1	2	Total	Con 3			
Obey law	42.9	28.6	71.4	28.6	44.4	11.1	55.6	44.4	1.64	ns	
Shop/Person	42.9	42.9	85.7	14.3	33.3	66.7	100.0	0.0	6.16	.05	
Old/Young	28.6	42.9	71.4	28.6	22.2	44.4	66.7	33.3	0.89	ns	
Poor/Rich	42.9	57.1	100.0	0.0	44.4	55.6	100.0	0.0	8.43	.025	
Man/Woman	14.3	42.9	57.1	42.9	44.4	33.3	77.8	22.2	0.13	ns	
Assault/ Sexual assault	14.3	57.1	71.4	28.6	0.0	44.4	44.4	55.6	5.42	ns	
Total	31.0	45.2	76.2	23.8	23.8	31.5	42.6	74.1	25.9	5.26	ns

Note. Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding