

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## The Gender Gap in Morality \*

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*"A man has a wife who is dying but can be saved by an expensive drug invented by a local druggist. The man cannot afford the drug or get credit to purchase it. Do you think the man should steal the drug to save his dying wife?"*

In 1976, this moral dilemma and others were used by Harvard psychologist **Lawrence Kohlberg** to pioneer studies in morality. From his data, he developed a theory of moral development. However, his research was **androcentric** – it was based on *male responses only*. Studies in morality had typically either dismissed women as morally inferior or dropped their data when their answers didn't fit the ones obtained from men. How do women's concepts of morality differ from those of men?

To answer this question, **Carol Gilligan** (another Harvard psychologist) used Kohlberg's dilemmas to gather data which included the moral views of women. Her work is presented in her book, *In a Different Voice* (1982).

Dr. Gilligan found that men tend to focus on a set of **abstract principles**. In contrast, women tend to weigh the impact a decision would have on the **people** involved. To the drug dilemma, young boys tend to quickly decide that the man should *steal the drug*, reasoning that life has a higher value than property. In contrast, girls of the same age worried more about whether the man would be caught and how it would affect his wife. They were more likely to suggest asking the pharmacist to *donate the drug* and wondered if the husband could *borrow the money* he needed. As Dr. Gilligan explains:

*"Women believe morality is connected to responsibility in relationships and they always assume a connection between self and others. Men tend to look at moral issues in terms of rights of individuals to noninterference."*

In the past, the woman's approach would be labeled as *"evasive and wishy-washy."* However, to Dr. Gilligan, it indicates concern for mutually beneficial solutions (situations in which everybody can come out ahead). In other words, women are more likely to look for *"win-win"* solutions than *"win-lose"* ones. This means that women also have a well-developed and mature moral understanding – but it is different from that of men.

When decisions are made in marriages, these differences become very clear. Suppose a couple has decided to purchase a new car. Once the decision is made, the man tends to see it as final. On the other hand, the woman may still want to discuss the ramifications of this decision on themselves and other members of the family. This leads to differences in their need to talk about the decision. Men tend to get frustrated with the seemingly

endless hassle from women. On the other hand, women tend to see men as curt – tuning their wives out and closing down communication.

On the job – as in marriage – different moral judgments are evident. As more women become managers, they show more sensitivity and responsiveness to people around them than most men. This changes the structure and tone of an organization, winning loyalty and making the organization more efficient and productive. This *woman's approach* is similar in some ways to that of the highly praised Japanese-style corporations. In contrast to many men, a woman is more likely to come up with a solution acceptable to more people – simply because she considers more alternatives.

As in the job and marriage, the woman's approach can also benefit politics, where negotiation and compromise are daily requirements. With the constant threat of nuclear holocaust, we need people who can find "*win-win*" alternatives.

However, many women carry this moral view too far – caring about everyone but themselves. This is not a "*win-win*" situation. It is a "*win-lose*" situation, with the woman being the big loser. These women *can never do enough* for their husbands, children, relatives, bosses, or employees. If these women do something for themselves at a cost to others, they are consumed with guilt. This attitude is associated with low self-esteem, low confidence, and a lack of assertiveness. Rather than being assertive, most of these women are passive when it comes to their needs. Below we can see three major ways of relating to others and their typical effects.

Method of relating	Effect on self	Effect on others
Aggressive	winning	losing
Passive	losing	winning
Assertive	winning	winning

Dr. Gilligan feels that women need to learn that responsible caring begins with one's self. To help women achieve this, teachers and parents can encourage girls to be less passive and more assertive – expect more of themselves and value their own viewpoints.

Rather than being determined by heredity, the gender differences in morality are probably learned in our society along with the rest of our sex roles. If so, making ourselves aware of the different moral views of men and women can be the first step in leading to better communication, more understanding, and some positive social changes.

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\* Adapted from Carol Johmann's article, "Sex and Morality," *Omni*, May, 1985, pages 20 and 80.