

Williams, G. (2013). A case analysis of Olivia: Applying Gilligan's theory of women's moral development. *Palmetto Practitioner* (Spring 2013). Retrieved from www.sccpaweb.org/palmettopractitioner/spring2013/index.html

A Case Analysis of Olivia: Applying Gilligan's Theory of Women's Moral Development

Ginger Williams, Valdosta State University

This article examines the case of "Olivia," a young woman studying at a regional state university, to examine how one woman experienced the stages of Gilligan's theory of women's moral development. It begins with an introduction to Olivia's background and her experience as a student in this community. Relevant student development theory, namely Carol Gilligan's theory of women's moral development, is reviewed. Through the lens of this particular theory, Olivia's actions and beliefs are analyzed. The author attempts to locate Olivia at a specific level within the context of Gilligan's framework. As Olivia was exposed to Gilligan's theory and learned more about herself as an individual, the author suggested appropriate interventions to help guide her towards the next stage of development. The paper concludes with a reflection on how this case can help inform other practitioners.

Ginger Williams is a reference librarian and instructor at Valdosta State University, where she coordinates an online embedded librarian program. She received an MLIS from Florida State University and is currently pursuing an MEd in Higher Education Leadership at Valdosta State University.

“The conflict between self and other [...] constitutes the central moral problem for women, posing a dilemma whose resolution requires a reconciliation between femininity and adulthood.”

~ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (1982, pp. 70-71)

Many young women attending college feel themselves being pulled in different directions (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009; Hanson, Drumheller, Mallard, McKee, & Schlegel, 2011). In certain instances, their responsibilities conflict with one another, and their relationships compete with their own needs (Hanson et al., 2011). It is difficult for women to take time for themselves because they may feel like they have to neglect someone or something else (Gilligan, 1982). The struggle between fulfilling others' needs and doing what is best for oneself, which is so common to college women, is central to Gilligan's work on women's moral development (1982). In this article, the researcher will examine one young woman's situation and use student development theory to (a) interpret her behavior and (b) provide a theoretical basis for interventions designed to help her manage her time well and balance her own needs with the needs of those close to her. By analyzing her situation through the lens of Gilligan's moral development theory, the researcher offers suggestions to the student that will better equip her to navigate her life circumstances. By reading about her case, professionals who work with college students—and, in particular, female college students—will gain a better understanding of how they could help someone in a similar situation.

BACKGROUND

The subject of this study, henceforth referred to as “Olivia,” is a 24-year old African American woman attending a regional, state university. Olivia is a student assistant at the

academic library where the researcher works. The researcher, who is pursuing her master's degree in Higher Education Administration, invited Olivia to participate in a student development project as part of a course assignment. In addition to regularly working alongside one another, Olivia and the researcher met several times throughout the course of the study for interviews and to have open dialogue about Olivia's concerns with college life.

As is typical of today's student, Olivia is very busy balancing school, work, relationships, extracurricular activities, and other social engagements. As a child, her family relocated several times because of her mother's career in the military, eventually making their home in Atlanta, Georgia. Her parents divorced when she was just a baby. As Olivia describes it, her father struck her mother in the face one time, and her mother decided she would not tolerate such behavior. Her mother is a strong woman who shows Olivia the way to get by "in a man's world", as her mother would say. While he does not figure prominently in her life, Olivia is in contact with her father. Olivia has a younger sister who plans to attend the same university after she graduates from high school. Because Olivia is a senior, she will only be on campus with her sister for a semester or two.

As a member of a social sorority on campus, Olivia is required to perform many hours of service. Although she has changed her major to early childhood education, she continues to participate in this sorority. While she has no problem making new friends because of her warm, outgoing nature, she likes to keep close ties with the friends she already has. Olivia is a multi-faceted woman, but the strongest feature of her personality is her desire to nurture others and take care of them. This is evident in her relationships with her family and boyfriend, the way she interacts with the researcher, the way the researcher observes her interacting with her friends and peers, and even in her chosen vocation.

During interviews, Olivia expressed concern to the researcher that she cared more for others than herself. She is very self-sacrificing and tries to help everyone she loves before she takes care of herself. This characteristic is expressed in a variety of ways. Because Olivia has a stable on-campus job, she is able to send money to her mother to help with the family's expenses. She also helps support her boyfriend because, at the time the study began, he was not employed; he has since begun working part-time thanks to her encouragement. Olivia is frequently going above and beyond her responsibilities in group projects with her classmates. She gets frustrated with group members whose work ethic is not as strong as her own, but she feels compelled to do extra work to ensure the quality of the project so she can attain the grade she wants.

All of this extra effort takes its toll on Olivia, as she does not have adequate time to incorporate leisure or exercise into her life because of her commitment to others. She works many hours each week in her on-campus job and spends much of her time doing things for friends and family. Because of this, Olivia is often frazzled and distracted. Although she has a very sweet, generous personality, she neglects to set aside time for her own interests and obligations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature begins with a discussion of works by Jones and Watt (1999) and Sax (2009), which are focused on the ways in which gender informs a student's collegiate experience. Specifically, they address students' psychosocial development and how it relates to gender. These are followed by a presentation of literature by Canon and Brown (1985) and Picard and Guido-DiBrito (1993) addressing Gilligan's theory of moral development and how it can be applied in student affairs practice. Rather than following a more dualistic, justice-oriented

professional ethic, Canon and Brown advocate for the use of Gilligan's care-oriented ethic in student affairs. Picard and Guido-DiBrito present a variety of student affairs contexts in which an ethic of care is appropriate. In conclusion, Gilligan's theory of women's moral development is presented to provide context to this case. The overview of Gilligan's theory is expanded upon in detail in the subsequent section, "Theoretical Framework".

A study conducted by Jones and Watt (1999) on college students' psychosocial development and moral orientation is very informative for student personnel practitioners. College students (primarily Caucasian freshmen, with near equality between total male and female participants) at a large, Midwestern university were asked to complete the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Assessment (SDTLA) and Measure of Moral Orientation (MMO) to assess their psychosocial development and moral orientation, respectively. Researchers conducted median splits to establish high and low scores. Findings indicated that women scored higher on tolerance towards those with different beliefs or backgrounds than men, but no significant difference was found between genders regarding care orientation. While preferences for care and justice orientations were split along gender lines, these frameworks could be considered tools for understanding morality that are equally available to both men and women (Jones & Watt, 1999). The ethic of care that Olivia displays in this case may be found in many other students regardless of gender; men are also likely to frame their morality around empathy and care towards others.

Furthering the examination of a connection between gender and moral orientation was Sax's (2009) study. In particular, Sax studied whether gender had an impact on students' responses to the college environment. This national study examined outcomes related to "personality and identity, political and social values, and measures of academic achievement"

(Sax, 2009, p. 3). Sax found that women and men experienced college very differently; often “a college environment or experience was significantly related to an aspect of development for one gender and not the other” (Sax, 2009, p. 4). The study also showed that women who travel farther from home for college were more successful academically. Their self-confidence flourished when they forged strong connections with faculty members (Sax, 2009). Relationships proved very significant to both men and women, however in different ways. Sax suggested that student personnel professionals should understand the differences in perception of the collegiate experience between the genders so that we can better assist all students (2009).

Literature on the application of Gilligan’s theory in the field of student affairs is dated, but attentive researchers will benefit from close reading of the works of Canon and Brown (1985) and Picard and Guido-DiBrito (1993). Professional ethics are especially vital in a field centered on nurturing the student and developing their character. Although much of Canon and Brown’s piece focused on dispelling “ethical myths,” the authors’ suggestion to focus on Gilligan’s concept of ethics as caring for the self and others in student affairs work was most pertinent. They presented her ethic of care as an alternative to what they considered more traditional rule-based ethical models based exclusively on logic and reason. They believed Gilligan’s model would work well in student affairs practice because it is “concerned more with relationships than with rules and more with the context of the particular dilemmas than with universal laws” (Canon & Brown, 1985, p. 86).

Picard and Guido-DiBrito’s (1993) article presented a myriad of ways that student affairs professionals could incorporate an ethic of care into their daily practice. Simply calling women’s awareness to developmental theories that address them in particular can help them start to understand and value their differences. Picard and Guido-DiBrito summarized Gilligan’s theory

of women's moral development and contrasted it to others, such as Kohlberg, whose 1981 work *Essays on Moral Development* had been the standard-bearer in moral development theory.

Suggested implementations of Gilligan's theory focused on the areas of career planning, housing and residence life, and leadership (Picard & Guido-DiBrito, 1993).

These four works each help the researcher's practice of applying Gilligan's theory of women's moral development as demonstrated in this case study. Whether addressing student's moral development in the context of gender or suggesting ways Gilligan's care-oriented theory can help student affairs practitioners, each relates directly to the situation in which the researcher finds herself trying to aid a young college woman in addressing her own moral development.

The theory Gilligan (1982) presented in *In a Different Voice* is also quite relevant to working with college-aged women. Although one of Gilligan's primary research methods included interviewing women faced with an abortion decision, this framework helped her determine how women's morality developed and changed throughout their lives. It is this focus on how women perceive their duty of care towards themselves and others that is particularly relevant to the student affairs field. Olivia's situation is emblematic of the struggle many college women face in setting aside time for themselves and developing the ability to prioritize their own needs over others'. Student affairs practitioners can play a role in helping these women by implementing student-centered interventions grounded by student development theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher based this study on Carol Gilligan's theory of women's moral development because Olivia was facing the same sort of ethical dilemmas that appear in Gilligan's work. Gilligan outlined her research on moral development in her book *In a Different Voice* (1982). The "different voice" Gilligan refers to is not just different because it is a woman's

voice; Gilligan found differences in men's and women's perception of care and justice (1982). Gilligan's work revealed that women experience morality in terms of care and responsibility. Women's morality develops through three dominant levels and two transition stages between them. With each level comes a more complex relationship between a woman's understanding of herself and others (Gilligan, 1982).

In the first level, a woman is impulsive, self-centered, and most concerned with her own wellbeing (Gilligan, 1982). According to Gilligan, these women's relationships are usually self-serving and leave them feeling unfulfilled; women in this stage say things like "[t]he only thing you are ever going to get out of going with a guy is to get hurt" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 75). As women move to the second level, their focus becomes less self-serving. This is a transition wherein they experience a growth in concern for others and an understanding of their responsibilities towards other people (Gilligan, 1982). These women experience awareness of a conflict between their feelings of selfishness and responsibility.

In the second level of Gilligan's theory women devote themselves to caring for others (1982). In this level, a woman feels it is important to fit into society and to make her peers comfortable. She might suppress her own thoughts and beliefs if they are counter to those of the dominant culture; indeed, a woman's focus in this stage is on living up to expectations based on her impression of traditionally feminine roles (Gilligan, 1982). Gosselin (2003) suggested that "[i]mplicit in this perspective is the assumption that, if she is a good enough girlfriend, wife, or lover, the other will see this goodness and provide for her the security she needs and depends on for survival" (p. 94). As women transition beyond this level, they start to wonder why they find everyone else's needs so much more important than their own (Gilligan, 1982). Women begin to examine their own needs and beliefs and try to align them with their relationships and

obligations; they start to realize that their own needs are as important as others'. A woman in this transition may struggle to integrate what she thinks is the right course of action with what is best for her as she reconciles the shift "in [her] concern from goodness to truth" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 82).

Women in Gilligan's third and final stage seek courses of action that will not harm themselves or others (1982). They factor themselves into decisions and make choices that value their own feelings and needs. In this level a woman no longer believes that she is selfish to consider her own needs. She has the conviction that she ought to minimize harm to everyone in her life- *including* herself.

METHODOLOGY

Two students were invited to participate in this study; one declined, and Olivia volunteered. Using unstructured interviews over the course of a semester, the researcher collected data on Olivia's situation and her beliefs. The majority of interviews were conducted in the latter half of the semester, all of which took place in a one-on-one setting. The researcher coded interview notes periodically during the project to reveal themes in Olivia's language and in the content of her responses. As categories of care and relationships with self and others emerged, the researcher turned to Gilligan's theory of women's moral development to contextualize Olivia's situation and inform future interviews. This theory was a natural fit as it focuses on the same themes that emerged in interviews. Rather than operate under a rigid framework, the researcher enacted Canon & Brown's (1985) suggestion of treating each student as an individual and developing a relationship into practice. The researcher felt that she and Olivia should address the issue of balancing her needs with those of her friends and family.

THEORY-TO-PRACTICE: OLIVIA THROUGH GILLIGAN'S EYES

As suggested by Picard and Guido-DiBrito (1993), the researcher thought it wise to make Olivia aware of Gilligan's theory and her own relation to it. As the researcher sensed the theme of caring primarily for others emerging, it was clear that applying Gilligan's theory of moral development would be helpful with Olivia. The types of issues Olivia expressed were distinctly voiced from a feminine ethic of care. Her concerns and values were well aligned with Gilligan's second level. The researcher felt strongly that this assessment was correct as Olivia was most concerned with taking care of others and avoiding conflict.

When Olivia had problems with group members not working on their assignment, she came to the researcher for advice instead of confronting her peers. She contributed more to their project because she wanted them all to score high marks even though she knew it was not fair for her to do so. She took care of others by paying her boyfriend's expenses and sending money home to her mother to help pay for shared bills as well. She expected to give to her relationship with her boyfriend much more than she asked in return. As is typical of women in the second level of Gilligan's theory, Olivia took on a very feminine role in their relationship.

The extent to which Olivia cared for others over herself emerged gradually and naturally during interviews. Initially, Olivia talked about her background, her home life, how she was performing academically, and so forth. Overall, Olivia displayed a very positive persona and rarely complained openly about a situation. Time and time again, however, Olivia expressed a lack of personal time and a feeling that her generosity was not being appreciated. Olivia seemed overwhelmed by opposing obligations and with the many different directions in which she was being pulled. Like many Millennial students, she often multitasked, finding time during work to complete homework assignments and even talk to group members about projects (Hanson et al.,

2011). Because of this harried existence, she felt she was unable to take a break and do something fun that would alleviate her stress. This stress was taking its toll on her physically and emotionally. She felt emotionally drained and did not feel motivated to incorporate physical exercise into her lifestyle.

Although she mentioned this conflict in caring for others over herself in passing, she did not seem to consider it important because she placed such little value on her own needs. She assumed everyone probably felt similarly about caring for and wanting to help loved ones. Upon the researcher's mention that Olivia had brought up the idea of caring for others and not having time for herself on several occasions, Olivia began to consider the possibility that it was a problem in her life that she should try to remedy.

OUTCOMES AND IDEAS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

Once Olivia and the researcher talked about issues of caring for others and acting in ways that were counter to her self-interest, Olivia started to shift into the second transition, heading towards Gilligan's third level. She began to recognize that her needs were important, too, and she wanted to get out of her relationships as much as she investing. Now, she knows that she has very limited time to spare, but she has started asking her boyfriend to take her out more and do more things that she is interested in doing. She has not made a complete change in behavior and still defers to putting others first at times. One difference the researcher now sees in Olivia's behavior is that she stops to consider her own needs when she is making a decision instead of just thinking about what others want. This development should help her as she graduates from college and starts making decisions in her adult life. Starting out on your career can be a difficult transition for anyone, made more so if someone is mostly concerned with what others think and

want her to do. She can now make these decisions with her own best interests in mind even if she is still factoring in what would be best for her family, her boyfriend, and so forth.

Another positive outcome is how the relationship between Olivia and the researcher grew during this project. They were already acquaintances but did not know one another on a deeper level. The researcher interacts with many students in her role as an academic librarian, but she had not gotten to know many very well. Similarly, Olivia knows many professors and student services personnel on campus, but she did not have a strong relationship with many adults outside of her family. Developing this relationship throughout the course of the interviews helped them both gain perspective on one another's point of view.

Olivia is a complex individual, and there are many aspects of her development that could use further attention. If the researcher were to do anything differently in Olivia's case, it would be talking more with her about her transition to a new major. She is thoroughly engaged with early childhood education, but she still associates predominately with students in her old major. It is not clear if her transition to identifying as a teacher rather than with her previous discipline is complete. The researcher might have explored another theory such as Schlossberg's transition theory to help make such a determination. It would also be beneficial to explore one of the psychosocial identity development theories with her, such as Erikson's identity development theory. This is a possibility for the future if Olivia is interested in continuing the process that she has been through with the researcher. In the end, Gilligan's theory was the best fit for her situation, and exploring it together was helpful for both the researcher and Olivia.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

This case can serve as an example to other student affairs practitioners who notice students, in particular young women, struggling to balance obligations between self and others.

The research method, one-on-one interviews, gave the researcher a chance to get to know this student well. In an everyday situation where interviews are not warranted, student affairs professionals would do well to open a dialogue with students. Nothing can replace the support students feel when they are listened to, and no other method can lead to greater understanding of the complex challenges a student faces. While more than a decade has passed since Jones and Watt insisted, “[s]tudent affairs professionals should be concerned with fostering development in students, helping them find their own moral voice and strengthening identified developmental weaknesses” (1999, p. 130), their message only grows in importance with the passage of time. Today’s students are confronted with moral dilemmas, from the Occupy Movement and a tumultuous protest at the University of California Davis, to a sexual abuse scandal at Penn State University, to a hazing death at Florida A&M University (Liddell & Cooper, 2012). Now more than ever, students need guidance to understand the complex predicaments they face.

Understanding Gilligan’s conception of an ethic of care can help guide practitioners’ everyday practices (Canon & Brown, 1985). Ours is a profession built around on the principal of care and of fostering development in all students (Liddell & Cooper, 2012). Sax (2009) suggested that helping foster development in female students is not the role of a single department on campus, but something we ought to all be supporting. From advising to classroom teaching, a concerted effort to understand women’s moral development can help our students and inform our practice. Picard and Guido-DiBrito urged practitioners to “have a better understanding of the female ethos, in order to fulfill their mission of serving the needs of all students” (1993, p. 30). We ought to also consider the impact of policies and procedures on students’ development (Jones & Watt, 1999; Picard & Guido-DiBrito 1993). Future research should examine this area of practice.

More research on applying Gilligan's theory to guide student affairs professionals' work is needed. Today's students need the help of student affairs practitioners in making sense of such a harried existence with demands pulling them every which way. If anyone on campus is poised to come to students' aid, we are.

References

- Brougham, R. R., Zail, C. M., Mendoza, C. M., & Miller, J. R. (2009). Stress, sex differences, and coping strategies among college students. *Current Psychology, 28*(2), 85-97.
doi:10.1007/s12144-009-9047-0
- Canon, H. J., & Brown, R. D. (1985). How to think about professional ethics. *New Directions in Student Services, 1985*(30), 81-87. doi:10.1002/ss.37119853008
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gosselin, C. (2003). In a Different Voice and the transformative experience: A Deweyan perspective. *Educational Theory, 53*(1), 91-105. doi:10.1111/j.1741-5446.2003.00091.x
- Hanson, T. L., Drumheller, K., Mallard, J., McKee, C., & Schlegel, P. (2011). Cell phones, text messaging, and Facebook: Competing time demands of today's college students. *College Teaching, 59*(1), 23-30. doi: 10.1080/87567555.2010.489078
- Jones, C. E., & Watt, J. D. (1999). Psychosocial development and moral orientation among traditional-aged college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(2), 125-131.
- Liddell, D. L., & Cooper, D. L. (2012). Moral development in higher education. *New Directions for Student Services, 139*, 5-15. doi:10.1002/ss.20018
- Picard, A. P., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1993). Listening to the voice of care: Women's moral development and implications for student affairs practitioners. *Iowa Student Personnel Association Journal, 8*(1), 21-34.
- Sax, L. J. (2009). Gender matters: The variable effect of gender on the student experience. *About Campus, 14*(2), 2-10. doi: 10.1002/abc.283