Received: 31 May 2023 | Revised: 13 October 2023 | Accepted: 16 October 2023

DOI: 10.1111/spc3.12915

REVIEW ARTICLE

WILEY

Moral psychology and civil rights protesters: Exemplary, different, and mad

Daniel W. Noon

School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

Correspondence
Daniel W. Noon, University of Kent, Keynes College, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NP, UK.
Email: d.noon@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

Martin Luther King Jr. appealed for social scientists to reflect on the normative questions of what morality ought to be and what the aims of science ought to be. To avoid rendering social science irrelevant, 1960s moral psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg agreed with King when he argued that morality should be based on a philosophical ideal rather than an adjustment to society. Kohlberg's definition of morality meant that Black protesters could be exemplary. By the 1970s, Kohlberg worked in schools to promote children's knowledge of racial justice and achieve institutional reform, such as integration and affirmative action. Subsequent work challenged Kohlberg's definition of morality and instead claimed morality meant adhering to group-defined standards. Rather than being seen as more moral and mature, Black civil rights activists came to be seen as possessing a different morality of care that refused to assimilate to White American moral norms. Later, Haidt claimed that a "great synthesis" of empirical work led to a definition of morality as adherence to cultural standards. This definition of morality led Haidt to describe the morality of Black protesters as deficient and mentally ill. The latter approach assumed science aims to achieve racial harmony and spoke against affirmative action. The change in the description of civil rights protesters as exceptional, different, and then mad

results in a change in normative assumptions rather than a new synthesis of empirical findings.

KEYWORDS
black lives matter, moral psychology, mental health

1 | INTRODUCTION

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a ten-year-old social movement where protesters have condemned the pervasive injustices experienced by Black people in their society. Like the civil rights movement in the 1960s, BLM has encouraged social scientists to reflect on the relevance of our work in combatting race discrimination (Allen & Leach, 2018; Giner-Sorolla, 2020). Normative assumptions are inevitably made in a science of morality. One of these is how morality ought to be defined. A second is what ought to be the aims of a moral science. The current paper reveals the stakes of these assumptions for those campaigning for racial justice. Here I explain how the 1960s civil rights movement shaped the norms used in Lawrence Kohlberg's (1963) theory of moral development and compare this to two subsequent reactions; care approaches to morality (Gilligan, 1977; Ward, 1995) and the social intuitionist approach (Haidt, 2001).

Previous histories of moral psychology describe changes in the field to have resulted in a "new synthesis" of empirical work (Haidt, 2008). In this history I aim to show how change in the psychological description of Black protesters and Dr Martin Luther King Jr. coincided with a change in normative ethical assumptions. I first describe why Kohlberg made the aims of moral psychology relevant to the fight for racial equality, how Kohlberg creatively defined morality in a way that characterised civil rights actors' as exceptionally moral, and how non-violent civil disobedience impacted Kohlberg's understanding of the means to moral progress. In the last two sections, I explain how two influential criticisms of Kohlberg's that involved very different understanding of Black protesters. By the 1980s an early challenge to Kohlberg emerged from the Black power movement. This challenge saw Black protesters, including King, as morally different from the White majority (Ward, 1995). Finally, a later challenge in the 2000s came from the social intuitionist approach (Haidt, 2001) which characterised King as representing typical American values but describes Black protesters as mentally ill.

2 | CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE RELEVANCE OF MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

What ought to be the aim of a science of morality? This normative question concerns the relevance of field in addressing problems in society. During the 1950s civil rights were being increasingly recognised as an important social problem (Wasow, 2020). Also during this time, psychologists and activists were thinking about the use of social science and whether the aims of science ought to be alleviating these problems. Here I describe how Kohlberg (1971), when he was developing the field of moral psychology, assumed that a science ought to promote racial justice and criticised those who called for neutrality.

The use of science to change society has been contentious. As Kohlberg began writing his thesis in the 1950s, Kenneth B. Clark and other psychologists worked with civil rights organisations to submit scientific evidence to the Supreme Court in the case of Brown versus the Board of Education (Jackson, 2005). This collaboration was pivotal in establishing racial segregation as unconstitutional and is widely celebrated today and a source of pride for psychology. Therefore, it can be surprising to learn how those who intervened in were accused of being politically motivated (Jackson, 2005).

The tension among social scientists about whether their aim is to remain neutral or to act as social engineers rose in the 1960s. The domination of those advocating for neutrality contributed to what Elms (1975) recalled as an

uncomfortable experience felt by an increasing number of academics who saw their field as irrelevant. This period is now recognised as a crisis in social psychology (Giner-Sorolla, 2020). Most social psychologists saw humanistic concerns about addressing social issues as contrary to the pursuit of detached knowledge (Ring, 1967). Uncomfortable with this detachment from society, Harvard psychology students demanded their courses be relevant to social problems (Gilligan, 1998).

The lack of support was noticed. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. (1968, p. 180) criticised social scientists when he addressed the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. He recognised that "It was the Negro who educated the nation by dramatizing the evils through nonviolent protest. The social scientist played little or no role in disclosing the truth." King asked for social scientists to improve people's knowledge. He said, "Negroes want the social scientist to address the white community and 'tell it like it is.' White America has an appalling lack of knowledge concerning the reality of negro life" (p 180).

Like King and a substantial minority of social scientists at the time, Kohlberg (1971) believed humanitarian aims were consistent with an ambition to uncover the truth. He recognised an applied science aiming to promote people's sense of justice faced two hurdles. Firstly, Hume's law asserts that using scientific description to make claims about what ought to be is fallacious (Hume, 1739/1969). This intractable law relegated social scientists to merely accumulating facts. Kohlberg charged that asserting Hume's law was "…the desperate desire of behaviorists, logical positivists, and analytic philosophers to set up 'independent disciplines' (or 'games') of psychology and philosophy" (1971, p. 154). The stakes of this separation between is and ought were known. Normative claims were "…necessary for any ethically justifiable educational or other practical application of his research findings." (1971, p. 153). He argued that those claiming to be scientifically neutral were wrong because "The psychologist cannot study cognition or morality in an epistemologically neutral way…" (1971 p. 154). Kohlberg believed that any scientific study of morality presupposed a definition of what it ought to be.

A second barrier to the desire for applied moral science was political. Like King, Kohlberg believed that justice needed to be taught to children. Kohlberg (1970) feared that an interpretation of the first amendment to the United States constitution, specifically the establishment clause that separates Church and state, could ban public schools from delivering all forms of value education on the grounds it constituted religious indoctrination. It was not sufficient for Kohlberg (1970) to claim that teaching justice was a preferred goal. Instead, he went much further to argue that moral education was constitutionally required. Kohlberg relied on the success of Clark and other interventionist social scientists in his reasoning.

> Desegregation of the schools is not only a passive recognition of the equal rights of citizens to access to a public facility… but an active recognition of the responsibility of the school for 'moral education,' i.e., for transmission of the values of justice… (p. 68).

Years later, Kohlberg (1976) argued that the only adequate justification for the US Supreme Court's decision on segregation was because there is a right to human dignity. Kohlberg thus repeatedly campaigned for an interpretation of the US constitution that would require scientific intervention in promoting civil rights.

Therefore, American moral psychology emerged when social scientists were torn between intervening in the pervasive problem of racism in American life. While some called for scientists to remain neutral, Kohlberg joined activists and students claiming that there was no such thing as neutrality and warned that it would render social science irrelevant. Inspired by the legal victory of desegregation, Kohlberg advanced a science of morality to promote King's radical vision of all races being treated with equal dignity and this could be achieved through moral education.

3 | THE CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT OF POST-CONVENTIONAL MORALITY

A second normative ethical assumption in the study of morality is how morality should be defined. In this part, I describe a contest in the US during the 1960s between two kinds of moral norms and reveal each norm's implications

for civil rights activists. I explain how an initial dominant view in the 1960s, which defined morality as conformity, was resisted by civil rights activists (King, 1968). I show how the civil rights conflicts extensively influenced the norms used in Kohlberg's (1971) cognitive developmental theory, which creatively characterised protesters as moral exemplars.

Drawing upon the history of statistics, Hegarty (2013) identified two kinds of norms. A Queteletian norm assumes the ideal is the statistical average or majority view. This type of norm is socially conservative and views deviants as a source of instability. Whereas, a Galtonian norm assumes the ideal is located at one end of a distribution. The few who exemplify the norm become a source of aspiration for the majority. Thus, the type of norm used has implication for whether minorities are characterised as deviant or exceptional. When King (1968) addressed the APA, he recognised a Queteletian moral norm was the dominant assumption and understood the stakes for those who were different. He said, "You are saying that all must seek the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities." (p. 185).

King was right as the Queteletian moral norm can be seen explicitly in the psychologist Leonard Berkowitz (1964, p. 44) definition of moral values as "evaluations of action believed by members of a given society to be 'right'." This relativist definition of morality meant that conforming to society's expectations was good conduct, and deviance was not". Additionally, non-compliance was deemed a subjectively unpleasant experience for the individual. Allen and Leach (2018) noted that a pervasive assumption in psychology is that humans are hedonistically motivated. Accordingly, healthy individuals are believed to cope with harsh injustice by rationalising the status quo. Together, these assumptions enabled psychiatrists to define a pathology characterised by a rejection of White values. This "protest psychosis" was considered a form of schizophrenia disproportionately imposed on Black activists (Bromberg & Simon, 1968; Metzl, 2009).

Yet, those fighting for racial justice had an alternative interpretation of their difference. They admitted their deviation from the majority but, using a Galtonian moral norm, challenged the value of this. King (1968) eloquently put this point as he addressed the APA, "There are some things concerning which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will" (p. 185). Instead, the difference between civil rights protesters was due to the fact "Negroes have grown wiser and more mature" (p. 184). Other Black people also decoupled the good from the adjusted to undermine the dominant Queteletian moral norms. Elms (1975, p. 971) recalled how social psychologists reflected on their assumptions "…when black students at one's own university began to insist that they often held different and perhaps superior values to Whites…." Despite the resistance, the Queteletian moral norm was widespread. Allen and Leach (2018, p. 319) explain that for psychologists in the 1960s "…it is easier to imagine King's creative maladjustment being interpreted as the cognitive distortions, negative thinking and ruminative depression Cognitive-Behavioural and other therapies are designed to undo."

The relationship between deviance, morality, and mental health was also addressed by Kohlberg (1966, p. 2). He also challenged the dominant Queteletian norm and hedonistic assumptions used by psychiatrists by asserting such claims were value-laden and biased. He wrote, "…psychologists have become acutely aware of the inadequacies of dealing with moral issues under cover of mental-health of group-adjustment labels… these mental-health labels are not really scientific and value-neutral terms." However, Kohlberg's early work did not directly study problems relating to civil rights and discrimination. For example, his methods included presenting a sample of all White boys with a series of moral dilemmas that did not refer to slavery or racist discrimination. His theory of moral maturity occurring in stages, with the sixth stage representing the terminal point of development, also ignored civil rights in his stage definitions. Yet the civil rights conflicts impacted Kohlberg. He admired King. Kohlberg's friends recall how he frequently brought King up in conversation (Noam & Wolf, 1991). He included Kings writing as course reading materials (Walker & Snarey, 2004). He wrote a memorial lecture when King was assassinated (Kohlberg, 1970). By the end of the 1960s, Kohlberg started to apply his theory in various ways to civil rights issues which helped change how those engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience were conceived.

Kohlberg eventually extended his theory of moral reasoning to civil rights issues. Using his structuralist belief that cognition is organised, Kohlberg claimed that an individual would be consistent in their reasoning across moral issues. For example, he explained that "An individual at Stage 6 on a situation of stealing a drug for a wife is likely to

be at Stage 6 on a story involving civil disobedience" (Kohlberg, 1971, p 169–171). Once the relevance of his work to the civil rights conflict was clear, Kohlberg provided participants with real dilemmas from America's past. For example, he described how participants morally evaluated those breaking the law to help enslaved people escape before the Civil War.

The idea of an invariant developmental sequence was integral to Kohlberg's creativity in altering the moral norm. His cognitive-developmental theory proposed that all individuals, irrespective of group membership or cultural background, progress through the same developmental sequence. His longitudinal studies demonstrated that most children went from pre-conventional morality to a conventional understanding. Only a minority went further to develop a system-changing post-conventional morality. However, Kohlberg recognised that being more mature did not necessarily mean a person's judgements were morally more adequate. Instead, he argued that the post-conventional individuals were more moral because they conformed to the ideal standards identified by formalist philosophers, such as Kant and Rawls. The criteria used to evaluate an individual's judgement as moral was independent of the majority's beliefs. Instead, a judgement was considered more moral if it was impartial and universal. Kohlberg claimed that the judgements of post-conventional minority were more morally adequate than the conventional majority.

Kohlberg's normative creativity had dramatic implications. Those once valorised for aligning with the Queteletian norm were now regarded as merely conventional. Kohlberg framework provided a Galtonian norm where the "maladjusted" pathologized for participating in nonviolent protests were, as King described, more mature and moral. The connection between racial justice activists and Kohlberg's concept of post-conventional morality can be seen in three ways. First, Kohlberg repeatedly provided King as an example of his final stage. Second, the definition of the final stage became defined by its ability to justify civil disobedience. He explained, "…in situations of civil disobedience for which justice, but no other moral principle, provides a rationale that can cope with the Stage-5 contractual argument that civil disobedience is always wrong" (p. 221). Third, studies conducted on activists substantiated the fact their judgements were post-conventional (Haan et al., 1968). Therefore, by providing moral exemplars, stage definitions, and conducting studies on protesters, Kohlberg creatively transformed the view of Black protesters as pathological and maladjusted to mature and extraordinary.

In Kohlberg's view, being a morally mature Black civil rights activist did not equate to being accepted by the public – quite the opposite. The conventional majority were found to be more conservative and more prejudiced towards Black people (Fishkin et al., 1973). However, antipathy alone could not explain how people morally justified discrimination against Black people. Kohlberg (1971) highlighted that "A stage 3 Southern conservative racist may 'stretch' what is 'nice' or 'loving' to absorb a great deal of racist behavior…" (p. 177). Yet the criticism of civil rights protesters did not have the same veneer of benevolence. A majority disapproved of civil rights protesters. Kohlberg explained the unbridled scorn directed at civil rights activists:

> Martin Luther King joins a long list of people who had the arrogance not only to teach justice but to live it in such a way that other people felt uncomfortable about their own goodness, their own justice (Kohlberg, 1970, p. 66)

The greater adequacy of civil rights morality exposed a moral deficit in the majority. The real reason the people resented protesters, such as King, was because activists were more developed.

4 | MORAL GROWTH AND VALUE CONFLICT: NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE

A project to promote radical equalitarianism would require a mechanism that would lead to innovation and improve current societal practices. Throughout the 1960s, activists deliberately and openly broke discriminatory laws, and this tactic inevitability clashed with the authorities. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, King (1963) explained, "there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth." He expressed disappointment over those who merely wanted harmony.

> …the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.

Tension could not be ignored and thus was the means to bring about a peaceful and just society. Yet, King was resolute that it was nonviolent conflict that led to development.

Cognitive-developmentalists sought to hasten children's moral development so that they would have a better understanding of justice. Again, conflict was the explanation for personal growth. Kohlberg (1971) explained how individuals of every stage, bar the final, would likely experience a value conflict. Disequilibrium would cause an unpleasant inner tension that an individual becomes motivated to reconcile. Kohlberg believed that an individual eventually resolves the conflict by reorganising their moral beliefs to form a new stage that can resolve more moral problems. Haan et al. (1968, p. 200–201) explained, "Late adolescents who are open to experience are more likely to change than those who protect themselves from disharmonies." Therefore, moral conflicts matured a sense of justice while harmony arrested it. The idea that lower stages are more likely to experience an unpleasant disequilibrium meant that an individual could not psychologically be at peace without a fully developed sense of justice.

The theory became embedded into a 1970s moral education program that gave students moral problems to discuss. These scenarios included value conflicts. For instance, Blatt and Kohlberg (1975, p. 135) provided "white middle-class" and "black lower-class" children vignettes which described a tension between "obedience to discriminatory laws in the South at the present and during the slavery period." The scenario thus contained a conflict between wanting to obey the law and justice. The researchers assessed their moral maturity scores before and after the intervention. They observed that those who received the intervention accelerated quicker than those in a control group that did not have these classes. Thus, Kohlberg achieved empirical confirmation that conflict promoted moral development.

Yet, Kohlberg became critical of his approach because presenting these scenarios for individuals to mull over did not necessarily help them reconcile the conflicts they encountered in their institutions. Therefore, he and colleagues started a new program in racially integrated schools. In this just community program, students openly discussed current institutional policies of the school, including admission procedures. Power et al. (1989) described "one of the most intense and explosive" student meetings, where Black students called for affirmative action to treat Black applicants over White applicants preferentially.

> …Kohlberg took the Rawlsian position that being on the waiting list did not give white students an antecedent right to be admitted to school. Fairness demanded that the point of view of both black and white students be considered and that a decision be made that would favor the least advantaged. (p. 165–166)

They reported that an overwhelming majority voted for the proposal, establishing a racial integration norm. However, some White students opposed the proposal, and other schools rejected the proposal for the paternalistic concern that "…a small minority of blacks would feel uncomfortable in such 'white environments'" (p. 171). The authors describe that after the votes passed, some White students resented Black students; however, they affirmed that the aim "…was not to bring black and white students into a more harmonious relationship but to acknowledge the interests of the subgroup of black students" (p. 170). The just community approach did not seek a negative peace but on having open conflict to promote a positive peace.

5 | THE CHALLENGE OF THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

Kohlberg's assumption to promote racial equality and formalist conception of justice was challenge in the 1980s and 1990s (Ward, 1995). Here I describe how the early challenge developed from the Black Power Movement in the 1960s, which rejected integrationist aims and non-violent means of the civil rights movement. Influenced by this critique, psychologists began to make different normative ethical assumptions. Morality meant adhering to

group-typical ethics, such as a Black ethic of care (Ward, 1995). I explain how this assumption challenged Kohlberg's proposition that Black activists were more moral and replaced it with a view that they differed from the White majority.

The Black Power Movement staunchly opposed the civil rights movement for seeking racial integration. Stokely Carmichael (1966), a prominent Black Power organiser, insisted that "…we were never fighting for the right to integrate, we were fighting against white supremacy." Black Power activists were concerned for Black people's welfare and established mutual aid services (Ward, 1995). Carmichael (1966) was also critical of the civil rights movement's use of nonviolence. However, King (1966), in his statement to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said the "…connotations of violence and separatism attached to the black power slogan must be resolutely opposed…" Kohlberg (1970, p.68) agreed, explaining that "A Black power politician using unjust means in the name of civil rights is clearly not in the enterprise of teaching justice…"

Drawing upon Black affirmative historians and the feminism of Carol Gilligan (1977), a new approach emerged which aimed to describe a Black-typical morality that was separate but equal to that of justice. Ward (1995) explained how the specific history of oppression endured by Black Americans made it necessary for Black people to build mutual aid and support communities. Rather than discrimination damaging a disadvantaged group's development, oppression helped Black Americans develop a concern to care for each other. The ethic of care not only described the morality of most Black people but it was also introduced as an ideal. As Ward (1995, p. 184) explained, "care reasoning is an important and desirable moral orientation, one that we need to nurture and sustain…" Furthermore, Ward believed those without a sense of care were a source of violence and a threat to the Black community.

This Black-specific Queteletian norm had implications for how activists were understood. Rather than possessing a more adequate sense of justice, protesters were believed to represent a Black-typical care norm. Ward (1995, p. 176) explained that "…traditional codes of caring in African American communities have tended to encompass a political agenda of social activism." Walker and Snarey (2004) edited a book studying the work of Kohlberg with a focus on African-American moral development. Drawing upon the work of Ward, they challenged Kohlberg's interpretation of King. They wrote.

> …[King] demonstrated his increasing appreciation of some aspects of the militant Black power movement. Kohlberg was aware of this… Perhaps Kohlberg never quite knew how to make sense of or acknowledge this more oppositional King, whose apparently newly matured voice legitimized the need for Black people to sacrifice themselves less and to care for themselves more (p. 20).

Through this interpretation, King's virtue was that he possessed a distinct ethic of care that was typical of the broader Black community. His radicalism was that he resisted assimilation into the norms of White society.

6 | A CHALLENGE FROM SOCIAL INTUITIONISM

Another challenge of Kohlberg's normative assumptions was presented in Jonathan Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model. Here I show how this challenge revived earlier Queteletian moral norms and show how this assumption promoted a view of civil rights activists, with the exception of King, as mentally ill.

The reassertion of the earlier Queteletian moral norm can be seen in how Haidt defined moral judgements and describe their function. He assumed moral judgements were "evaluations (good vs. bad) of the actions or character of a person that are made with respect to a set of virtues held to be obligatory by a culture or subculture." Therefore, individuals are morally appraised according to their conformity to majoritarian norms. The criteria provide no way for individuals to morally condemn the banal commonplace acts of discrimination of their culture since the judgements must be about other people. Furthermore, Haidt believed these interpersonal judgements served a function, whereby "People who fail to embody these virtues or whose actions betray a lack of respect for them are subjected to

criticism, ostracism, or some other punishment" (ibid). Here deviance from the cultural standards became to represent a personal deficit. Furthermore, while Kohlberg believed that the majority's animosity towards the morally different revealed their insecurity, Haidt (2003, p. 858) explains that emotionally charged judgement serves a stabilising function. He explained, "Contempt, anger, and disgust therefore act as guardians of the moral order."

Haidt's (2001) definition had clear implications for those individuals who had historically rebelled against the culturally proscribed criteria, such as civil rights activists. King has grown in popularity since his assassination, is celebrated with a national holiday, and is a hard person to express anger towards for rebelling against the moral order. To preserve the legacy of King as a moral exemplar, Haidt provided a different interpretation of his virtues compared to others.

> Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech was remarkably effective in this task, using metaphors and visual images more than propositional logic to get White Americans to see and thus feel that racial segregation was unjust and un-American (Haidt, 2001, p. 823)

Unlike Kohlberg who believed King to be creatively maladjusted to and resented by American society, Haidt described King as assimilated within a colourblind conception of Americans typically endorsing values of patriotism and religion. Therefore, a national Queteletian norm was identified and persisted as Lukianoff and Haidt (2019, p. 60) later reiterated that, "Part of King's genius was that he appealed to the shared morals and identities of Americans…"

While considerable efforts were made to preserve King's inclusion in the definition of moral, others striving for racial justice were not as adjusted. Initially, Haidt (2008, p.103) claimed the Galtonian ideal of justice advocated by Kohlberg constituted a "rationalist delusion." While Kohlberg believed mental health labels were value laden, this new Queteletian ideal sees value in describing the health of protesters. For instance, Lukianoff and Haidt (2019, p. 11) noted that by 2015 "A powerful movement for racial justice had been launched and was gaining strength with each horrific cell phone video of police killing unarmed black men." Lukianoff and Haidt (2019, p. 9) explain that "…even when students are reacting to real problems, they are more likely than the previous generations to engage in thought patterns that make those problems seem more threatening…." The authors continue and claim protesters are engaged in "a consensual hallucination." The reassertion of the Queteletian norm encouraged a particular view of difference as pathological. The protest psychosis was rediscovered.

Finally, the social intuitionist had different normative aims for moral psychology. While Kohlberg believed the purpose of scientific knowledge was to achieve justice through conflict Haidt (2011) believed racial conflict was the social problem science can address. He illustrated the problem of conflict by explaining the 1992 Rodney King incident, where police officers, despite being caught on film beating up the unarmed a Black man, were acquitted. This injustice ignited over 6 days of peaceful and violent protests. While Kohlberg devised interventions encouraging constructive tension, Haidt explained how he hoped moral psychology "will help us get along" (p. XIII). Rather than seek justice, Haidt clarified that his moral psychology aimed to reduce tensions and promote cohesion.

With the normative goal to achieve a harmonious social order, Haidt identified the sources of enduring conflict in society. Haidt (2006) identified how the 1978 Supreme Court ruling (U.C Regents V. Bakke) encouraged universities to celebrate diversity and he "…wondered whether celebrating diversity might also encourage division." Additionally, Haidt (2011) explained how the contemporary political incivility "was the natural result of the political realignment that took place after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964" (p. 362). For Kohlberg, conflict was a means to achieve justice. For Haidt, harmony was the means to achieve order. Kohlberg viewed the civil rights supreme court rulings as upholding the equal opportunity for Black people. Haidt viewed the civil rights rulings as being an enduring barrier to harmony.

Haidt's aversion to conflict can also be seen in advice that he and psychologists Lee Jussim gave to university leaders as they responded to campaigners demanding affirmative action. Kohlberg believed that decisions should be made to favour the view of the disadvantaged even if it did not achieve harmony. Instead, Haidt and Jussim (2016) advise against this because "If a school increases its affirmative-action efforts in ways that expand these gaps, it is likely to end up with more self-segregation and fewer cross-race friendships…"

7 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Kohlberg was right that moral psychology inevitably involves normative ethical assumptions about what morality ought to be and what the science ought to achieve. In particular, in different phases of US moral psychology different assumptions correspond to distinct descriptions of civil rights protesters. Kohlberg believed morality should be defined as justice and ought to identify the means to achieve it. This approach characterised activists, like King, as more moral than the public. Later reactions to Kohlberg rejected his definition and assumed morality ought to be defined as a Black-specific care norm (Ward, 1995) or nationally defined norms (Haidt, 2001). While the former saw activists as possessing a difference of care, the latter began to describe protesters, except King, as maladjusted. The later approach saw the aims of science as a means to achieve racial harmony. The change in assumptions over time cannot result from a new synthesis of a value-neutral descriptive moral psychology because, as Hume's Law states, no accumulation of empirical facts can tell us what morality ought to be.

Currently, Haidt's social intuitionism is the dominant approach in moral psychology. It often describes Kohlberg's approach as ethnocentric for its philosophical grounding in the liberal principles dominant in late 1960s psychology. But as this discussion of the positioning of the history of the American civil rights movement and its leaders by moral psychologists shows, social intuitionism is grounded in values and a partial understanding of history, as all moral psychologies ultimately must be. Which moral psychology will we chose? One that describes civil rights activists as exemplary, different or mad?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Sebastian E. Bartos for providing helpful discussions on the topic and Peter Hegarty for invaluable comments on early drafts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The Author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

ORCID

Daniel W. Noon https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2038-5521

REFERENCES

Allen, A. M., & Leach, C. W. (2018). The psychology of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "creative maladjustment" at societal injustice and oppression. *Journal of Social Issues*, *74*(2), 317–336. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12271

Berkowitz, L. (1964). *The development of motives and values in the child*. Basic Books.

Blatt, M. M., & Kohlberg, L. (1975). The effects of classroom moral discussion upon children's level of moral judgment. *Journal of Moral Education*, *4*(2), 129–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724750040207

Bromberg, W., & Simon, F. (1968). The "protest psychosis": A special type of reactive psychosis. *Archive of General Psychiatry*, *19*(2), 155–160. https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.1968.01740080027005

Carmichael, S. (1966). *Speech at university of California*. American Radio Works. Retrieved from https://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/scarmichael.html

Elms, A. C. (1975). The crisis of confidence in social psychology. *American Psychologist*, *30*(10), 967–976. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.30.10.967

Fishkin, J., Keniston, K., & McKinnon, C. (1973). Moral reasoning and political ideology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *27*(1), 109–119. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034434

Gilligan, C. (1977). In a different voice: Woman's conceptions of self and morality. *Harvard Educational Review*, *47*(4), 481–517. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.47.4.g6167429416hg5l0

Gilligan, C. (1998). Remembering larry. *Journal of Moral Education*, *27*(2), 125–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724980270201

Giner-Sorolla, R. (2020). On racism and justice for Black lives. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *91*, 104024. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104024

Haan, N., Smith, M. B., & Block, J. (1968). Moral reasoning of young adults: Political-social behavior, family background, and personality correlates. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *10*(3), 183–201. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0026566

Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, *108*(4), 814–834. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.108.4.814

Haidt, J. (2003). The moral emotions. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 852–870). Oxford University Press.

Haidt, J. (2006). *The happiness hypothesis: Putting ancient wisdom to the test of modern science*. Penguin books.

Haidt, J. (2008). The new synthesis in moral psychology. *Science*, *316*(5827), 998–1002. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1137651

Haidt, J. (2011). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. Penguin Books.

Haidt, J., & Jussim, L. (2016). Hard truths about race on campus. *Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/hard-truths-about-race-on-campus-1462544543

Hegarty, P. (2013). *Gentleman's disagreement Alfred Kinsey, Lewis Terman and the sexual politics of smart men*. The University of Chicago Press.

Hume, D. (1969). *A treatise of human nature*. Penguin. (Original work published 1739–1740).

Jackson, J. P. (2005). *Social scientists for social justice: Making the case against segregation*. New York University Press.

King, M. L., Jr. (1968). The role of the behavioral scientist in the civil rights movement. *American Psychologist*, *23*(3), 180–186. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0025715

King, M. L. (1963). *Letter from Birmingham Jail. The Martin luther king, Jr*. Research and Education Institute. Retrieved from https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/letter-birmingham-jail

King, M. L., Jr. (1966). *Statement on black power*. [Conference session]. Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Retrieved from https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6610_mlk_power-poverty.pdf

Kohlberg, L. (1963). The development of children's orientations toward a moral order I. sequence in the development of moral thought. *Vita Humana*, *6*(1), 11–33. https://doi.org/10.1159/000269667

Kohlberg, L. (1966). Moral education in schools: A developmental view. *The School Review*, *74*(1), 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1086/442759

Kohlberg, L. (1970). From is to ought: A modern statement of the platonic view. In N. F. Sizer & T. R. Sizer (Eds.), *Moral education* (pp. 57–83). https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674424944

Kohlberg, L. (1971). From is to ought: How to commit the naturalistic fallacy and get away with it in the study of moral development. In T. Mischel (Ed.), *Cognitive development and epistemology* (pp. 151–235). Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-498640-4.50011-1

Kohlberg, L. (1976). The quest for justice in 200 years of American history and in contemporary American education. *Contemporary Education*, *48*(1), 5.

Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2019). *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. Penguin Books.

Metzl, J. M. (2009). *The protest psychosis: How schizophrenia became a black disease*. Beacon Press.

Noam, G. G., & Wolf, M. (1991). Lawrence Kohlberg 1927–1987. In W. Kurtines & J. L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Handbook of moral behavioural and development* (Vol. 1, pp. 21–24). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Power, F. C., Higgins, A., & Kohlberg, L. (1989). *Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to moral education*. Columbia University Press.

Ring, K. (1967). Experimental social psychology: Some sober questions about some frivolous values. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *3*(2), 113–123. https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(67)90016-9

Walker, V. S., & Snarey, J. R. (2004). *Race-ing moral formation: African American perspectives on care and justice*. Teachers College Press.

Ward, J. V. (1995). Cultivating a morality of care in African American adolescents: A culture-based model of violence prevention. *Harvard Educational Review*, *65*(2), 175–188. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.65.2.077676x73k129681

Wasow, O. (2020). Agenda seeding: How 1960s black protests moved elites, public opinion and voting. *American Political Science Review*, *114*(3), 638–659. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542000009X

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Daniel W. Noon is currently a lecturer in psychology at the University of Kent. The University of Surrey awarded him a BSc in 2014, a MSc in 2015, and a Ph.D. in 2019. He has lectured previously at the University of Hertfordshire and the University of Sussex. His teaching and research interests include examining relations between moral judgement, emotion, and action at the individual and group-level.

How to cite this article: Noon, D. W. (2024). Moral psychology and civil rights protesters: Exemplary, different, and mad. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, e12915. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12915