

Layers of Significance—

Influencing students' moral default settings

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BY STEVE PAWLUK

Why is it that some students instinctively retaliate, while others always seek to make peace? Why will some students readily cheat, while others avoid doing so even when presented with an easy opportunity?

Background

Lawrence Kohlberg theorized that children all begin at a basic stage of moral reasoning and then progress sequentially through various stages as they mature.¹

Preconventional Level

Stage 1 - Keeping rules, avoiding damage or punishment

Stage 2 - Fairness, equal exchange

Conventional Level

Stage 3 - Relationships, mutual trust, loyalty, respect

Stage 4 - Fulfilling social agreements, contributing to society

Postconventional Level

Stage 5 - Awareness of a variety of belief systems, protecting the welfare of the greatest number of people

Stage 6 - Equal rights to life and dignity for all

Kohlberg believed that children progress to the next higher stage by being exposed, over a period of time, to the thinking of that stage. His research showed that, while people cannot skip stages or even understand the reasoning of a stage that is too advanced, interchange between people of various levels of moral development can result in growth for those at lower levels. However, to say that mere exposure to a more principled level of thinking will positively affect moral development counters the evidence of history.

Two other individuals, William Glasser² and Viktor Frankl,³ have also made important contributions to our understanding of human interaction. Based on his observations of people's responses to torture and imprisonment in German death camps, Frankl found that those who saw their existence as meaningful or who had a sense of purpose tended to survive and occasionally even thrive under the most inhumane conditions. Those who failed to find meaning in their lives soon died.

Using his work in schools and as a counselor, Glasser identified five basic

needs of human beings, regardless of their background, culture, or other differences: safety, belonging and love, power, freedom, and fun.

Some Observations

We can combine the above needs into one overriding need—that of personal power. As early in human history as the Genesis story, the role of humanity is described as having “dominion.” Almost every literary work portrays some kind of human power struggle. Since the word *power* carries some negative connotations, we might want to use the term *significance* instead. Human experience, as

well as research, indicate that all of us need to feel a sense of personal significance and that others care about us.

Most teachers have noticed that students do not always make choices rationally. Moral reasoning is not the same as moral action. For example, when hit by another student, a child doesn't pause to make a list of "pluses" and "minuses," but reacts according to his or her default setting and either hits or doesn't hit back.

One possible explanation for this behavioral default setting is that a student who develops a sense of personal significance might be better insulated from making poor choices than one who needs to

compensate for a lack of self-worth.

Our Project

Based on this information and these observations, Tonya Wessman, my graduate assistant, and I devised a preliminary model and some moral or ethical dilemmas to test the model. Our scenarios dealt with cheating, doing chores, vandalism, finding lost wallets, and such. We selected a random sample of 146 students from both public and Seventh-day Adventist schools in the Walla Walla Valley in Washington state. Tonya spent much of a year interviewing each student personally, using a semi-clinical interview format.

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Our Tentative Findings

We found that our preliminary working model correctly identified the reasons for *some* students' choices, but not others'.

The factors we identified did not appear to be sequential stages, but rather cumulative layers. For each person, various layers of motivation came into play at different times and under different circumstances. So we revised our model. (See Figure 1.)

Punishment avoidance seemed the most basic motivation for decision making. Then, fairly early in life, "what is being done for me" added another layer. Children began to behave in ways that would cause people to do nice things for them. Parents use this

layer when they bargain with their children, and teachers continue its use in the classroom. Whether it is praise or candy bars, students—especially younger ones—are motivated by positive responses.

Sometime during the preschool and primary grades, children increasingly derive their sense of significance from being able to do new things for themselves, i.e., dressing and feeding themselves, playing a

game successfully, learning various psychomotor skills, being able to play a musical instrument, and so on. Accomplishments and reasonable challenges became motivators and sources of personal significance, without displacing the earlier two layers.

What I can learn (yes, we've temporarily skipped a layer) fits into this pattern, except that it focuses on the child's cognitive abilities. Academic abilities such as writing one's name, reading a book, spelling correctly, and being able to compute or do basic science experiments seem to provide yet another layer of personal significance.

Returning to the skipped layer, we thought at first that being nice/fair was a fairly principled layer of mo-

LAYERS OF SIGNIFICANCE

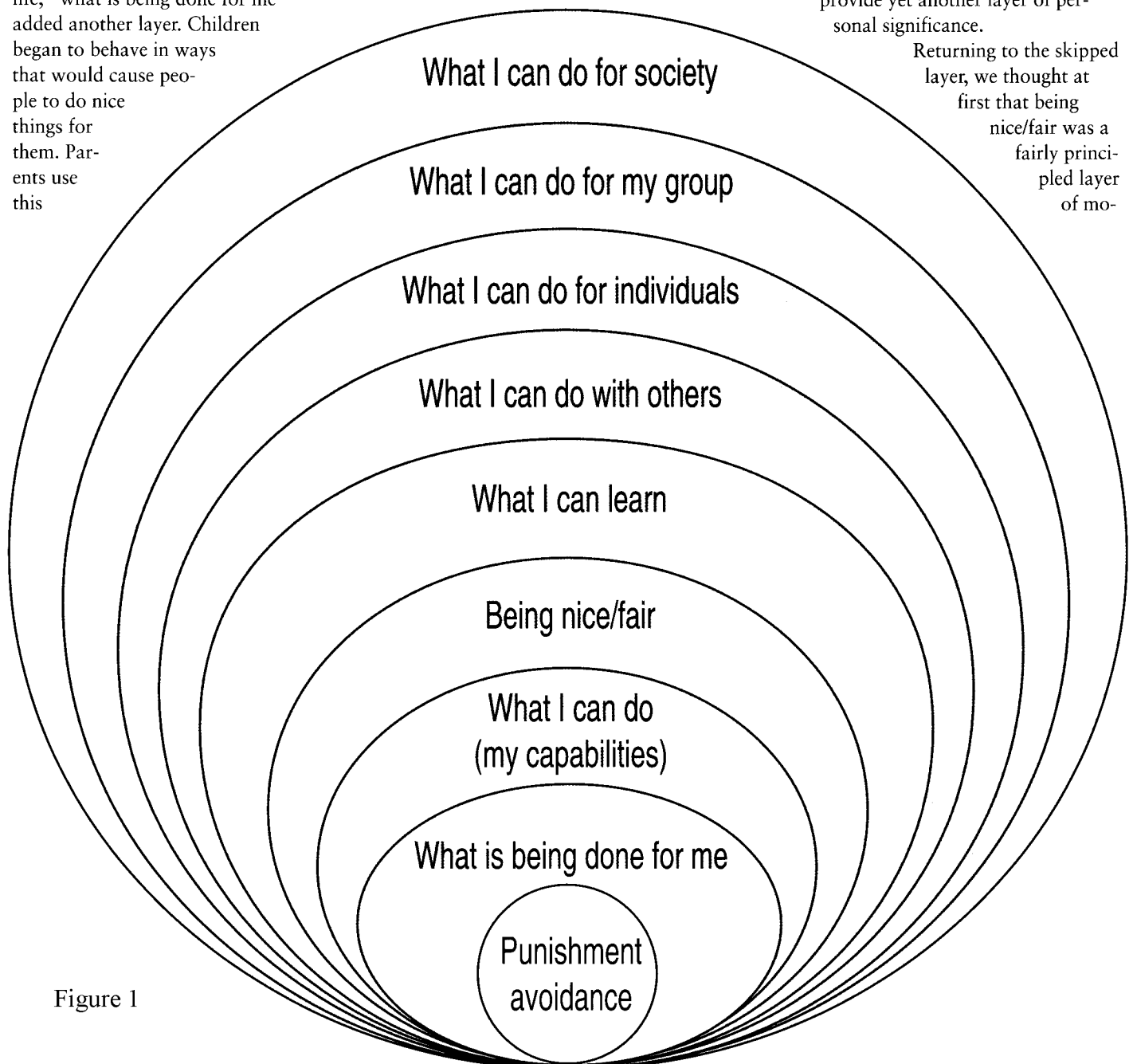


Figure 1

tivation. However, in re-analyzing the interviews, it became clear that in many cases, students were less interested in *being* nice or fair than in wanting to be *seen* as nice and fair! So we classified this as a distinct layer of significance because it occurred so frequently, but placed it between the other two self-focused items.

During the middle school years, a social interaction layer became more important. Peer approval and fitting in motivated choices and provided a source of personal significance. This finding agrees with Donna Habenicht's study, reported in the February/March 1996 issue of this journal.⁴

Later in the middle grades, another motivation gained importance. Young people developed a more *proactive* interest in doing things for others (generally acted upon at the individual level for people close to them). However, they also became aware of strangers in need, local homeless persons, or local disaster victims, and wanted to take action. During these years and into the high school years, contributing to (as opposed to merely belonging to or being entertained by) one's group (whether church, school, or youth group) became an important motivation.

We saw only glimpses of "what I can do for society" among the high school population, and a little in the data collected on college students by Jody Wearner, who was then my graduate assistant. This layer, finding significance through doing something for humanity, is probably the most abstract, since it implies a heightened interest in global politics and events. Involvement in issues such as abortion and ecology (although this could easily fall into the *for my group* category as well), world hunger, and international affairs offers another source of personal significance and a motivation for moral choices and actions.

A Thought Experiment

For a practical illustration of the model, consider yourself. You probably live a circumspect life because (1) you don't want to get caught by the police or by God, (2) you have loving family members who do things for you, as does God, (3) you receive a reasonable paycheck from your employer, (4) you know that you have both academic and non-academic

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capabilities that can be put to good use, (5) most people perceive you as a respectable person, (6) you have various circles of friends at church, work, and in your neighborhood, (7) you spend much of your life helping individuals and groups, and (8) you are in the education business because you want to make a positive impact on society. When confronted with a moral dilemma, you will probably make a positive moral choice, even on the spur of the moment, because you already feel significant and want to protect and reinforce your sources of self-esteem. You are, in a sense, insulated by these layers of significance, so your default setting causes you to make positive choices.

At the other extreme, someone who consistently feels incompetent, cannot read or compute, has few friends (or whose only friends are gang members), and doesn't feel capable of doing anything significant for others will have more reason to temporarily gain a feeling of significance by wielding power over other people or institutions by engaging in anti-social activities, especially if the risk of punishment is low. Since such power is temporary, the antisocial activities must be repeated. However, at the same time, society's disapproval of those activities reinforces the person's belief in his or her *insignificance*.

An Opportunity

Additional research could provide answers to the following questions:

1. If parents and schools took steps to ensure significant academic success at the preschool and early elementary years,

might this help students develop higher levels of personal significance and less need to gain power at someone else's expense?

2. Should we emphasize at the middle school and junior high levels, through policies and instruction, the relationship between the effects of one's actions on others and society's reactions to one's behavior? Perhaps social studies might become less a litany of dates and wars, and more an analysis of human and cultural interactions. Language arts, in addition to communication study, might focus more on why people wrote what they did and how it affects readers. Physical education might emphasize teamwork more than technique, and support more than rules and winning. If teachers in the middle grades emphasized the relational implications of each content area, would students be more motivated to make prosocial choices? This is not, however, a call for a content-free, or even content-lite, curriculum, merely an invitation to examine the focus of our curriculum in these grades.

3. Additionally, might an emphasis on service learning in the junior high and high school curriculum decrease discipline problems and positively affect student choices? Additional study may provide confirmation or corrections for the Layers of Significance model. I would welcome comments, suggestions, and the sharing of action research by other educators. ☺

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