

## The Routes of Moral Development and the Impact of Exposure to the Milgram Obedience Study

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines how business students route themselves through the process of cognitive moral development (CMD) to arrive at a more autonomous level of CMD when there is an impetus to do so. In this study, two groups were given Rest's Defining Issues Test; half the test 1 week and half three weeks later. In between, one group viewed a film of Milgram's obedience study as a stimulus towards a more autonomous level of CMD. The results of the analysis indicate that viewing the Milgram study produced a positive response regarding subjects' level of autonomous CMD. However, the response was not uniform across the subject pool. Females showed a greater consistent significant positive response to viewing Milgram while male subjects varied their response contingent upon their functional area of study. While subjects' functional area of study alone made little difference in the results, when

taken in conjunction with gender, significant differences were found between groups. Thus, researchers should take care when investigating differences between subjects' area of study since gender differences may be present even within an apparently homogenous population-like business students.

**KEY WORDS:** cognitive moral development, DIT, Kohlberg, Milgram, obedience, Rest

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Hear the names Enron and World Com and what comes to mind? "Phoney earnings, inflated revenues...a crisis of investor confidence the likes of which hasn't been seen since...the Great Depression" (Nocera, 2002: 65). How did this happen? CEO's like Enron's Jeff Skilling and World Com's Bernie Ebbers were not lone mavericks whose rogue actions bankrupted their firms. They enlisted teams of managers and accountants to hide their questionable acts (Behr and Witt, 2005; Moberg and Romar, 2005).

Were those who helped craft the accounting slight-of-hand at these firms just following orders? While Vince Kaminski helped Enron hide billions in debt, Cynthia Cooper at WorldCom fought with her bosses to pursue the largest fraud case in U.S. history. How do we get more of the latter type of manager? How do we get managers to take the moral high road despite orders by higher authority to do otherwise? One place to start is to show future managers the pitfalls of obedience to authority. In this study, we showed students in one section of a third year undergraduate business ethics class the classic 45-minute film, *Obedience to Authority* (Milgram, 1965) and compared the change in their level of cognitive moral development to those in another section of the same class who did not see the film.