



# Relational Morality and Sociocultural Vulnerability in Chevy Stevens's Still Missing

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**Citation:** Joshna S John and(2024). Relational Morality and Sociocultural Vulnerability in Chevy Stevens's Still Missing *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(7) 1516-1518  
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i7.11408

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Chevy Stevens' *Still Missing* depicts the kidnapping of Annie O'Sullivan as a personal tragedy that is influenced by gendered indoctrination within relational moral frameworks. This article uses Carol Gilligan's theory of gendered moral development as the analytical lens to investigate how societal norms shape women to prioritize care, relational harmony, and compliance, creating structural vulnerabilities. The broader societal norms that might leave women vulnerable to exploitation, such as interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution, and internalizing social responsibility, are highlighted by Annie's experiences. The study demonstrates how relational morality can increase women's vulnerability and invisibility even when it is socially acceptable by using textual analysis to show how Stevens challenges these sociocultural frameworks. Through the examination of psychological adaptation, survival tactics, empathy, post-traumatic identity, structural vulnerability, and sociocultural forces, the study highlights the intricate relationship between sociocultural influences and gendered moral socialization.

**Keywords:** Feminist theory, missing women, sociocultural vulnerability, gender norms, and relational morality

## Introduction

Chevy Stevens's *Still Missing* frames Annie O'Sullivan's kidnapping within a sociocultural context that highlights relational moral reasoning. Through both her professional and personal interactions, Annie demonstrates the internalization of societal norms that emphasize care, avoidance of conflict, and consideration for others. As a real-estate agent, her role necessitates constant attention to her clients' needs and emotions, reflecting the greater societal expectation that women uphold harmony and relational stability. Annie reflects: "I was just doing my job. Showing a house. Being polite" (Stevens ,6). This aligns with Carol Gilligan's insight: "Women are socialized to maintain relationships and avoid conflict, prioritizing care and connectedness over self-interest" (Gilligan ,34). These behaviours, shaped by social pressures, can unintentionally make people more vulnerable. Annie takes on responsibility even in dangerous situations, showing how deeply relational moral socialization affects her thoughts and feelings. She thinks about how her abductor might react: "If I just stay quiet, maybe he won't hurt me more. Maybe it will pass" (Stevens ,114). Gilligan explains: "Women's moral reasoning is relationally mediated; decisions are evaluated in terms of how they affect others" (Gilligan, 34). Annie's way of thinking shows how relational morality can help manage risk in extreme situations. Even when she is alone and not being judged by others, she still measures her actions against moral standards, which shows the strong influence of internalized expectations.

Stevens portrays Annie's compliance not as passivity, but as a strategic moral choice informed by relational ethics. She reflects: "I said what he wanted, nodded when I should, and hoped my silence would save me" (Stevens ,119).Gilligan asserts: "Ethical decision-making for women often involves balancing the needs of others with self-interest, producing relationally informed strategies" (Gilligan, 34).Annie negotiates the tension

between self-preservation and relational obligation, demonstrating how moral reasoning is intertwined with survival. Her attentiveness and compliance, though constrained by fear, represent an adaptive application of socially instilled ethical principles. The labour involved in these calculations highlights how relational morality, while socially sanctioned, carries a cognitive and emotional cost under extreme duress. Her internal deliberations further reflect the moral and psychological dimensions of relational reasoning: "I can't make him angry. I have to be careful; think of everything I say" (Stevens, 119). This careful balancing act illustrates that survival strategies are morally informed, emphasizing the complex interplay between ethics, gender socialization, and cognitive adaptation in traumatic circumstances.

Extended isolation heightens the pressure of relational morality. Annie recounts, "There was no one to judge me, but I still felt like I had to act as if someone was" (Stevens, 134). Gilligan notes, "Women internalize relational expectations early on, and these continue to shape moral choices even without immediate social feedback" (Gilligan, 34). Annie's ongoing self-monitoring, her anticipation of her captor's responses, and her self-control reveal the profound psychological effects of relational moral socialization. Isolation turns moral standards into a form of mental vigilance, leading to anxiety and heightened awareness that reflect societal expectations on a smaller scale. Normalized fear is another consequence of relational moral socialization. Annie notes: "It was always there, in the background, like something you're supposed to live with" (Stevens, 210). The persistent anxiety illustrates how gendered moral expectations condition women to anticipate danger, mitigate harm, and maintain relational harmony—even under extreme threat. Stevens demonstrates that internalized moral norms function as both a protective and constraining force, shaping psychological adaptation to trauma. Stevens critiques the structural consequences of relational moral socialization. Annie worries: "What if they forget me? What if my name disappears?" (Stevens, 228). Gilligan observes: "Relational moral socialization can suppress assertive self-advocacy, as women are taught to maintain relationships and prioritize others' needs" (Gilligan, 34). Annie's fear of being erased highlights the relationship between societal neglect and internalized moral obligations, showing how relational morality can reinforce vulnerability. As a result of structural patterns of marginalization and invisibility, women who internalize relational obligations may be reluctant to speak up even after experiencing trauma. Annie expects criticism as well: "They'll ask why I went alone. They will claim that I shouldn't have put my trust in him" (Stevens, 205). By showing how relational socialization increases vulnerability and encourages structural victim-blaming, Stevens highlights the weight of moral expectations placed on society.

Annie's relational morality directs moral and compassionate decisions even when she is under duress. She notes: "I was aware of his fear of losing control. I needed to exercise caution for both of us" (Stevens, 127). "Female moral reasoning emphasizes understanding others' feelings and maintaining relationships, even under conflict," Gilligan observes (Gilligan, 34). In times of extreme stress, empathy serves as a practical survival tool that shapes decisions and behaviour. Annie considers the tenacity of her internalized moral framework following her escape: "I realized I had been thinking about him, his feelings, even when he was gone." I was taught to prioritize caring (Stevens, 223). "Relational moral development is persistent; moral habits formed early continue to influence behaviour under extreme stress," Gilligan emphasizes (Gilligan, 34). These observations demonstrate the enduring psychological and sociocultural impact of relational morality and show how moral conditioning persists. As a psychological adaptation, Annie's internalized moral reasoning enables her to foresee danger, negotiate threats, and retain her sense of agency. By converting relational morality from a social expectation into a survival strategy, this cognitive framework strengthens resilience. Her ethical reasoning, focus, and empathy show how gendered moral socialization gives women relational insight, which can be both psychologically demanding and protective. According to Stevens, these skills vary depending on the context: relational moral reasoning promotes cooperation and connection in supportive social settings, but it increases vulnerability in coercive ones. This conflict highlights relational morality's dual character and demonstrates how it shapes both structural vulnerability and psychological resilience.

Carol Gilligan's relational moral development theory is used in *Still Missing* to illustrate how gendered moral socialization affects post-traumatic identity, vulnerability, and judgment. The interplay of anticipatory judgment, internalized responsibility, compliance, empathy, and relational vigilance is revealed by Annie O'Sullivan's experiences, showing that while societal moral expectations are adaptive in everyday situations, they can increase psychological and structural vulnerability in extreme situations. By highlighting the psychological and sociocultural effects of internalized morality, such as fear, invisibility, victim-blaming, and enduring post-traumatic reflection, Stevens challenges cultural norms that place a higher value on interpersonal harmony than individual safety. The story illustrates the intricate relationship between survival, gendered expectations, and moral socialization, demonstrating how relational morality can be both a source of resilience and a vulnerability. Annie O'Sullivan's actions while in captivity show how psychological adaptation and relational moral reasoning interact intricately. She constantly keeps an eye on her kidnapper's emotions, foresees possible dangers, and adjusts her behaviour to keep herself safe even when she is under tremendous pressure. Her internalized moral socialization, which teaches her to put other people's feelings and responses first, is directly responsible for this hypervigilance. "I had to maintain his composure," Annie muses. It was the sole method.

According to Carol Gilligan, the creator of the theory of gendered moral development, "decisions are evaluated in terms of how they affect others; women's moral reasoning is relationally mediated" (Gilligan, 34). Even though relational morality is socially constructed, Annie's internal calculations demonstrate how it can serve

as a survival strategy, emphasizing the mental and emotional work required to deal with dire circumstances. Stevens places Annie's experience in the context of larger sociocultural frameworks that influence the behaviour of women. Women are inadvertently made more vulnerable by their socialization to uphold harmony, make accommodations for others, and avoid conflict. Annie is more vulnerable to coercion because of her societal norm-shaped attentiveness and compliance. "If I had just said something different, maybe it would have been worse," she notes. (Stevens, 121) I had to exercise caution. According to Gilligan, "self-advocacy is socially complex because female moral reasoning frequently prioritizes relational obligations over self-interest" (Gilligan, 34). Annie's story demonstrates how, although societal moralization is useful in daily life, it can worsen structural vulnerability in hazardous situations, connecting personal thought processes to more general cultural influences. The psychological impact of relational morality is increased by Annie's seclusion. "I felt like I had to behave as if someone was judging me, but there was no one to do so," she observes (Stevens, 134). Her constant awareness shows how social norms are deeply ingrained and influence behaviour even when there is no external feedback. "Women internalize relational expectations early, and these continue to influence moral decisions even in the absence of immediate social feedback," Gilligan emphasizes (Gilligan, 34). Stevens demonstrates how isolation exacerbates moral and cognitive motivation through Annie's experience. Annie continues to practice moral reframing, reassessing her previous deeds in light of relational morality, even after she has managed to flee. "Even when he was gone, I realized I had been thinking about him, his feelings," she muses. I had been taught to prioritize caring (Stevens, 223). This shows how moral reasoning is incorporated into post-traumatic processing by survivors. According to Gilligan, "relational moral development is persistent; moral habits formed early continue to influence behaviour under extreme stress" (Gilligan, 34). Annie demonstrates how moral socialization affects both long-term psychological adaptation and survival tactics by using her internalized morality as a guide for introspection, empathy, and decision-making. Annie demonstrates compassion for her kidnapper even while she is in captivity, striking a balance between her own survival and interpersonal concern. "I knew he was afraid of losing control," she observes. I needed to exercise caution for both of us (Stevens, 127). This ethical navigation draws attention to the problem. Following her release, Annie is still navigating the moral fallout from relational socialization while considering her options and accountability. "I couldn't stop thinking about what I could have done differently," she says (Stevens, 228). This illustrates how internalized moral frameworks continue to shape identity, introspection, and interpersonal relationships even after trauma. "Women's ethical reasoning often involves anticipating others' responses, which continues across time and situations," Gilligan emphasizes (Gilligan, 34). Stevens demonstrates how survivors' resilience, judgment, and self-perception are impacted by relational moral socialization long after the immediate threat has passed.

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