

# Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

## Background

Most scientific research on human development has concentrated on the period from birth through early adolescence, owing to both the rapidity and magnitude of the psychological changes observed during those phases and to the fact that they culminate in the optimum mental functioning of early adulthood. A primary motivation of many investigators in the field has been to determine how the culminating mental abilities of adulthood were reached during the preceding phases. This means that most information will concentrate, therefore, on human development during the first 12 years of life.

The systematic study of children is less than 200 years old, and 90% of its research has been published since the mid-1940s. Basic philosophical differences over the fundamental nature of children and their growth have occupied psychologists during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most important of such controversies concerned the relative importance of genetic endowment and environment, or "nature" and "nurture," in determining development during infancy and childhood. Most researchers now recognize, however, that it is the interaction of inborn biological factors with external factors, rather than the mutually exclusive action or predominance of one or the other force, that guides and influences human development. The advances in cognition, emotion, and behavior that normally occur at certain points in the life span requires both maturation (i.e., genetically driven biological changes in the genetically driven biological changes in the central nervous system) and events, experiences, and influences in the physical and social environment. Generally, maturation by itself cannot cause a psychological function to emerge; it does, however, permit such a function to occur and sets limits on its earliest time of appearance.

Three theories of human development have been dominant during the 20th century, each addressing different aspects of psychological growth. In retrospect, these and other theories seem to have been neither logically rigorous nor able to account for both intellectual and emotional growth within the same framework. Research in the field has thus tended to be descriptive, since developmental psychology lacks a tight net of interlocking theoretical propositions that reliably permit satisfying explanations.

Empathy and other forms of social awareness are important in the development of a moral sense. Morality embraces a person's beliefs about the appropriateness or goodness of what he does, thinks, or feels. During the last few months of the second year, children develop an appreciation of right and wrong; these representations are called moral standards. Children show a concern over dirty hands, torn clothes, and broken cups, suggesting that they appreciate that certain events violate adult standards. By age two most children display mild distress if they cannot meet standards of behavior imposed by others. After age two they will playfully violate rules on acceptable behavior in order to test the validity of that standard. One of the signs of the child's growing morality is the ability to control behavior and the willingness to postpone immediate gratification of a desire.

## Freud

Freud made great contributions to psychological theory—particularly in his concept of unconscious urges and motivations—his elegant concepts cannot be verified through scientific experimentation and empirical observation. But his concentration on emotional development in early childhood influenced even those schools of thought that rejected his theories. The belief that personality is affected by both biological and psychosocial forces operating principally within the family, with the major foundations being laid early in life, continues to prove fruitful in research on infant and child development.

## Erikson

Erikson viewed emotional development over the life span as a sequence of stages during which there occur important inner conflicts whose successful resolution depends on both the child himself and his environment. These conflicts can be thought of as interactions between instinctual drives and motives on the one hand and social and other external factors on the other. Erikson evolved eight stages of development, the first four of which are (1) infancy: trust versus mistrust, (2) early childhood: autonomy versus shame and doubt, (3) preschool: initiative versus guilt, and (4) school age: industry versus inferiority. Conflicts at any one stage must be resolved if personality problems are to be avoided.

## Piaget

Piaget's theory rests on the fundamental notion that the child develops through stages until he arrives at a stage of thinking that resembles that of an adult. The four stages given by Piaget are (1) the sensorimotor stage from birth to 2 years, (2) the preoperational from 2 to 7 years, (3) the concrete-operational from 7 to 12 years, and (4) the stage of formal operations that characterizes the adolescent and the adult.

## American Influence

A more distinctively American theoretical view focuses primarily on the child's actions, rather than on his emotions or thinking. This point of view, called learning theory, is concerned with identifying those mechanisms that can be offered to explain differences in behavior, motives, and values among children. Its major principles stress the effects of reward and punishment (administered by parents, teachers, and peers) on the child's tendency to adopt the behavior and values of others. Learning theory is thus directed to the overt actions of the child, rather than to inner psychological states or mechanisms.

Learning is any relatively permanent change in behavior that results from past experience. There are two generally recognized learning processes: classical and instrumental conditioning, both of which use associations, or learned relations between events or stimuli, to create or shape behavioral responses.

Rewards, such as praise and approval from parents, act as positive reinforcers of specific learned behaviors, while punishments decrease the likelihood of repeating such behaviors.

## Kohlberg

Childhood is thus the time at which moral standards begin to develop in a process that often extends well into adulthood. The American psychologist Lawrence **Kohlberg** hypothesized that people's development of moral standards passes through stages that can be grouped into three moral levels. At the early level, that of pre-conventional moral reasoning, the child uses external and physical events (such as pleasure or pain) as the source for decisions about moral rightness or wrongness; his standards are based strictly on what will avoid punishment or bring pleasure. At the intermediate level, that of conventional moral reasoning, the child or adolescent views moral standards as a way of maintaining the approval of authority figures, chiefly his parents, and acts in accordance with their precepts. Moral standards at this level are held to rest on a positive evaluation of authority, rather than on a simple fear of punishment. At the third level, that of post-conventional moral reasoning, the adult bases his moral standards on principles that he himself has evaluated and that he accepts as inherently valid, regardless of society's opinion. He is aware of the arbitrary, subjective nature of social standards and rules, which he regards as relative rather than absolute in authority.

Thus the bases for justifying moral standards pass from avoidance of punishment to avoidance of adult disapproval and rejection to avoidance of internal guilt and self-recrimination. The person's moral reasoning also moves toward increasingly greater social scope (*i.e.*, including more people and institutions) and greater abstraction (*i.e.*, from reasoning about physical events such as pain or pleasure to reasoning about values, rights, and implicit contracts). This transition from one stage to another is characterized by gradual shifts in the most frequent type of reasoning; thus, at any given point in life, a person may function at more than one stage at the same time. Different people pass through the stages at varying rates. Finally, different people are likely to reach different levels of moral thinking in their lives, raising the possibility that some people may never reach the later, more abstract, stages.

The evidence for these theoretical stages comes from children's answers to moral dilemmas verbally presented to them by researchers, rather than their actual behavior in time of conflict. Scientists have argued that many children display a more profound moral understanding than is evident in their responses on such tests. Others have argued that because even rather young children are capable of showing empathy with the pain of others, the inhibition of aggressive behavior arises from this moral affect rather than from the mere anticipation of punishment. Some scientists have found that children differ in their individual capacity for empathy, and, therefore, some children are more sensitive to moral prohibitions than others. There is evidence suggesting that temperamentally inhibited children whose parents impose consistent socialization demands on them experience moral affect more intensely than do other children.

Kohlberg's stages of moral development are planes of moral adequacy conceived to explain the development of moral reasoning. Kohlberg wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago in 1958; the theory was inspired by the work of Piaget and a fascination with children's reactions to moral dilemmas.

The theory holds that moral reasoning, which is the basis for ethical behavior, has six identifiable developmental stages. Kohlberg followed the development of moral judgment beyond the ages originally studied by Piaget who claimed that logic and morality develop through constructive stages.

Kohlberg used stories about moral dilemmas in his studies, and was interested in how people would justify their actions if they were put in a similar moral crux. He would then categorize and classify evoked responses into one of six distinct stages.

These six stages were broken into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Kohlberg followed Piaget's constructivist requirements for a stage model; even still, no one functions at their highest stage at all times. It is also not possible to "jump" stages – each stage provides a new, yet necessary perspective, and is more comprehensive, differentiated, and integrated than its predecessors.

Level 1 – Pre-Conventional

Stage 1 -- Obedience and punishment orientation

Stage 2 -- Self-interest orientation (*What's in it for me?*)

Level 2 – Conventional

Stage 3 -- Interpersonal accord and conformity (*The good boy/good girl attitude*)

Stage 4 -- Authority and social-order maintaining orientation (*Law and order morality*)

Level 3 – Post-Conventional

Stage 5 -- Social contract orientation

Stage 6 -- Universal ethical principles (*principled conscience*)

### Pre-Conventional

The pre-conventional level of moral reasoning is especially common in children, although adults can also exhibit this level of reasoning. Reasoners in the pre-conventional level judge the morality of an action by its direct consequences. The pre-conventional level consists of the first and second stages of moral development, and are purely concerned with the self in an egocentric manner.

In *Stage 1* (obedience and punishment driven), individuals focus on the direct consequences that their actions will have for themselves. For example, an action is perceived as morally wrong if the person who commits it gets punished. The worse the punishment for the act is, the more 'bad' the act is perceived to be. In addition, there is no recognition that others' points of view are any different from one's own view<sup>1</sup> This stage may be viewed as a kind of authoritarianism.

*Stage 2* (self-interest driven) espouses the *what's in it for me* position, right behavior being defined by what is in one's own best interest. Stage two reasoning shows a limited interest in the needs of others, but only to a point where it might further one's own interests, such as *you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours*. In stage two concern for others is not based on loyalty or intrinsic respect. Lacking a perspective of society in the pre-conventional level, this should not be confused with social contract (stage five), as all actions are performed to serve one's own needs or interests. For the stage two theorist, the perspective of the world is often seen as morally relative.

### Conventional

The conventional level of moral reasoning is typical of adolescents and adults. Persons who reason in a conventional way, judge the morality of actions by comparing these actions to societal views and expectations. The conventional level consists of the third and fourth stages of moral development.

In *Stage 3* (interpersonal accord and conformity driven), the self enters society by filling social roles. Individuals are receptive of approval or disapproval from other people as it reflects society's accordance with the perceived role. They try to be a *good boy* or *good girl* to live up to these expectations, having learned that there is inherent value in doing so. Stage three reasoning may judge the morality of an action by evaluating its consequences in terms of a person's relationships, which now begin to include things like respect, gratitude and the "golden rule." Desire to maintain rules and authority exists only to further support these stereotypical social roles. The intentions of actions play a more significant role in reasoning at this stage; 'they mean well.'"

In *Stage 4* (authority and social order obedience driven), it is important to obey laws, dictums, and social conventions because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society. Moral reasoning in stage four is thus beyond the need for individual approval exhibited in stage three; society must learn to transcend individual needs. A central ideal or ideals often prescribe what is right and wrong, such as in the case of fundamentalism. If one person violates a law, perhaps everyone would - thus there is an obligation and a

duty to uphold laws and rules. When someone does violate a law, it is morally wrong; culpability is thus a significant factor in this stage as it separates the bad domains from the good ones.

### Post-Conventional

The post-conventional level, also known as the principled level, consists of stages five and six of moral development. Realization that individuals are separate entities from society now becomes salient. One's own perspective should be viewed before the society's. It is due to this 'nature of self before others' that the post-conventional level, especially stage six, is sometimes mistaken for pre-conventional behaviors.

In *Stage 5* (social contract driven), individuals are viewed as holding different opinions and values. Along a similar vein, laws are regarded as social contracts rather than rigid dictums. Those that do not promote the general welfare should be changed when necessary to meet *the greatest good for the greatest number of people*. This is attained through majority decision, and inevitably compromise. In this way democratic government is ostensibly based on stage five reasoning.

In *Stage 6* (universal ethical principles driven), moral reasoning is based on abstract reasoning using universal ethical principles. Laws are valid only insofar as they are grounded in justice, and that a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws. Rights are unnecessary as social contracts are not essential for deontic -- an approach to ethics that focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions themselves, as opposed to the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of those actions. It is sometimes described as "duty" or "obligation" based ethics -- moral action. Decisions are not met hypothetically in a conditional way but rather categorically in an absolute way. This can be done by imagining what one would do being in anyone's shoes, who imagined what anyone would do thinking the same. The resulting consensus is the action taken. In this way action is never a means but always an end in itself; one acts *because* it is right, and not because it is instrumental, expected, legal or previously agreed upon. While Kohlberg insisted that stage six exists, he had difficulty finding participants who consistently used it. It appears that people rarely if ever reach stage six of Kohlberg's model.

### Further stages

In his empirical studies of persons across their life-span, Kohlberg came to notice that some people evidently had undergone moral stage regression. He was faced with the option of either conceding that moral regression could occur, or revising his theory. Kohlberg chose the latter, postulating the existence of sub-stages wherein the emerging stage has not yet been adequately integrated into the personality. In particular Kohlberg noted of a stage 4½ or 4+, which is a transition from stage four to stage five, sharing characteristics of both. In this stage the individual has become disaffected with the arbitrary nature of *law and order* reasoning. Culpability is frequently turned from being defined by society to having society itself be culpable. This stage is often mistaken for the moral relativism of stage two as the individual views the interests of society which conflict with their own choices as relatively and morally wrong. Kohlberg noted that this was often seen in students entering college.

Kohlberg further speculated that a seventh stage may exist (Transcendental Morality or Morality of Cosmic Orientation) which would link religion with moral. However, because of Kohlberg's trouble providing empirical evidence for even a sixth stage, he emphasized that most of his conjecture towards a seventh stage was theoretical

### Theoretical assumptions (philosophy)

Kohlberg's theory is not value-neutral. It begins with a stake in certain perspectives in meta-ethics (the branch of ethics that seeks to understand the nature of ethical properties, and ethical statements, attitudes, and judgments.). This includes for instance a view of human nature, and a certain understanding of the form and content of moral reasoning. It holds conceptions of the right and the scope of moral reasoning across societies. Furthermore it includes the relationship between morality and the world, between morality and logical expression, and the role of reason in morality. Finally, it takes a view of the social and mental processes involved in moral reasoning.

The picture of human nature which Kohlberg begins with is the view that humans are inherently communicative and capable of reason as well as possessing a desire to understand others and the world around them. The stages of Kohlberg's model refer to the qualitative moral reasonings that people adopt, and thus do not translate directly into praise or blame of the actions or characters of persons. In order to argue that his theory measures moral reasoning and not particular moral conclusions, Kohlberg insists that the *form and structure* of moral arguments is independent of the *content* of the arguments, a position he calls "formalism" -- an emphasis on form over content or meaning in the arts, literature, or philosophical.

Kohlberg's theory revolves around the notion that justice is the essential feature of moral reasoning. By the same token, justice relies heavily upon the notion of sound reasoning upon principles. Despite being a justice-centered theory of morality, Kohlberg considered it to be compatible with plausible formulations of deontology and eudaimonia -- a classical Greek word commonly translated as "happiness".

Kohlberg's theory *understands* values as a critical component of the right. Whatever the right is, for Kohlberg, it must be universally valid across societies (a position known as "moral universalism"): there can be no relativism. Moreover, morals are not natural features of the world; they are prescriptive. Nevertheless, moral judgments can be evaluated in logical terms of truth and falsity.

According to Kohlberg, a person who progresses to a higher stage of moral reasoning cannot skip stages. For example, one cannot jump from being concerned mostly with peer judgments (stage three) to being a proponent of social contracts (stage five). However, when one encounters a moral dilemma and finds one's current level of moral reasoning unsatisfactory, one will look to the next level. Discovery of the limitations of the current stage of thinking drives moral development as each progressive stage is more adequate than the last. This process is *constructive*; it arises through the conscious construction of the actor, and is neither in any meaningful sense a component of the actor's innate dispositions, nor a result of past inductions.

Formal elements

	View of Persons	Social Perspective Lvl
<b>6</b>	Sees how human fallibility and frailty are impacted by communication	Mutual respect as a universal principle
<b>5</b>	Recognize that contracts will allow persons to increase welfare of both	Contractual perspective
<b>4</b>	Able to see abstract normative systems	Social systems perspective
<b>3</b>	Recognize good and bad intentions	Social relationships perspective
<b>2</b>	Sees that a) others have goals and preferences, b) either conform to or deviate from norms	Instrumental egoism
<b>1</b>	No VOP: only self & norm are recognized	Blind egoism

Progress along the stages of development occurs because of the actor's increased competence in both psychologically and socially balancing conflicting value-claims. The name of "justice operation" is given to the process which resolves the dispute between conflicting claims and strikes an equilibrium between them. Kohlberg identifies two of these operations in "equality" and "reciprocity," which respectively involve an impartial regard for persons (i.e., irrespective of who the individual persons are), and a regard for the role of personal merit. For Kohlberg, the most adequate result of both operations is "reversibility," where a moral or dutiful act within a particular situation is evaluated in terms of whether or not the act would be satisfactory even if particular persons were to switch roles within the situation (also known colloquially as "moral musical chairs").

Knowledge and learning contribute to moral development. Specifically important are the actor's *view of persons* and their *social perspective level*, each of which becomes more complex and mature with each advancing stage. The view of persons can be understood as the actor's grasp of the psychology of other persons; it may be pictured as a spectrum, with stage one having no view of other persons at all, and stage six being entirely sociocentric. Similarly, the social perspective level involves the understanding of the social universe, differing from the view of persons in that it involves a grasp of norms.

### Examples of applied moral dilemmas

Kohlberg established the *Moral Judgment Interview* in his original 1958 dissertation. During the roughly 45 minute tape recorded semi-structured interview, the interviewer uses moral dilemmas to determine which stage of moral reasoning a person uses. The dilemmas are fictional short stories that describe situations in which a person has to make a moral decision. The participant is asked a systemic series of open-ended questions, like what they think the right course of action is, as well as justifications as to why certain actions are right or wrong. The form and structure of these replies are scored and not the content; over a set of multiple moral dilemmas an overall score is derived.

#### Heinz dilemma

A dilemma that Kohlberg used in his original research was the druggist's dilemma: *Heinz Steals the Drug In Europe*.

A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about \$ 1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Should Heinz have broken into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?

From a theoretical point of view, it is not important what the participant thinks that Heinz should *do*.

Kohlberg's theory holds that the justification the participant offers is what is significant, the *form* of their response.

Below are some of many examples of possible arguments that belong to the six stages:

Stage 1 (*obedience*): Heinz should not steal the medicine because he will consequently be put in prison which will mean he is a bad person. Or: Heinz should steal the medicine because it is only worth \$200 and not how much the druggist wanted for it; Heinz had even offered to pay for it and was not stealing anything else.

Stage 2 (*self-interest*): Heinz should steal the medicine because he will be much happier if he saves his wife, even if he will have to serve a prison sentence. Or: Heinz should not steal the medicine because prison is an awful place, and he would probably languish over a jail cell more than his wife's death.

Stage 3 (*conformity*): Heinz should steal the medicine because his wife expects it; he wants to be a good husband. Or: Heinz should not steal the drug because stealing is bad and he is not a criminal; he tried to do everything he could without breaking the law, you cannot blame him.

Stage 4 (*law-and-order*): Heinz should not steal the medicine because the law prohibits stealing, making it illegal. Or: Heinz should steal the drug for his wife but also take the prescribed punishment for the crime as well as paying the druggist what he is owed. Criminals cannot just run around without regard for the law; actions have consequences.

Stage 5 (*human rights*): Heinz should steal the medicine because everyone has a right to choose life, regardless of the law. Or: Heinz should not steal the medicine because the scientist has a right to fair compensation. Even if his wife is sick, it does not make his actions right.

Stage six (*universal human ethics*): Heinz should steal the medicine, because saving a human life is a more fundamental value than the property rights of another person. Or: Heinz should not steal the medicine, because others may need the medicine just as badly, and their lives are equally significant.

### Criticisms

One criticism of Kohlberg's theory is that it emphasizes justice to the exclusion of other values. As a consequence of this, it may not adequately address the arguments of people who value other moral aspects of actions. Carol Gilligan has argued that Kohlberg's theory is overly androcentric -- the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing male human beings or the masculine point of view at the center of one's view of the world and its culture and history. Kohlberg's theory was initially developed based on empirical research using only male participants; Gilligan argued that it did not adequately describe the concerns of women. Although research has generally found no significant pattern of differences in moral development between sexes, Gilligan's theory of moral development does not focus on the value of justice. She developed an alternative theory of moral reasoning that is based on the ethics of caring. Critics such as Christina Hoff-Sommers, however, argued that Gilligan's research is ill-founded, and that no evidence exists to support her conclusion.

Other psychologists have questioned the assumption that moral action is primarily reached by formal reasoning. One such group, the social intuitionists, state people often make moral judgments without weighing concerns such as fairness, law, human rights and abstract ethical values. Given this, the arguments that Kohlberg and other rationalist psychologists have analyzed could be considered post hoc rationalizations of intuitive decisions. This would mean that moral reasoning is less relevant to moral action than Kohlberg's theory suggests.

### Continued relevance

Theory and research of Kohlberg's stages of moral development have been utilized by others in academia. One such example, the *Defining Issues Test* or *DIT*, was created by James Rest in 1979 originally as a pencil-and-paper alternative to the *Moral Judgment Interview*. Heavily influenced by the six-stage model, it made efforts to improve validity criteria by using a quantitative test of a likert scale to rate moral dilemmas similar to Kohlberg's. It also used a large body of Kohlbergian theory such as the idea of 'post-conventional thinking'. In 1999 the *DIT* was revised as the *DIT-2*; the test persists in many areas that require moral testing and in varied cohorts.

See also

[Jean Piaget, Theory of cognitive development](#)  
[Carol Gilligan, Ethics of care](#)  
[James W. Fowler, Stages of faith development](#)  
[Jane Loevinger, Stages of ego development](#)  
[Erik Erikson, Stages of psychosocial development](#)  
[James Rest, Defining Issues Test](#)

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