

Kohlberg's Moral Stages: How Our Ethical Compass Evolves

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Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development constitute an adaptation of a psychological theory originally conceived of by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. Kohlberg began work on this topic while a psychology postgraduate student at the University of Chicago, and expanded and developed this theory throughout his life.

The theory holds that moral reasoning, the basis for ethical behavior, has six identifiable developmental stages, each more adequate at responding to moral dilemmas than its predecessor. Kohlberg followed the development of moral judgment far beyond the ages studied earlier by Piaget, who also claimed that logic and morality develop through constructive stages. Expanding on Piaget's work, Kohlberg determined that the process of moral development was principally concerned with justice, and that it continued throughout the individual's lifetime, a notion that spawned dialogue on the philosophical implications of such research.

Kohlberg relied for his studies on stories such as the Heinz dilemma, and was interested in how individuals would justify their actions if placed in similar moral dilemmas. He then analyzed the form of moral reasoning displayed, rather than its conclusion, and classified it as belonging to one of six distinct stages.

There have been critiques of the theory from several perspectives. Arguments include that it emphasizes justice to the exclusion of other moral values, such as caring; that there is such an overlap between stages that they should more properly be regarded as separate domains; or that evaluations of the reasons for moral choices are mostly post hoc rationalizations (by both decision makers and psychologists studying them) of essentially intuitive decisions.

Nevertheless, an entirely new field within psychology was created as a direct result of Kohlberg's theory, and according to Haggblom et al.'s study of the most eminent psychologists of the 20th century, Kohlberg was the 16th most frequently cited psychologist in introductory psychology textbooks throughout the century, as well as the 30th most eminent overall.

Kohlberg's scale is about how people justify behaviors and his stages are not a method of ranking how moral someone's behavior is. There should however be a correlation between how someone scores on the scale and how they behave, and the general hypothesis is that moral behaviour is more responsible, consistent and predictable from people at higher levels.

Stages

Kohlberg's six stages can be more generally grouped into three levels of two stages each: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. Following Piaget's constructivist requirements for a stage model, as described in his theory of cognitive development, it is extremely rare to regress in stages--to lose the use of higher stage abilities. Stages cannot be skipped; each provides a new and necessary perspective, more comprehensive and differentiated than its

predecessors but integrated with them.

Level 1 (Pre-Conventional)

1. Obedience and punishment orientation

(How can I avoid punishment?)

2. Self-interest orientation

(What's in it for me?)

(Paying for a benefit)

Level 2 (Conventional)

3. Interpersonal accord and conformity

(Social norms)

(The good boy/good girl attitude)

4. Authority and social-order maintaining orientation

(Law and order morality)

Level 3 (Post-Conventional)

5. Social contract orientation

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 at this 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 is solely concerned with the self in an egocentric manner. A child with pre-conventional morality has not yet adopted or internalized society's conventions regarding what is right or wrong, but instead focuses largely on external consequences that certain actions may bring.

In Stage one (obedience and punishment driven), individuals focus on the direct consequences of

their actions on themselves. For example, an action is perceived as morally wrong because the perpetrator is punished. "The last time I did that I got spanked so I will not do it again." The worse the punishment for the act is, the more "bad" the act is perceived to be. This can give rise to an inference that even innocent victims are guilty in proportion to their suffering. It is "egocentric", lacking recognition that others' points of view are different from one's own. There is "deference to superior power or prestige".

Stage two (self-interest driven) espouses the "what's in it for me" position, in which right behavior is defined by whatever is in the individual's best interest. Stage two reasoning shows a limited interest in the needs of others, but only to a point where it might further the individual's own interests. As a result, concern for others is not based on loyalty or intrinsic respect, but rather a "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" mentality. The lack of a societal perspective in the pre-conventional level is quite different from the social contract (stage five), as all actions have the purpose of serving the individual's own needs or interests. For the stage two theorist, the world's perspective is often seen as morally relative.

Conventional

The conventional level of moral reasoning is typical of adolescents and adults. Those who reason in a conventional way judge the morality of actions by comparing them to society's views and expectations. The conventional level consists of the third and fourth stages of moral development. Conventional morality is characterized by an acceptance of society's conventions concerning right and wrong. At this level an individual obeys rules and follows society's norms even when there are no consequences for obedience or disobedience. Adherence to rules and conventions is somewhat rigid, however, and a rule's appropriateness or fairness is seldom questioned.

In Stage three (interpersonal accord and conformity driven), the self enters society by filling social roles. Individuals are receptive to approval or disapproval from others 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". "I want to be liked and thought well of; apparently, not being naughty makes people like me." Desire to maintain rules and authority exists only to further support these social roles. The intentions of actions play a more significant role in reasoning at this stage; "they mean well ...".

In Stage four (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. Most active members of society remain at stage four, where morality is still predominantly dictated by an outside force.

Post-Conventional

The post-conventional level, also known as the principled level, consists of stages five and six of moral development. There is a growing realization that individuals are separate entities from society, and that the individual's own perspective may take precedence over society's view; they may disobey rules inconsistent with their own principles. These people live by their own abstract principles about right and wrong--principles that typically include such basic human rights as life, liberty, and justice. Because of this level's "nature of self before others", the behavior of post-conventional individuals, especially those at stage six, can be confused with that of those at the pre-conventional level.

People who exhibit postconventional morality view rules as useful but changeable mechanisms--ideally rules can maintain the general social order and protect human rights. Rules are not absolute dictates that must be obeyed without question. Contemporary theorists often speculate that many people may never reach this level of abstract moral reasoning.

In Stage five (social contract driven), the world is viewed as holding different opinions, rights and values. Such perspectives should be mutually respected as unique to each person or community. Laws are regarded as social contracts rather than rigid edicts. 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 achieved through majority decision, and inevitable compromise. Democratic government is ostensibly based on stage five reasoning.

In Stage six (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 a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws. Rights are unnecessary, as social contracts are not essential for deontic moral action. Decisions are not reached hypothetically in a conditional way but rather categorically in an absolute way, as in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. This involves an individual imagining what they would do in another's shoes, if they believed what that other person imagines to be true. The resulting consensus is the action taken. In this way action is never a means but always an end in itself; the individual acts because it is right, and not because it is instrumental, expected, legal, or previously agreed upon. Although Kohlberg insisted that stage six exists, he found it difficult to identify individuals who consistently operated at that level.

Further Stages

In Kohlberg's empirical studies of individuals throughout their life Kohlberg observed that some had apparently undergone moral stage regression. This could be resolved either by allowing for moral regression or by extending the theory. Kohlberg chose the latter, postulating the existence of sub-stages in which the emerging stage has not yet been fully integrated into the personality. In particular Kohlberg noted a stage 4½ or 4+, a transition from stage four to stage five, that shared characteristics of both. In this stage the individual is disaffected with the arbitrary nature of law and order reasoning; culpability is frequently turned from being defined by society to viewing society itself as culpable. This stage is often mistaken for the moral relativism of stage two, as the individual views those interests of society that conflict with their own as being relatively and morally wrong. Kohlberg noted that this was often observed in students entering college.

Kohlberg suggested that there may be a seventh stage--Transcendental Morality, or Morality of Cosmic Orientation--which linked religion with moral reasoning. Kohlberg's difficulties in obtaining empirical evidence for even a sixth stage, however, led him to emphasize the speculative nature of his seventh stage.

Theoretical Assumptions (Philosophy)

The picture of human nature Kohlberg begins with is that humans are inherently communicative and capable of reason. They also possess a desire to understand others and the world around them. The stages of Kohlberg's model relate to the qualitative moral reasonings adopted by individuals, and so do not translate directly into praise or blame of any individual's actions or character. Arguing 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 those arguments, a position he calls "formalism".

Kohlberg's theory centers on the notion that justice is the essential characteristic of moral reasoning. Justice itself relies heavily upon the notion of sound reasoning based on principles. Despite being a justice-centered theory of morality, Kohlberg considered it to be compatible with plausible formulations of deontology and eudaimonia.

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: someone progressing to a higher stage of moral reasoning cannot skip stages. For example, an individual cannot jump from being concerned mostly with peer judgments (stage three) to being a proponent of social contracts (stage five). On encountering a moral

dilemma and finding their current level of moral reasoning unsatisfactory, however, an individual will look to the next level. Realizing the limitations of the current stage of thinking is the driving force behind moral development, as each progressive stage is more adequate than the last. The process is therefore considered to be constructive, as it is initiated by the conscious construction of the individual, and is not in any meaningful sense a component of the individual's innate dispositions, or a result of past inductions.

Formal Elements

Progress through Kohlberg's stages happens as a result of the individual's increasing competence, both psychologically and in balancing conflicting social-value claims. The process of resolving conflicting claims to reach an equilibrium is called "justice operation". Kohlberg identifies two of these justice operations: "equality," which involves an impartial regard for persons, and "reciprocity," which means a regard for the role of personal merit. For Kohlberg, the most adequate result of both operations is "reversibility," in which 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 that situation (also known colloquially as "moral musical chairs").

Knowledge and learning contribute to moral development. Specifically important are the individual'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 individual'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 an appreciation of social norms.

Examples of Applied Moral Dilemmas

Kohlberg established the Moral Judgement 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 one (obedience): Heinz should not steal the medicine because he would consequently be put in prison, which would mean he is a bad person. Or: Heinz should steal the medicine because it is only worth \$200, not how much the druggist wanted for it. Heinz had even offered to pay for it and was not stealing anything else.

Stage two (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 experience anguish over a jail cell more than his wife's death.

Stage three (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 four (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 five (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, and so may not adequately address the arguments of those who value other moral aspects of actions. Carol Gilligan has argued that Kohlberg's theory is overly androcentric. 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 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.

Kohlberg's stages are not culturally neutral, as demonstrated by its application to a number of different cultures. Although they progress through the stages in the same order, individuals in different cultures seem to do so at different rates. Kohlberg has responded by saying that although different cultures do indeed inculcate different beliefs, his stages correspond to underlying modes of reasoning, rather than to those beliefs.

Other psychologists have questioned the assumption that moral action is primarily a result of formal reasoning. Social intuitionists such as Jonathan Haidt, for example, argue that individuals often make moral judgments without weighing concerns such as fairness, law, human rights, or abstract ethical values. Thus the arguments analyzed by Kohlberg and other rationalist psychologists could be considered post hoc rationalizations of intuitive decisions; moral reasoning may be less relevant to moral action than Kohlberg's theory suggests.

Continued Relevance

Kohlberg's body of work on the stages of moral development has been utilized by others working in the field. One example is the Defining Issues Test (DIT) created in 1979 by James Rest, originally as a pencil-and-paper alternative to the Moral Judgement Interview. Heavily influenced by the six-stage model, it made efforts to improve the validity criteria by using a quantitative test, the 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 continues to be used in many areas where moral testing is required, such as divinity, politics, and medicine.