

Kohlberg's stages of moral development

Lawrence Kohlberg's moral reasoning theory was inspired by the work of Jean Piaget. This theory holds that moral reasoning, which is the basis for ethical behaviour, has six identifiable developmental stages. He followed the development of moral judgment beyond the ages originally studied by Piaget, who claimed that logic and morality develop through constructive stages. Kohlberg expanded considerably on this groundwork, determining that the process of moral development was principally concerned with justice and that its development continued throughout the lifespan, even spawning dialogue of philosophical implications of his research.

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 are broken into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. His theory is based on constructive developmental stages; each stage and level is more adequate at responding to moral dilemmas than the last.

Kohlberg's six stages were grouped into three levels:

Level 1 (Pre-Conventional)

1. Obedience and punishment orientation
2. Self-interest orientation(What's in it for me?)

Level 2 (Conventional)

3. Interpersonal accord and conformity (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. Persons 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 one**, 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. This stage may be viewed as a kind of authoritarianism.

Stage two espouses the *what's in it for me* position, right behaviour 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. 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 three**, 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.

In **Stage four**, 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 or laws, 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 five**, individuals are viewed as holding different opinions and values, and it is paramount that they be respected and honoured impartially. Issues that are not regarded as relative like life and choice should never be withheld or inhibited. Along a similar vein, laws are regarded as social contracts rather than rigid dictums. Those that do not promote general social 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 **Stage six**, 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 demonic moral action. Decisions are met categorically in an absolute way rather than hypothetically in a conditional way.

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 revise 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 reasoning. 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 includes 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, and they possess 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". 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.

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.

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

Progress along the stages of development occurs because of the person'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 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 .

Criticisms

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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
- 3) 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.