

KOHLBERG'S MORAL DEVELOPMENT

The Contributions of Lawrence Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg was born in 1927 in Bronxville, New York. In 1945, he graduated from high school, and he spent the next three years serving in the U.S. Merchant Marine. In 1948, he returned to the United States and earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Chicago in one year. He completed his doctoral degree in psychology ten years later.

In his unpublished dissertation, Kohlberg described what is now known as Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development. Influenced by Jean Piaget, he proposed a form of Socratic thinking and suggested that this should be the aim of education. Kohlberg's theory explains that moral reasoning, which is the basis for honest behavior, has six important developmental constructive stages – each more effective at responding to moral issues than the last. These stages roughly match Piaget's stages of cognitive development. Kohlberg's major argument was that as people develop, they achieve a greater ability to make decisions based on ethical truths.

Theory of Moral Development

In his dissertation, Kohlberg labeled and classified the types of thinking used by the people in his study into one of six separate stages. He then grouped the responses into three levels: **pre-conventional**, **conventional**, and **post-conventional**. He argued that as we mature, we basically use different problem-solving strategies to come to our own conclusions.

Description of the Six Stages

Children in the **pre-conventional level** range in ages from 3-9. In **Stage 1**, the child is first influenced only to avoid punishment. They also make decisions based on the need to follow authority and fear of punishment. In **Stage 2**, the child focuses on self-interest. Instead of focusing on avoiding punishment, the child focuses on getting what they desire. At this level, the child acts on what they believe is right or wrong, and it is easy for them to see the difference between the two.

The **conventional level** applies to people from early teenage years to adulthood. At this point in their lives, people know that following social rules and laws is important. This is more and more important because conforming is necessary for maintaining order and good relationships within a community. **Stage 3** is characterized by engaging in "good" behavior and showing concern for others. Moral decisions are motivated by the need to gain approval from others. **Stage 4** is a promise to law and order. The individual feels they have to follow the rules because law adds to security, and people conform in order to avoid criticism from authority figures.

The **post-conventional level** is the highest level of moral development. Kohlberg believed that only a small percentage of people ever reached this stage. People who reach this stage question whether what they see and experience is good. **Stage 5** is the belief that while rules exist for the greater good, they do not necessarily work for the good of everyone. **Stage 6** is the

stage where people develop their own moral guidelines and are prepared to defend them even if it means going against the wishes of the group.

In an effort to understand and explain these levels, Kohlberg created a series of moral dilemmas that he presented to people he wanted to study. One of his frequently used scenarios that illustrates the value of his theories is about a man named Heinz. In figuring out the thinking behind their judgments in “Heinz Steals the Drug,” Kohlberg was interested in the thinking people used to explain their choices.

Heinz’s wife was extremely sick with a rare cancer. Doctors believed there was only one drug that might save her life. When Heinz talked to the pharmacist who developed the drug about buying some for his wife, he was told that the cost was \$2,000 per dose. It was common knowledge that the pharmacist who made the drug had only invested \$200 per dose. Heinz was only able to raise \$1,000 even though he borrowed all that he could. He explained to the pharmacist that his wife was near death and that the drug was his last hope. He begged him to sell the drug at a lower price or to allow him to pay it out over time. The pharmacist refused saying that he had developed the drug and was intent on making money from it. Heinz felt hopeless and helpless, so he broke into the store and stole the drug for his wife.

Kohlberg reasoned that if someone said that Heinz should not have stolen the drug because breaking the law is a crime and he could have been sent to prison, their moral reasoning represented **stage one**. If someone said that Heinz should have found another way to get the drug, maybe by reporting the pharmacist or asking others for help paying for it, their moral reasoning reflected **stage two**. If someone had said that Heinz should have stolen the drug because his wife's life was more important than breaking the law and going to jail (and more important than creating a good community), that kind of moral reasoning represents **stage three**. By classifying their responses, he was able to create his ranking of moral reasoning.

Kohlberg’s Influence on Modern Psychology

Kohlberg believed that moral development can be influenced by exposure to adult role models who demonstrate moral values and principles in their actions. He also believed that moral reasoning can be stimulated by talking about moral dilemmas with peers and adults. In an effort to help increase the use of moral development as an important part in children’s education, he and some of his colleagues created the “just community” schools approach. The basic foundation of these schools is to guide students’ moral development by offering them the chance to participate in a community environment based on the principles of justice and respect. Kohlberg believed that such a program helps students gain a sense of civic responsibility and valuable social skills by allowing students to take ownership of their education and choose the classes that they attend and what they want to learn.

Source:

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