Kohlberg's stages of moral development

Kohlberg's stages of moral development were conceived by Lawrence Kohlberg to explain the development of moral reasoning. Created while studying psychology at the University of Chicago, it was inspired when he became fascinated with children's reactions to moral dilemmas. He wrote his doctoral dissertation there in 1958, outlining what are now his stages of moral development.

Kohlberg’s theory holds that moral reasoning, which he thought to be the basis for ethical behavior, has developmental stages. He followed the development of moral judgment beyond the ages originally studied by Jean Piaget, expanding considerably on Piaget’s work. He determined that the process of moral development continued throughout the lifespan, and created a model based on six identifiable stages of moral development.

Contents

Stages

Kohlberg’s six stages were grouped into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Following Piaget’s requirements for a stage model, it is not possible to regress backwards in stages. It is also not possible to ‘jump’ stages; each stage provides new perspective and is “more comprehensive, differentiated, and integrated than its predecessors.”

Level 1 (Pre-Conventional) (up to age 9)
1. Obedience and punishment orientation
2. Self-interest orientation

Level 2 (Conventional) (age nine+ to adolescence)
3. Interpersonal accord and conformity
   (a.k.a. The good boy/good girl attitude)
4. Authority and social-order maintaining orientation
   (a.k.a. Law and order morality)

Level 3 (Post-Conventional) (adulthood)
5. Social contract orientation
6. Universal ethical principles
   (a.k.a. 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 (egocentric).

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. In addition,
there is no recognition that others' points of view are any different from one's own view.

Stage two 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 5) as all actions are performed to serve one's own needs or interests.

**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.

In Stage four, it is important to obey laws and social conventions because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society. Moral reasoning in stage four is thus beyond the need for approval exhibited in stage three, because the individual believes that society must transcend individual needs. If one person violates a law, perhaps everyone would - thus there is an obligation and a duty to uphold laws and rules.

**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 is considered.

In Stage five, individuals are viewed as holding different opinions and values, all of which should be respected and honored as as impartiality is paramount. However issues that are not regarded as relative like life and choice should never be withheld. Along a similar vein, laws are regarded as social contracts rather than dictums, and those that do not promote general social welfare should be changed when necessary to met the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Democratic government is ostensibly based on stage five reasoning.

In Stage six, moral reasoning is based on abstract reasoning using universal ethical principles. Decisions are met categorically in an absolute way rather than hypothetically in a conditional way. In addition, 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. While Kohlberg insisted that stage six exists, he had difficulty finding participants who use it. It appears that people rarely if ever reach stage six of Kohlberg's model.

**Other**

Kohlberg's stage 4½ or 4+, which is a transition from stage four to stage five, is the stage where people have become disaffected with the arbitrary nature of law and order reasoning and become moral relativists. This transition stage may result in either progress to stage five or in regression to stage four.
Kohlberg further speculated that a seventh stage may exist (Transcendental Morality) which would link religion with moral reasoning (See James Fowler's stages of faith).

**Examples**

Kohlberg used moral dilemmas to determine which stage of moral reasoning a person uses. The dilemmas are short stories that describe situations in which a person has to make a moral decision, yet they provide no solution. The participant is asked what the right course of action is, as well as an explanation why. 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. (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 19)

_Shoould Heinz break 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. The point of interest is the justification that the participant offers. Below are examples of possible arguments that belong to the six stages. It is important to keep in mind that these arguments are only examples. It is possible that a participant reaches a completely different conclusion using the same stage of reasoning:

- **Stage one (obedience)**: Heinz should not steal the medicine, because he will consequently be put in prison.
- **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.
- **Stage three (conformity)**: Heinz should steal the medicine, because his wife expects it.
- **Stage four (law-and-order)**: Heinz should not steal the medicine, because the law prohibits stealing.
- **Stage five (human rights)**: Heinz should steal the medicine, because everyone has a right to live, regardless of the law. Or: Heinz should not steal the medicine, because the scientist has a right to fair compensation.
- **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 that violates the golden rule of honesty and respect.

**Theoretical assumptions**

The stages of Kohlberg's model refer to reasoning, not to actions or to people themselves. Kohlberg insists that the form of moral arguments is independent of the content of the arguments. Piaget's stages of cognitive development are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of moral reasoning, which is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for moral action. He posits justice as the a priori summum bonum (justice is assumed to be equal with moral virtue).

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 judgements (stage three) to being a proponent of social contracts (stage five). However, when one encounters a moral dilemma and finds their current level of
moral reasoning unsatisfactory, they 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.

**Criticism**

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. For example, Carol Gilligan has argued that Kohlberg's theory is overly androcentric. Her theory was the result of empirical research using only male participants. Gilligan argued that Kohlberg's theory therefore did not adequately describe the concerns of women. She developed an alternative theory of moral reasoning that is based on the value of care. Although recent research has generally found no significant differences in moral development between genders, Gilligan's theory illustrates that theories on moral development do not need to focus on the value of justice.

Other psychologists have challenged the assumption that moral action is primarily reached by formal reasoning. For example, social intuitionists assume that people often make moral judgments without weighing concerns such as fairness, law, human rights and abstract ethical values. If this is true, the arguments that Kohlberg and other rationalist psychologists have analyzed are often no more than post hoc rationalizations of intuitive decisions. This would mean that moral reasoning is less relevant to moral action than it seems.

**See also**

- Jean Piaget, Theory of cognitive development
- James W. Fowler, Stages of faith development
- Jane Loevinger, Stages of ego development.

**External links**

- Moral Development and Moral Education: An Overview (http://tigger.uic.edu/~lmucci/MoralEd/overview.html)
- Kohlberg's Moral Stages (http://www.haverford.edu/psych/ddavis/p109g/kohlberg.stages.html)
- Boston Review article covering the topic and other related areas (http://bostonreview.net/BR30.5/saxe.html)

**References**


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