

# Kohlberg's moral development essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Moral Development](#)



Is it morally acceptable to steal food from the wealthy to feed the poor? This was the type of question Lawrence Kohlberg, an American-born Harvard Professor, would ask of his research subjects. Dr. Kohlberg was fascinated by the cognitive development work proposed by Swiss theorist Jean Piaget (Long, n. d.). “Kohlberg's work aids both our understanding of the ways in which individuals make moral decisions, and demands that we use a more discerning system to critique the systems of justice that are in place in our societies” states Long.

One of Kohlberg's best-known dilemmas is the Heinz Dilemma (Berk, 2010). Mr. Heinz cared for his cancer-ridden wife by providing her with the proper medication needed. He discovered the one medicine that would greatly benefit his wife was outside of his financial capability. The druggist responsible for creating the medicine was not interested in helping Mr. Heinz obtain the medicine and was knowingly charging ten times the amount required to produce the medicine. After Mr. Heinz had borrowed all the money he could and exhausted all of his resources he broke into the pharmacy and stole the medicine needed to save the life of his wife (Berk, 2010).

Long states, “Using the Dilemma of Heniz, Kohlberg completes his doctoral dissertation research on the moral development of children, and proposes his six stages”. The following are basic examples of Kohlberg's six stages (Long, n. d.): Level 1 - Pre-conventional Morality (ages 4-10)

Stage 1: I do not say bad words because if I do, mommy will get mad at me.

Stage 2: For a cookie, I will pick up my toys.

## Level 2 - Conventional Morality (ages 10-13)

Stage 3: I do not eat in class because my teacher does not like it. Stage 4: I do not talk during a fire drill because that is one of the rules. Level 3 - Post-conventional (adolescence to adulthood)

Stage 5: I pay taxes because it is the law. Stage 6: I pay taxes not because it is the law, but because it is the right thing to do. Long also goes onto share that; " Kohlberg based his theory on interviews that he conducted in Chicago with 72 Caucasian male youths, largely lower and middle class. He later added more diversity to his sample, including delinquents, females, younger children and youth raised in other cultures." The three contributions that Kohlberg made in order to understanding of moral development are pre-conventional morality, conventional morality, and post-conventional morality (DeHart, Sroufe, & Cooper, 2004, p. 481).

Pre-conventional Morality is level one. Moral reasoning in young people has not started yet. Stage one obedience and punishment orientation, the young adult is concerned with what is right and wrong. A person's motives do not matter. Young adults have no concept of any type of pro and anti-social behavior. Shaffer (2004) states the child is more concerned with the punishment they would receive. The worse the punishment for the act is, the more ' bad' the act is perceived to be. Stage two self-interest orientation with older children, which make judgments based on what gives the young child pleasure. If a reward is given they behave. They still focus mainly on the seriousness of the consequences but start to see moral issues. Kohlberg

calls level one thinking "preconventional" as children do not yet have voices in society and morality is external to them.

Level two, stages three is the level of conventional morality. The child or adolescent start to judge the morality of his or her actions in relation to the approval of his or her family, and society. Kohlberg (1973) suggests they make decisions based on what will make them popular and try to live up to the good boy or good girl expectation. The next stage four is maintaining the social order, obeying the laws, and social conventions. Moral reasoning in stage four is thus beyond the need for individual approval exhibited in stage three; society must learn to transcend individual needs. The level of postconventional morality is the person's view of what is right and wrong. Realization that individuals are separate entities from society now becomes salient. At stage five people begin to ask "What makes a good society?" Young adults begin to think about society in a very theoretical way. They are interested in the benefits of the community as a whole rather than the individual.

Anyone who has reached stage six will have developed a set of personal ethics; they will have Universal Principles and work towards the concept of a good society. 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. Colby et al 1983 states it appears that people rarely if ever reach stage six of Kohlberg's model. There have been many criticisms of Kohlberg's model. Some critics claim the use of moral dilemmas measures abstract rather than concrete reasoning. (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987, pg. 4). Woolfolk

(1993) states other critics wonder if the reasoning a person uses should be enough. Other psychologists have argued that Kohlberg's theory is susceptible to impression management and that people make different kinds of moral judgments to impress different audiences. Johnson and Hogan (1981) cited in Krebs and Denton (2005). Even though there have been many criticisms of Kohlberg's work Kohlberg undertook research to support his findings. Kohlberg tested a cross-sectional sample of 7-, 10-, 13-, and 16-year-old American males.

The results confirmed that with increasing age participants tended to reach higher stages and there was little evidence of them skipping stage. (Durkin, 1995). Kohlberg's theory does have limitations though. The influence of situational factors on moral judgments indicates that like Piaget's cognitive stages, Kohlberg's moral stages are loosely organized and overlapping (Berk, 2010). His theory focuses on the moral dilemma between right and wrong, and the repercussions involved with making the wrong choice. Justice may not be the only aspect of moral reasoning. Critics have pointed out that Kohlberg's theory of moral development overemphasizes the concept as justice when making moral choices. Factors such as compassion, caring and other interpersonal feelings may play an important part in moral reasoning. Another limitation is the overemphasis on Western philosophy. Some critics argue that Kohlberg's theory only entails Western thinking and excludes Eastern attitudes and beliefs.

Eastern cultures may have different moral outlooks that Kohlberg's theory does not account for (Cherry, 2012). Traditional Eastern village cultures

normally have a different moral development that stops at Stage 3 of Kohlberg's theory. His theory also draws criticism because it implies the danger of people placing their own principles above society and the law. It may be that many psychologists react to Kohlberg in a similar way, and that this reaction underlies many of the debates over the scientific merits of his research. Also, according to psychologist Carol Gilligan, Kohlberg's theory is sex-biased because it was derived exclusively from interviews with male subjects. Males tend to have advanced moral thought that revolves around rules, rights, and abstract principles; while Gilligan believes feminine morality emphasizes an "ethic of care" that Kohlberg's system devalues.

Despite all of the limitations and criticisms that have transpired over the years since Kohlberg's theory was tested, the theory has generated a lot of thought and expanded on Piaget's stages of moral judgment. The theory may also give insight into how the great moral philosophers may have constructed their own theories from ages ago. Carol Gilligan is an internationally acclaimed psychologist, and writer whose work has focused on sex differences on moral reasoning. Gilligan's theory poses a major challenge to Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning by introducing a feminist perspective of moral development (Kretchmar, 2008).

Kohlberg's findings had shown that the average female attained a moral judgment rating of stage three, while males scored at a level four. Kohlberg also agreed that adolescent males were more likely to move on to the post-conventional stage. Gilligan suggested that Kohlberg's findings revealed gender bias, and not that females were less mature than boys as Kohlberg

suggested. According to Carol Gilligan, men tend to organized social relationships in a type of hierarchy model while following moral rights. Women on the other hand value more interpersonal relationships, care, sensitivity, and responsibility to people. Gilligan's aim was not to criticize the validity of Kohlberg's work but to integrate both principals, sensitivity and care with justice and rights. Gilligan argued at only by integrating both male (justice) and women (care) we will be able to realize our full human potential in moral development (Kretchmar, 2008).

## References

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