

Perspectives of moral development

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



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Morality has different principal meanings. In its first, descriptive usage, morality means a code of conduct or belief which is held to be authoritative in matters of right and wrong. Morals are created and defined by society, philosophy, religion, and/or individual conscience. Morality is also synonymous with ethics. Ethics is the philosophical study of the moral domain. Ethics seeks to address questions such as how a moral outcome can be achieved in a specific situation, how moral values should be determined, and what morals people actually abide by. This paper and presentation will discuss morality as it relates to the learning and cognitive perspectives in psychology, with the primary goal of discovering which perspective is stronger and why.

There are many different theories of moral development, all with their own strengths and weaknesses. Perspectives, such as the competing learning and cognitive perspectives in this paper, try to explain why morality exists amongst humans. In this paper, we will discuss several important learning and cognitive theories of moral development and their associated critiques. More specifically, from the learning perspective, we will discuss Bandura's social learning theory of moral development, Kohlberg's stages of moral

development and Gillian's expanded research on Kohlberg's stages of moral development.

In particular, the cognitive perspective also shows to be particularly convincing in presenting morality in its light. The cognitive perspective brings many things to the table, such as, how evolutionary adaptive selfishness and never feeling anonymous can create ethical behavior and morality. The cognitive perspective ventures to say morality is only understood when seen in collections of people seeking their own self interest. Included in this paper is a study that supports this selfish tendency of humans. Morality can also be seen as an interplay of emotions and cognition. Lastly, through the cognitive perspective, cause and effect and brain structures are used to help explain morality.

Learning Perspectives

Social Learning Perspective

Social learning is the acquisition of new behavior from watching others demonstration actions (children see, children do) (Bandura, 1969). It is important to note that just because you learn an observable behavior from someone else does not mean that you fully imitate that behavior. When discussing morality, people may pick up only certain pieces from observing other's moral action, emulating to achieve the same goal, not imitating the exact motor functions. This is prevalent when discussing how we develop our morality. Most moral development theories state that acquisition of morality often occurs during childhood, as explained later on.

One of the most important theories of moral development is Bandura's social learning theory of moral development. According to social learning, a child's acquisition of adult moral standards is a gradual process of imitating the observable values and behavior of others. In this theory, moral development is learned through modeling (Bandura, 1969). Bandura believed that direct reinforcement does not account for all learning and "intrinsic reinforcement as a form of internal reward, such as pride, satisfaction, and sense of accomplishment" (Wagoner). Modeling teaches new behaviors, influences the frequency of previously learned behaviors, encourages previously forbidden behaviors, and increases the frequency of similar behaviors (Bandura, 1969). In order for modeling to work accurately, a person must be paying attention to the observable behavior, retain knowledge of the behavior, be able to replicate it, and have motivation of intrinsic-positive reinforcement.

Modeling can be seen in the variety of ways people acquire their personal moral behavior. Primary attainment of morality is derived from immediate family. As a child your parents teach you their perspective of right and wrong through both contingencies and observational learning. For example the parents donate their clothes to the Salvation Army as an act of good will; by the child observing this behavior, he learns to be charitable and donate his clothes as well. Religion also heavily influences moral development by teaching a child to believe and ask for help from a higher power or creator. If a child were to go to church every Sunday growing up they would learn to have similar morals as the congregation such as helping others, living for the higher power, and differentiating between good and evil. Another important

influence on children's moral development is their education. In school, if a child sees another child get in trouble for cheating, that child will view the punishment and choose not to pick up the unmoral behavior of the other student. Other moral inspirations can include, but are not limited to media, peers, mentors, and positive role models.

Overall, this model is the most frequently used when discussing moral development, but no theory comes without critiques. Our evaluation of this theory leads us to believe that this theory does not take into account that everyone has different ideas of morality. Therefore, what may be seen as just in one's life may not be for another. Another issue is whether morality develops out of intention or behavior. For example, if a person knows that his married friend's husband is cheating on her, and tells her with the good intention of helping their marriage and it actually causes a murder, even though the friend's intention was moral, the end result is not. This theory does not account for such ambiguities.

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Another important theory is Kohlberg's stages of Moral development. He based his theory on research and interviews that he conducted with children at younger ages. Kohlberg's theory consisted of six stages, and he was not so interested in the yes or no answers he received, but more on the logic behind the response (Jorgenson, 2006). The six stages included obedience and punishment orientation, individualism and exchange, good interpersonal relationships, maintaining the social order, social contract and individual rights, and universal principles (Jorgenson, 2006). Along with these six

stages were three levels: pre-conventional morality, conventional morality, and post-conventional morality. Through the stages and levels the children begin to see that there is not just one authority, and there are different sides to all situations (Jorgenson, 2006). They also emphasize on being a good person, obeying laws, and concentrate on values that will make for a good society. Pre-conventional level holds stages one and two, and is when the child focuses on external consequences of a certain action (Jorgenson, 2006). At the conventional level the person is concerned with right or wrong and obeys laws rules and society's norms without consequences, and contains stages three and four (Jorgenson, 2006). Last the post-conventional level which composes stages five and six allows the person to realize to live by their own principles and definition of right and wrong (Jorgenson, 2006).

Is it right or wrong to take something that is desperately needed if you have been turned down to receiving it? In one of Kohlberg's examples a woman has a deadly disease and needs some rare medicine that the town druggist makes and sells for way too much. The husband of the woman gathers some money, but not enough and asks the druggist for to give him the drug for what money he does have. The druggist of course says "no", and later that night the husband breaks into the store and takes the medicine, so his wife does not have to suffer (Jorgenson, 2006). There are many different answers to this question, but your morals would be justified with your response.

As any other theory Kohlberg's had critiques as well. The major dilemma with this particular theory is that some psychologists found it sexist. The six stages were more directed towards men than women (Jorgenson, 2006).

Another problem with Kohlberg's theory is that it is limited to morals and excludes moral values such as caring, and that there is an overlap between some of the stages. Critics also state that Kohlberg overemphasizes justice when making a moral decision. One last critique that seems to be an issue is the difference in knowing what we need to do and actually doing it.

Gilligan's Perspective of Moral Development

Expanding on Kohlberg's theory, Carol Gilligan complained against male-centered psychology including Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Gilligan proposed stages of moral development for women. Her theory is very similar to Kohlberg's stages in that there is a pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional stage, but what she discovered through her years of work with women is that when women make monumental moral decisions they are more concerned with caring than the rules of the game (Jorgenson, 2006). For Gilligan, the transitions between the stages are fueled by changes in the sense of self rather than in changes in cognitive capability (Jorgenson, 2006). With that in mind, Gilligan explained that the goal of the first stage is individual survival, transitioning from selfishness to responsibility for others. The second stage's goal is to learn that self-sacrifice is goodness and a person's transition is from goodness into truth that you are a person. Followed by the third, post-conventional stage, where the goal is learning the principle of non-violence. (Jorgenson, 2006)

Cognitive Perspectives

Adaptation

From the cognitive perspective, one way of explaining morality is by using evolution. From this viewpoint it is argued that more altruistic behavior was (in our ancestry) more beneficial than selfish behavior, which increased fitness for the non-selfish competing homo-sapiens. This would indeed allow more success than selfish behavior (Gintis, Henrich, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2008). When it comes to surviving, it is of course easier to work as a group. This goes along well with the discussion that took place in Intro to Cognition class about whether or not there is truly a genuine altruistic act. In this particular case, the homo-sapiens that are less selfish are more “altruistic”, however, they are acting in their best interest. So it really depends on how one defines altruism. If altruism is defined by a person receiving zero benefit from a “selfless” act, then defending true altruism is quite difficult. It could be argued that a seemingly selfless act always provides a reward to an organism, whether it is internal or external. If the reward is not material, then it could be in the form of, for lack of better terms, a warm cozy feeling.

Anonymity

Discounting morality as an adaptation, Price explains being charitable to strangers as a carry over from our Pleistocene ancestors. In the past we encountered few strangers and our Pleistocene brains confused strangers with acquaintances and even kin. Furthermore, Price believes we act ethically under anonymous conditions, because anonymity was rare in our hunter-gatherer times. With anonymity being so rare, our stone-age brains never really act as if we are not being closely watched and socially evaluated

(as cited in Gintis, Henrich, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2008). It seems that we always think we are on stage even though we are not.

Group survival

One may argue that genuine altruism exists, but consider that an altruistic act, which may be costly to an individual may benefit the survival of a group (Gintis, Henrich, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2008). Benefiting the group also benefits the individual that acted altruistically. So is this true altruism? Could our morality be based off of cognitive processes that are just a long run of our own self interest (Dawkins, 1989)? This further highlights the evolutionary advantages of morality. Taking the perspective that humans are purely survival machines, it is clear that ones self-interest is best preserved when being a team player. As R. D. Alexander put it in *The Biology of Moral Systems*, “ ethics, morality, human conduct, and the human psyche are to be understood only if societies are seen as collections of individuals seeking their own self-interest” (as cited in, Gintis, Henrich, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2008).

Saving yourself vs. others

To further show the evolutionary ingrained self-interest to act morally, a study by Moore, Clark, and Kane (2008), accurately predicted that killing to save oneself and other people would be more acceptable than killing to save only other people. When the situation called for inflicting harm to save only others, the harm was considered especially inappropriate. However, when the situation called for saving themselves and others, the harm was

particularly appropriate. Factors such as personal or impersonal nature of inflicted harm, the benefit to the agent, the inevitability of victims' deaths, and individual differences in Working-Memory-Capacity were all factors taken into account with this study.

Emotion and Cognition

Both emotion and cognition are at play with moral judgment, but it is still unclear as to how they interact. One view suggests that even though emotion and cognition operate together, they are dependent on largely separable neural systems. This is best seen when looking at difficult moral decisions associated with response conflict, leading to a competition between the limbic (emotional) and cognitive brain regions. In this scenario, automatic emotional responses must be suppressed by rational (cognitive) top-down processes so that better decisions can be made (Moll, de Oliveira-Souza, & Zahn, 2008).

Cause and Effect

A way to look at the cognitive perspective of morality is based off of influence and consequence. People tend to make decisions based on the nature of the effect their actions will have on them. Moral judgment is said to be a cognitive process which is developed naturally. Cognitive scientists believe that the mind functions by means of heuristics-“ fast and frugal procedures for forming beliefs, reaching decisions, and performing actions” (W. Armstrong, 14). Piaget states that morality is acquired through construction-actively thinking about multiple aspects of situations in which

social conflicts arise and deriving new moral understandings. According to Lawrence Kohlberg, a strong follower of Piaget, the center of moral choice and feelings are based on the outcome of personal well being (Garcia, Solis p. 349). Kohlberg lays out six stages of moral development. In his book, *Theories of Development*, W. C. Crain summarizes Kohlberg's stages well. Collectively, in the six stages, a child conceives right and wrong according to his authorities, then notices differentiating sides to issues and decides to pursue his own interest. As the child develops, he begins to absorb the society's values and expectations, and finally decides to adhere to the morals he thinks are accurate. This coincides with the beliefs that morality is both a learned and mental process.

Brain Structures

Morality is also said to be connected with brain structures and chemical reactions within the brain. These findings are mainly the result of the analysis and study of patients with changes in their social and moral behavior as a consequence of acquired brain injuries, as well as the study of normal and pathologic behaviors with structural and functional neuroimaging (Garcia, Solis p. 352). Let's go to the case of Phineas Gage. Gage was a railroad worker who had an accident on the job resulting in a rod piercing his brain and destroying his frontal lobes. Prior to his accident, Gage was well balanced, intelligent, and respectful. Afterwards, his friends described him as fitful, irreverent, and grossly profane, showing little deference for his fellows (Macmillan). The frontal lobe is believed to be the motor house for morality and cognition. According to researchers, any dysfunction in the frontal lobes

of the brain shows a disassociation between social cognition and moral knowledge. The person no longer understands what morals are and how they affect his behavior. Research done by scientists at Harvard, Caltech, and the University of California concluded that there is a direct link between the neuro-anatomy of emotion and moral judgment. According to F. A. Von Hayek, “ humans do not directly perceive and respond. Instead, human perceptions, thoughts and actions are the result of internal transformations and computations that follow from processes repeatedly carried out by our minds” (E. Gick). This belief associates with the dual process theory of moral judgment. Hayek supposes that we as individuals live in two worlds, a substantial one and phenomenal one. In our bodies, our minds are always processing new information. Our neurotransmitters, when excited by a stimuli, will send messages to our brain, which will in turn elicit a certain response. At times, a person can react one way when enticed by a stimulus, and a completely different way when enticed by that same stimuli in a different environment.

Conclusion

Both the learning and cognitive perspectives bring great arguments to the table; however, our group believes that the cognitive perspective wins out with more supporting scientific evidence. There is an obvious interplay between both perspectives. You must have a predisposing for moral development but you also must have an aspect of social learning involved. We have reasoned that people act morally by socially learning from their family, peers and other environmental factors, nevertheless, morality is ingrained in our brain. There are no morals without a place to put them. With

that in mind, organisms have evolved into moral beings because it is beneficial to the person; making altruistic acts nonexistent.

Another reason we believe the cognitive perspective to be stronger is because of the anatomy of the brain. Damage to the frontal lobes will change cognition, specifically moral cognition. Also, in general moral development is a cognitive process, led by the idea of heuristics. The social learning theory may explain morality in one aspect, but the organism still has to choose what they “ think” (cognition) is moral behavior. Therefore, choosing the learning perspective as the strongest argument would be understandable and debatable, but without the cognitive backbone, morality would not exist.