

# Critical thinking on kohlberg's moral development theory

[Technology](#), [Development](#)



Lawrence Kohlberg was the proponent of the cognitive-developmental theory of moral development (Rathus, 2010). He expounded on the complexities of moral reasoning and the kinds of information that children use. According to him, all children go through the same sequence of the developmental stages of moral reasoning (Rathus, 2010). He further asserts that children progress at different paces and that not all children – who later become adults – reach the highest stage (Rathus, 2010). However, he claims that regardless of the pace at which children develop, they would still have to go through each stage sequentially.

According to Kohlberg (Rathus, 2010), there are 3 levels of moral development, with each level consisting of two stages. These levels are the Preconventional Level; the Conventional Level; and the Postconventional Level (Rathus, 2010). In the Preconventional Level, the moral judgments of children are based on the consequences of their actions. With obedience and punishment being the basis for the orientation in Stage 1, good behavior is associated with obedience, which in turn also enables one to avoid punishment. In Stage 2, good behavior is associated with the satisfaction of one's own needs, as well as the needs of others. According to the findings of Kohlberg's study (Rathus, 2010), the Stage 1 and Stage 2 types of moral judgment were mostly exhibited by children who were aged 7 and 10 and that these declined after the age of 10.

In the Conventional Level, the judgment of the rightness or wrongness of an action is based on conformity to the standards of right and wrong. In Stage 3, good behavior is associated with the ability to meet other people's needs and expectations. In this stage, what majority does is considered to be moral

or normal behavior. On the other hand, good behavior in Stage 4 is based on the rules that enable the maintenance of social order, an example of which is the respect for authority and duty. According to Kohlberg (Rathus, 2010), the Stage 3 and Stage 4 types of judgments were exhibited by children in the middle childhood stage, particularly by those aged 10 and above. Kohlberg also claimed that many people did not develop past the Conventional level. Finally, moral reasoning in the Postconventional level is based on one's own moral standard. In Stage 5, one weighs the needs of humans versus the need for maintaining social order while in Stage 6, one must follow their own conscience and the universal ethical principles, even if this means breaking the law. If a person reaches this level of moral development then it is bound to take place in the adolescent or adult stage.

### **Difficulties in Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory**

Critics of Kohlberg's moral development theory question the link between moral thought and behavior and the gender bias, as well as the quality of Kohlberg's research (Ashford, LeCroy & Lortie, 2009). They question the extent to which moral judgment is associated with behavior, that is, whether people who reason differently also act based on their judgments. However, the studies conducted to try to determine the answers to these questions have obtained inconsistent results, so experts suggest that moral reasoning may not directly affect behavior but may directly provide ethical standards and a sense of direction (Ashford et al., 2009).

Researchers also question the methods used by Kohlberg, particularly about how he measured moral development. Since Kohlberg's method made use of moral dilemmas about which he interviewed subjects and where he based

the subjects' moral development on their answers, some researchers assert that there should be other assessment methods used (Ashford et al., 2009). Moreover, they assert that another concern is that the moral dilemmas presented to the subjects may not be reflective of their lives (Ashford et al., 2009).

Still, another concern over Kohlberg's theory is its gender bias where researchers claim that majority of Kohlberg's research has been conducted with males. However, later studies, which were conducted to determine the differences between the male and female reasoning, indicate that there are very few differences in the moral reasoning of men and women. These imply that women do not necessarily reason in a predominantly caring manner in the same way that men do not necessarily reason in a predominantly justice-oriented manner. Rather, studies show that most people use both perspectives in their reasoning (Ashford et al., 2009).

## **Validity of the Moral Development Theory**

Despite the criticisms and weaknesses of Kohlberg's moral development theory, the writer thinks that this theory is valid because one's morals do determine their personality and these morals develop in stages.

This can be related to Piaget's cognitive development theory in that children's cognitive capabilities and their level of understanding develop in stages. For example, babies and toddlers are so innocent and can comprehend only the simple things. Since children at this age would correspond to Kohlberg's Stage 1 of moral development, these children's understanding would be limited to knowing that such things as their parents

frowning at what they're doing means that they're doing something wrong and that they should obey their parents so that their parents don't get mad at them. However, as children grow older, their cognitive capabilities are also enhanced, which enable them to process more complex information. They also learn how to deal with more complex situations where things may not be as simple as black and white or right and wrong.

How they deal with these complex situations will largely depend on the environment where they were raised, that is the cultural beliefs and the family values that are inculcated in them. Moral development can then be associated with Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which states that a child's development depends on when and where they grow up, that is, how they assimilate the values of a particular culture (Crandell, Crandell & Zanden, 2008). Similarly, Bandura's social learning theory posits that learning occurs through the imitation of the behavior of socially competent models (Crandell, Crandell & Zanden, 2008).

However, while Vygotsky's and Bandura's theories explain how the environment influences one's behavior, Kohlberg's moral development theory explains that the environment influences one's morals, which eventually determine their behavior. This is especially evident in the Conventional and Postconventional levels of moral development where, as children mature, they get exposed to more experiences and more perspectives, which in turn influence their morals up to the point where they reach the postconventional level. As children grow into adulthood and as they become more capable of processing more complex information, they become capable of deciding for themselves how they choose to act. Whereas

the sociocultural theory merely bases personality development on one's assimilation of cultural values and while the cognitive learning theory posits that personality is developed through the imitation of the behavior of models, the moral development theory implies that people can choose which behavior they want to imitate and which culture they want to assimilate to. In other words, as they process all of the perspectives and experiences that they encounter, their values may change, which may make these new values different from their culture's or their models' values. With their values changing, their morals can also change, thus shaping their personality. Finally, once a person's morals are deeply inculcated in them, these morals serve to guide them in their behavior, even in the absence of a culture or a role model.

## References

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