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Reading 19: HOW MORAL ARE YOU?

Kohlberg, L. (1963). The development of children's orientations toward a moral order: Sequence in the development of moral thought. *Vita Humana*, 6, 11–33.

Have you ever really thought about how moral you are compared to others? What are the moral principles guiding your decisions in life? Experience should tell you that people's morality varies a great deal. Psychologists generally define morals as those attitudes and beliefs that help people decide the difference between and degrees of right and wrong. Your concept of morality is determined by the rules and norms of conduct that are set forth by the culture in which you have been raised and that have been internalized by you. Morality is not part of your standard equipment at birth: You were probably born without morals. As you developed through childhood into adolescence and adulthood, your ideas about right and wrong developed along with you. Every normal adult has a personal conception of morality. But where did your morality originate? How did it go from a set of cultural rules to part of who you are?

Probably the two most famous and influential figures in the history of research on the formation of morality were Jean Piaget (discussed in Reading 18) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987). Kohlberg's research at the University of Chicago incorporated and expanded upon many of Piaget's ideas about intellectual development and sparked a new wave of interest in this topic of study. Kohlberg was addressing this question: "How does the amoral infant become capable of moral reasoning?"

Using the work of Piaget as a starting point, Kohlberg theorized that the uniquely human ability to make moral judgments develops in a predictable way during childhood. He believed that specific, identifiable *stages* of moral development are related and similar in concept to Piaget's stages of intellectual development. As Kohlberg explained, "The child can internalize the moral values of his parents and culture and make them his own only as he comes to relate these values to a comprehended social order and to his own goals as a social self" (Kohlberg, 1964). In other words, a child must reach a certain stage of intellectual ability in order to develop a certain level of morality.

With these ideas in mind, Kohlberg set about formulating a method for studying children's abilities to make moral judgments. From that research grew his widely recognized theory of moral development.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

When Kohlberg asserted that morality is acquired in developmental stages, he was using the concept of *stage* in a precise and formal way. It is easy to think of nearly any ability as occurring in stages, but psychologists draw a clear distinction between changes that develop gradually over time (such as a person's height) and those that develop in distinct and separate stages. So when Kohlberg referred to "structural moral stages in childhood and adolescence," he meant that (a) each stage is a uniquely different kind of moral thinking and not just an increased understanding of an adult concept of morality; (b) the stages always occur in the same step-by-step sequence so that no stage is ever skipped and there is rarely any backward progression; and (c) the stages are *prepotent*, meaning that children comprehend all the stages below their own and perhaps have some understanding of no more than one stage above. Children are incapable of understanding higher stages, regardless of encouragement, teaching, or learning. Furthermore, children tend to function at the highest moral stage they have reached. Also implied in this stage formulation of moral development is the notion that the stages are universal and occur in the same order, regardless of individual differences in environment, experience, or culture.

Kohlberg believed that his theory of the formation of morality could be explored by giving children at various ages the opportunity to make moral judgments. If the reasoning they used to make moral decisions could be found to progress predictably at increasing ages, this would be evidence that his stage theory was essentially correct.

METHOD

Kohlberg's research methodology was really quite simple. He presented children of varying ages with 10 hypothetical moral dilemmas. Each child was interviewed for 2 hours and asked questions about the moral issues presented in the dilemmas. The interviews were tape-recorded for later analysis of the moral reasoning used. Two of Kohlberg's most widely cited moral dilemmas were as follows:

The Brother's Dilemma. Joe's father promised he could go to camp if he earned the \$50 for it, and then changed his mind and asked Joe to give him the money he had earned. Joe lied and said he had only earned \$10 and went to camp using the other \$40 he had made. Before he went, he told his younger brother, Alex, about the money and about lying to their father. Should Alex tell their father? (p. 12)

The Heinz Dilemma. 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 10 times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2000 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 \$1000, 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. Should the husband have done this? (p. 17)

The participants in Kohlberg's original study were 72 boys living in the Chicago suburbs. The boys were in three different age groups: 10, 13, and 16 years. Half of each group of boys were from lower-middle-class socioeconomic brackets; the other half were from upper-middle-class brackets. During the course of the 2-hour interviews, the children expressed between 50 and 150 moral ideas or statements.

Following are four examples quoted by Kohlberg, of responses made by children of different ages to these dilemmas:

Danny, age 10, The Brother's Dilemma. "In one way it would be right to tell on his brother, or [else] his father might get mad at him and spank him. In another way it would be right to keep quiet, or [else] his brother might beat him up." (p. 12)

Don, age 13, The Heinz Dilemma. "It really was the druggist's fault, he was unfair, trying to overcharge and letting someone die. Heinz loved his wife and wanted to save her. I think anyone would. I don't think they would put him in jail. The judge would look at all sides and see the druggist was charging too much." (p. 19)

Andy, age 13, The Brother's Dilemma. "If my father finds out later, he won't trust me. My brother wouldn't either, but I wouldn't [feel so bad] if he (the brother) didn't." (p. 20)

George, age 16, The Heinz Dilemma. "I don't think so, since it says the druggist had a right to set the price. I can't say he'd actually be right; I suppose anyone would do it for a wife, though. He'd prefer to go to jail than have his wife die. In my eyes he'd have just cause to do it, but in the law's eyes he'd be wrong. I can't say more than that as to whether it was right or wrong." (p. 21)

Based on such statements, Kohlberg and his associates defined six stages of moral development and assigned various statements to one of the six stages. In addition, six types of motives were used to justify the boys' reasoning, which corresponded to the six stages. It should be noted that each of the six stages of moral reasoning delineated by Kohlberg was intended to apply universally to any situation the child might encounter. The stages do not predict a specific action a child might take when faced with a real dilemma, but rather the *reasoning* the child would use in determining a course of action.

RESULTS

Kohlberg grouped the six stages he had found into three moral levels, each with distinct stages as outlined in Table 19-1. The early stages of morality, which Kohlberg called the "premoral" level, are characterized by egocentrism and personal interests. In Stage 1, the child fails to recognize the interests of others and behaves morally out of fear of punishment for *bad* behavior. In Stage 2, the child begins to recognize the interests and needs of others but behaves morally to get moral behavior back. Good behavior is, in essence, a manipulation of a situation to meet the child's own needs.

In Level 2, conventional morality that is a part of recognizing one's role in interpersonal relationships comes into play. In Stage 3, the child behaves morally in order to live up to the expectations of others and to maintain trust

TABLE 19-1 Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Development

LEVEL 1. PREMORAL LEVEL	
Stage 1.	Punishment and obedience orientation (Consequences for actions determine right and wrong.)
Stage 2.	Naive instrumental hedonism (Satisfaction of one's own needs defines what is good.)
LEVEL 2. MORALITY OF CONVENTIONAL ROLE CONFORMITY	
Stage 3.	"Good boy–nice girl" orientation (What pleases others is good.)
Stage 4.	Authority maintaining morality (Maintaining law and order, doing one's duty are good.)
LEVEL 3. MORALITY OF SELF-ACCEPTED MORAL PRINCIPLES	
Stage 5.	Morality of agreements and democratically determined law (Society's values and individual rights determine right and wrong.)
Stage 6.	Morality of individual principles of conscience (Right and wrong are matters of individual philosophy according to universal principles.)

(Based on data from p. 13.)

and loyalty in relationships. It is during this stage, according to Kohlberg, that "golden rule thinking" begins and the child becomes concerned about the feelings of others (similar to Piaget's notion of overcoming egocentric thinking). Stage 4 begins with the child's recognition of and respect for law and order. Here, an individual takes the viewpoint of the larger social system and sees good behavior in terms of being a law-abiding citizen. There is no questioning of the established social order but rather the belief that whatever upholds the law is good.

When a person enters Level 3, judgments about morality begin to transcend formal societal laws. In Stage 5, the child recognizes that some laws are better than others. Sometimes what is moral may not be legal, and vice versa. The individual still believes that laws should be obeyed to maintain social harmony but may seek to change laws through due process. At this stage, Kohlberg maintained, a person will experience conflict in attempting to integrate morality with legality.

If a person reaches morality Stage 6 (and not everyone does), moral judgments will be based upon a belief in *universal* ethical principles. When laws violate these principles, the person behaves according to these ethical principles, regardless of the law. Morality is determined by the individual's own conscience. Kohlberg was to find in this and later studies that very few individuals actually reach Stage 6. He eventually ascribed this level of reasoning to great leaders of conscience, such as Gandhi, Thoreau, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Kohlberg claimed that,

A motivational aspect of morality was defined by the motive mentioned by the subject in justifying moral action. Six levels of motive were isolated, each congruent with one of the developmental types. They were as follows: (1) punishment by another; (2) manipulation of goods or rewards by another; (3) disapproval by others; (4) censure by legitimate authorities followed by feelings of guilt; (5) community respect and disrespect; (6) self-condemnation. (p. 13)

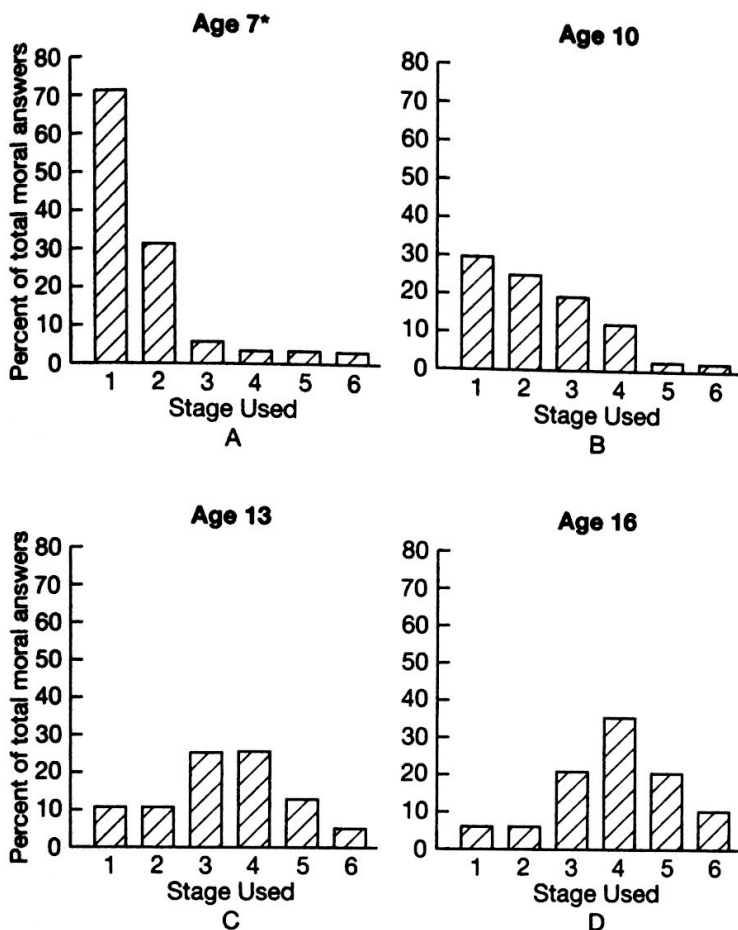


FIGURE 19-1 Stages of moral reasoning by age.

*Kohlberg notes that the data for this group of 7-year-old boys were acquired from an additional group of 12. (Figures based on data on p. 15.)

It was crucial to Kohlberg's stage theory that the different levels of moral reasoning are seen to advance with the age of the person. To test this idea, he analyzed the various stages corresponding to the children's answers according to the ages of the children. Figure 19-1 summarizes these findings: As the age of the subjects increased, the children used increasingly higher stages of moral reasoning to respond to the dilemmas. Other statistical analyses demonstrated that the ability to use each stage appeared to be a prerequisite to moving to the next-higher level.

DISCUSSION

In Kohlberg's discussion of the implications of his findings, he pointed out that this new conceptualization clarified how children actively organize the morality of the world around them in a series of predictable, sequential stages. For the child, this was not seen simply as an assimilation and internalization of adult moral teachings through verbal explanation and punishment but as an *emergence* of cognitive moral structures that developed as a result of the child's interaction with the social and cultural environment. In this view, children do not simply learn morality—they construct it. What this means is that a child is literally incapable of understanding or using Stage 3 moral reasoning before passing through Stages 1 and 2. And a person would not apply the moral concepts of basic human rights found in Stage 5 to solve a dilemma unless that person had already experienced and constructed the patterns of morality

inherent in the first four stages. Further implications of this and later work of Kohlberg are discussed shortly.

CRITICISMS AND RECENT APPLICATIONS

Kohlberg expanded and revised his stage theory of moral development over more than 30 years following this original study. As with most new, influential research, his views have been questioned from several perspectives. One of the most often cited criticisms is that even if Kohlberg was correct in his ideas about moral reasoning, this does not mean those ideas can be applied to moral *behavior*. In other words, what a person thinks or says is moral may not be reflected in the person's moral actions. Several studies have suggested a lack of correspondence between moral reasoning and moral behavior, although others have found evidence that such a relationship does exist. One interesting line of research related to this criticism focused on the importance of strong situational factors in determining whether someone will act according to his or her stage of moral reasoning (see Kurtines, 1986). Although this criticism may have some validity, Kohlberg acknowledged that his theory applied only to moral *reasoning*. The fact that situational forces may sometimes alter moral *behavior* does not negate the fact, according to Kohlberg, that moral *reasoning* progresses through the stages he described.

Another criticism of Kohlberg's work has focused on his claim that the six stages of moral reasoning are universal. These critics claim that Kohlberg's stages represent an interpretation of morality that is found uniquely in Western individualistic societies and may not apply to the non-Western, collectivist cultures that make up most of the world's population (see Reading 28 on the research by Triandis for a discussion of the differences between these cultures). However, in defense of the universality of Kohlberg's ideas, 45 separate studies conducted in 27 different cultures were reviewed (Snarey, 1987). In every study examined, researchers found that all the participants passed through the stages in the same sequence, without reversals, and that stages 1 through 5 were present in all the cultures studied. Interestingly, however, in more collectivist cultures (e.g., Taiwan, Papua, New Guinea, and Israel), some of the moral judgments did not fit into *any* of Kohlberg's six stages. These were judgments based on the welfare of the entire community. Such reasoning was not found in the judgments made by U.S. participants (see Reading 28 on Triandis's research on individualistic and collectivist cultures later in this book).

A third area of criticism deals with the belief that Kohlberg's stages of moral development may not apply equally to males and females. The researcher who led this line of questioning was Carol Gilligan (1982). She maintained that girls and boys and women and men do not think about morality in the same way. In her research, she found that, in making moral decisions, women talked more than men about interpersonal relationships, the responsibility for others, the importance of avoiding hurting others, and

the importance of the connections among people. She called this foundation upon which women's morality rests a *care orientation*. Based on this gender difference, Gilligan has argued that women will score lower on Kohlberg's scale because the lower stages deal more with these relationship issues (such as Stage 3, which is based primarily on building trust and loyalty in relationships). Men, on the other hand, Gilligan says, make moral decisions based on issues of justice, which fit more easily into Kohlberg's highest stages. She contends that neither of these approaches to morality is superior, and that if women are judged by Kohlberg to be at a lower moral level than men, it is because of an unintentional gender bias built into Kohlberg's theory.

Other researchers, for the most part, have failed to find support for Gilligan's assertion. Several studies have found no significant gender differences in moral reasoning using Kohlberg's methods. Gilligan has responded to those negative findings by acknowledging that although women are *capable* of using all levels of moral reasoning, in their real lives they choose not to do so. Instead, women focus on the human relationship aspects discussed in the preceding paragraph. This has been demonstrated by research showing how girls are willing to make a greater effort to help another person in need and tend to score higher on tests of emotional empathy (see Hoffman, 1977, for a more complete discussion of these gender issues).

Kohlberg's early work on the development of moral judgment continues to be cited in studies from a wide range of disciplines. One area of research that relied on Kohlberg's study examined the effects of women's alcohol abuse during pregnancy on their children's moral development (Schonfeld, Mattson, & Riley, 2005). Although evidence is clear that alcohol abuse during pregnancy suppresses intelligence scores in exposed children, this study also found that "Children and adolescents with histories of prenatal alcohol exposure demonstrated lower overall moral maturity compared with the control group. According to Kohlberg's stages of moral development, the [alcohol exposed] group was primarily concerned with minimizing negative consequences to self (i.e., Stage 2), whereas the control group demonstrated concern for others and what is socially normative (i.e., Stage 3)" (pp. 550–551).

Another study citing Kohlberg's theory examined the accuracy of eyewitness testimony given by children (Bottoms et al., 2002). Children between the ages of three and six participated in a play session with their mothers. Half of the children were told not to play with certain toys in the room. However, when the researcher left, the children's mothers urged them to play with the "forbidden" toys but to "keep it a secret." Later the researchers interviewed the children and asked if they had played with the prohibited toys: "Results indicated that older children who were instructed to keep events secret withheld more information than did older children not told to keep events secret. Younger children's reports were not significantly affected by the secret manipulation" (p. 285). Often, children are told by adults to keep secrets about the adults' illegal or injurious activities. Understanding when their understanding of the use and meaning of secrecy may play an important role in the use of

child eyewitness testimony in legal proceedings (see Reading 16 on Loftus's research on eyewitness testimony earlier in this book).

CONCLUSION

Dialogue and debate on Kohlberg's work has continued to the present (e.g., see Goodwin & Darley, 2010) and shows every sign of continuing into the future. Its ultimate validity and importance remain to be clearly defined. However, few new conceptualizations of human development have produced the amount of research, speculation, and debate that surrounds Kohlberg's theory of moral development. And its usefulness to society, in one sense, was predicted by Kohlberg in this quote from 1964:

Although any conception of moral education must recognize that the parent cannot escape the direct imposition of behavior demands and moral judgments upon the child, it may be possible to define moral education primarily as a matter of stimulating the development of the child's own moral judgment and its control of action [I] have found teachers telling 13-year-olds not to cheat "because the person you copied from might have it wrong and so it won't do you any good." Most of these children were capable of advancing much more mature reasons for not cheating Children are almost as likely to reject moral reasoning beneath their level as to fail to assimilate reasoning too far above their level. (p. 425)

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