Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development

Kohlberg’s theory of moral development states that we progress through three levels of moral thinking that build on our cognitive development.

**KEY POINTS**

- Lawrence Kohlberg expanded on the earlier work of cognitive theorist Jean Piaget to explain the moral development of children, which he believed follows a series of stages.
- Kohlberg defined three levels of moral development: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Each level has two distinct stages.
- During the preconventional level, a child’s sense of morality is externally controlled. Children accept and believe the rules of authority figures, such as parents and teachers, and they judge an action based on its consequences.
- During the conventional level, an individual’s sense of morality is tied to personal and societal relationships. Children continue to accept the rules of authority figures, but this is now because they believe that this is necessary to ensure positive relationships and societal order.
- During the postconventional level, a person’s sense of morality is defined in terms of more abstract principles and values. People now believe that some laws are unjust and should be changed or eliminated.
- Kohlberg’s theory has been criticized for its cultural and gendered bias toward white, upper-class men and boys. It also fails to account for inconsistencies within moral judgments.

The term morality refers to Recognition of the distinction between good and evil or between right and wrong; respect for and obedience to the rules of right conduct; the mental disposition or characteristic of behaving in a manner intended to produce good results.

Lawrence Kohlberg expanded on the earlier work of cognitive theorist Jean Piaget to explain the moral development of children. Kohlberg believed that moral development, like cognitive development, follows a series of stages. He used the idea of moral dilemmas—stories that present conflicting ideas about two moral values—to teach 10 to 16 year-old boys about morality and values. The best known moral dilemma created by Kohlberg is the “Heinz” dilemma, which discusses the idea of obeying the law versus saving a life. Kohlberg emphasized that it is the way an individual reasons about a dilemma that determines positive moral development.
After presenting people with various moral dilemmas, Kohlberg reviewed people’s responses and placed them in different stages of moral reasoning. According to Kohlberg, an individual progresses from the capacity for pre-conventional morality (before age 9) to the capacity for conventional morality (early adolescence), and toward attaining post-conventional morality (once Piaget’s idea of formal operational thought is attained), which only a few fully achieve. Each level of morality contains two stages, which provide the basis for moral development in various contexts.

**Kohlberg’s stages of moral development**

Kohlberg identified three levels of moral reasoning: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Each level is associated with increasingly complex stages of moral development.

**Level 1: Preconventional**

Throughout the preconventional level, a child’s sense of morality is externally controlled. Children accept and believe the rules of authority figures, such as parents and teachers. A child with pre-conventional morality has not yet adopted or internalized society’s conventions regarding what is right or wrong, but instead focuses largely on external consequences that certain actions may bring.

**Stage 1: Obedience-and-Punishment Orientation**

Stage 1 focuses on the child’s desire to obey rules and avoid being punished. For example, an action is perceived as morally wrong because the perpetrator is punished; the worse the punishment for the act is, the more “bad” the act is perceived to be.

**Stage 2: Instrumental Orientation**

Stage 2 expresses the “what’s in it for me?” position, in which right behavior is defined by whatever the individual believes to be in their best interest. Stage two reasoning shows a limited interest in the needs of others, only to the point where it might further the individual’s own interests. As a result, concern for others is not based on loyalty or intrinsic respect, but rather a “you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours” mentality. An example would be when a child is asked by his parents to do a chore. The child asks “what’s in it for me?” and the parents offer the child an incentive by giving him an allowance.

**Level 2: Conventional**

Throughout the conventional level, a child’s sense of morality is tied to personal and societal relationships. Children continue to accept the rules of authority figures, but this is now due to their belief that this is necessary to ensure positive relationships and societal order. Adherence to rules and conventions is somewhat rigid during these stages, and a rule’s appropriateness or fairness is seldom questioned.

**Stage 3: Good Boy, Nice Girl Orientation**
In stage 3, children want the approval of others and act in ways to avoid disapproval. Emphasis is placed on good behavior and people being “nice” to others.

**Stage 4: Law-and-Order Orientation**

In stage 4, the child blindly accepts rules and convention because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society. Rules are seen as being the same for everyone, and obeying rules by doing what one is “supposed” to do is seen as valuable and important. Moral reasoning in stage four is beyond the need for individual approval exhibited in stage three. If one person violates a law, perhaps everyone would—thus there is an obligation and a duty to uphold laws and rules. Most active members of society remain at stage four, where morality is still predominantly dictated by an outside force.

**Level 3: Postconventional**

Throughout the postconventional level, a person’s sense of morality is defined in terms of more abstract principles and values. People now believe that some laws are unjust and should be changed or eliminated. This level is marked by a growing realization that individuals are separate entities from society and that individuals may disobey rules inconsistent with their own principles. Post-conventional moralists live by their own *ethical* principles—principles that typically include such basic human rights as life, liberty, and justice—and view rules as useful but changeable mechanisms, rather than absolute dictates that must be obeyed without question. Because post-conventional individuals elevate their own moral evaluation of a situation over social conventions, their behavior, especially at stage six, can sometimes be confused with that of those at the pre-conventional level. Some theorists have speculated that many people may never reach this level of abstract moral reasoning.

**Stage 5: Social-Contract Orientation**

In stage 5, the world is viewed as holding different opinions, rights, and values. Such perspectives should be mutually respected as unique to each person or community. Laws are regarded as social contracts rather than rigid edicts. Those that do not promote the general welfare should be changed when necessary to meet the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This is achieved through majority decision and inevitable compromise. Democratic government is theoretically based on stage five reasoning.

**Stage 6: Universal-Ethical-Principal Orientation**

In stage 6, moral reasoning is based on abstract reasoning using universal ethical principles. Generally, the chosen principles are abstract rather than concrete and focus on ideas such as equality, dignity, or respect. Laws are valid only insofar as they are grounded in justice, and a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws. People choose the ethical principles they want to follow, and if they violate those principles, they feel guilty. In this way, the individual acts because it is morally right to do so (and not because he or she wants to avoid punishment), it is in their best interest, it is expected, it is legal, or it is previously agreed upon. Although Kohlberg insisted that stage six exists, he found it difficult to identify individuals who consistently operated at that level.
HEINZ DILEMMA

One of Kohlberg’s best known experiments is known as the **Heinz Dilemma**. In this experiment, Kohlberg presented a story about a man named Heinz: Heinz’s wife had a form rare cancer and was dying. A doctor told Heinz that a local chemist had invented a new drug that might save his wife. Heinz was very happy to hear this and went to talk to the chemist. When Heinz saw the price tag of the new drug, he was devastated because there was no way he could afford the drug. Heinz also knew that the price was ten times of the cost of the drug so the chemist was making a big buck from this drug.

Heinz tried his best to borrow money from his friends and family, but the money was still not enough. He went back to the chemist and begged the chemist to lower the price. The chemist refused to do that. Heniz knew that his wife would die without this new drug, so he broke into the chemist’s office that night and stole the drug.

Watch this video - [https://youtu.be/5czp9S4u26M](https://youtu.be/5czp9S4u26M)

After telling Heinz’s story to children in various age groups, Kohlberg asked them what Heinz should do. Based on the children’s responses, Kohlberg classified their moral reasoning into three levels, each of which contains two distinct substages:

- Pre-conventional Level
  - Obedience
  - Self-interest
- Conventional Level
  - Conformity
  - Law and order
- Post-conventional Level
  - Social contract orientation
  - Universal human ethics

Age ranges are considerably more vague in the Kohlberg’s stages than in the Piaget stages, as children vary quite significantly in their rate of moral development.

As we studied, the pre-conventional stage is associated with the first two Kohlberg’s stages of moral development: **Obedience** and **Self-interest**. At this level, children are only interested in securing their own benefits. This is their idea of morality. They begin by avoiding punishment, and quickly learn that they may secure other benefits by pleasing others. No other ethical concepts are available to children this young.

When being asked what Heinz should do, children at this level of moral development may answer:

- He shouldn’t steal the drug because it’s bad to steal.
- He should steal the drug because the chemist is charging too much.
- He should steal the drug because he’ll feel good that he saves his wife.
- He shouldn’t steal the drug because he’ll end up in prison.

These Kohlberg stages are parallel to **Piaget’s sensorimotor stage** – for children whose conceptual framework don’t extend beyond their own senses and movements, the moral concepts of right and wrong would be difficult to develop.
According to Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development, the conventional level is associated with Conformity and Law and Order. This is the stage at which children learn about rules and authority. They learn that there are certain “conventions” that govern how they should and should not behave, and learn to obey them.

At this stage, no distinction is drawn between moral principles and legal principles. What is right is what is handed down by authority, and disobeying the rules is always by definition “bad.”

When being asked what Heinz should do, children at this level of moral development may answer:

- He should steal the drug because he is a good husband, and a good husband would do anything to save his wife.
- He shouldn’t steal the drug because he’s not a criminal.
- He shouldn’t steal the drug because it’s illegal to steal.
- He should steal the drug to save his wife and after that, he should go to prison for the crime.

Kohlberg believed that some people stay at this stage of moral reasoning for their whole lives, deriving moral principles from social or religious authority figures and never thinking about morality for themselves.
The Post-conventional Level

The post-conventional level is associated with these Kohlberg’s stages of moral development: **Social contract orientation** and **Universal human ethics**. At this level, children have learned that there is a difference between what is right and what is wrong from a moral perspective, and what is right and what is wrong according to rules. Although they often overlap, there are still times when breaking a rule is the right thing to do. When being asked what Heinz should do, children at this level of moral development may answer:

- He should steal the drug because everyone has a right to live, regardless of the law.
- He shouldn’t steal the drug because the chemist deserves to get paid for his effort to develop the drug.
- He should steal the drug because saving life is more important than anything else.
- He shouldn’t steal the drug because others also have to pay for the drug. It’s only fair that he pays for it as well.

**Comparisons of Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development and Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development**

Although Kohlberg’s stages of moral development aren’t direct parallels of Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, Kohlberg was inspired by Piaget’s work. By comparing these two theories, you can get a sense of how our concepts of the world around us (our descriptive concepts) influence our sense of what we ought to do in that world (our normative concepts).
Kohlberg’s Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level/Stage</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I: Obedience/Punishment</td>
<td>Infancy</td>
<td>No difference between doing the right thing and avoiding punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I: Self-Interest</td>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>Interest shifts to rewards rather than punishment – effort is made to secure greatest benefit for oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II: Conformity and Interpersonal Accord</td>
<td>School-age</td>
<td>The “good boy/girl” level. Effort is made to secure approval and maintain friendly relations with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II: Authority and Social Order</td>
<td>School-age</td>
<td>Orientation toward fixed rules. The purpose of morality is maintaining the social order. Interpersonal accord is expanded to include the entire society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III: Social Contract</td>
<td>Teens</td>
<td>Mutual benefit, reciprocity. Morally right and legally right are not always the same. Utilitarian rules that make life better for everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III: Universal Principles</td>
<td>Adulthood</td>
<td>Morality is based on principles that transcend mutual benefit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>What happens at this stage?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensorimotor</td>
<td>0-2 years old</td>
<td>Coordination of senses with motor responses, sensory curiosity about the world. Language used for demands and cataloguing. Object permanence is developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoperational</td>
<td>2-7 years old</td>
<td>Symbolic thinking, use of proper syntax and grammar to express concepts. Imagination and intuition are strong, but complex abstract thoughts are still difficult. Conservation is developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Operational</td>
<td>7-11 years old</td>
<td>Concepts attached to concrete situations. Time, space, and quantity are understood and can be applied, but not as independent concepts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Operational</td>
<td>11 years old and older</td>
<td>Theoretical, hypothetical, and counterfactual thinking. Abstract logic and reasoning, strategy and planning become possible. Concepts learned in one context can be applied to another.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Criticisms of Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development

Like Piaget, Kohlberg has come under fire in recent years from cross-cultural psychologists who believe that Kohlberg’s theory is simply a codification of Western (post-modern Western liberal, to be precise) notions of justice and morality. Other moral and political cultures may not believe in certain principles.

These critics argue that Kohlberg’s stages of moral development are Kohlberg’s attempt to make his own moral beliefs appear to be psychological facts. Kohlberg’s theory of moral development also seems to have a troubling normative aspect – that is, it seems to suggest that certain kinds of moral reasoning are better than others. This, of course, presupposes certain moral assumptions, and so from a philosophical perspective Kohlberg’s argument is circular.

Furthermore, there are also some studies that indicate that children as young as six years old can attain vague concepts of universal ethical principles – they may be able to distinguish between a rule that says “no hitting” (universal and moral) and one that says “kids must sit in a circle during story-time” (conventional, arbitrary, and non-moral).

Since Kohlberg’s theory of moral development questions whether even teenagers can attain this level of moral reasoning, these studies throw considerable doubt on his conclusions. The best conjecture, however, may be that Kohlberg’s stages of moral development describe not a one-way process of psychological growth for an individual, but a categorization of different types of moral values, which may be developed and prioritized differently for different individuals and moral cultures.

Kohlberg has been criticized for his assertion that women seem to be deficient in their moral reasoning abilities when compared to men. Carol Gilligan (1982), a research assistant of Kohlberg, criticized her former mentor’s theory because it was based so narrowly on research using white, upper-class men and boys. She argued that women are not deficient in their moral reasoning and instead proposed that males and females reason differently: girls and women focus more on staying connected and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Kohlberg’s theory has been criticized for emphasizing justice to the exclusion of other values, with the result that it may not adequately address the arguments of those who value other moral aspects of actions. Similarly, critics argue that Kohlberg’s stages are culturally biased—that the highest stages in particular reflect a westernized ideal of justice based on individualistic thought. This is biased against those that live in non-Western societies that place less emphasis on individualism.

Another criticism of Kohlberg’s theory is that people frequently demonstrate significant inconsistency in their moral judgements. This often occurs in moral dilemmas involving drinking and driving or business situations where participants have been shown to reason at a lower developmental stage, typically using more self-interest driven reasoning (i.e., stage two) than authority and social order obedience driven reasoning (i.e., stage four). Critics argue that Kohlberg’s theory cannot account for such inconsistencies.
Applications in Classroom & Learning

Kohlberg’s Stage 1 and Early Childhood Education

Most preschool and some kindergarten students are still in the first stage of moral development, according to Kohlberg’s theory. In this stage, it is important to begin to lay the groundwork to encourage moral behaviors.

In stage 1, young children are primarily motivated to behave appropriately simply to avoid being punished for misbehaving. By understanding this stage of moral development, teachers can help to guide their student’s moral development by setting a code of conduct for the classroom to encourage good behavior. For young children who are still in the first stage of moral development, it is important to set clear guidelines for behavior, and clear consequences for misbehavior. It is important to stay consistent with the code of conduct and punishment system throughout the school year.

For young children, it is important to implement clear punishments, such as loss of privileges, for students who break your classroom rules. This could include taking away free choice time for students who break the rules.

You can also start to offer rewards for children who follow the rules at this level. As they progress toward stage 2 of level 1, they will become more motivated to follow the rules if an enticing reward is offered.

Encourage students to work together and help each other to strengthen their moral character.
Kohlberg’s Stage 2 and Early Elementary

By stage 2, young children become more motivated to behave and follow the rules if they are offered a reward for doing so. Implementing a system to reward elementary students who follow the classroom rules and who exhibit helpful behaviors in the classroom can go a long way in encouraging moral behavior.

At this stage, children understand that behaviors that are punished are considered “bad,” and that behaviors that are rewarded are considered “good.”

Students also begin to learn that different people have different points of view at this stage. They consider what is best for the individual (themselves) to be what is right, however, they also begin to see the need for mutual benefit. They begin to learn that others will treat them well if they in turn treat others well. They begin to see morality in terms of helping others for their own self-interest.

At this stage, it is a good idea to introduce classroom activities that encourage cooperation between students. Games and assignments that require students to help one another in order to succeed will help students at this stage to further develop their moral reasoning skills.
Kohlberg’s Stage 3 and Late Elementary/Middle School

Most children reach stage 3 between the ages of 10 and 13. In this stage, children begin to think more about the other people around them. They consider how their behavior affects other people, and how other people perceive them.

At this stage, you can help to strengthen your students’ moral character by allowing them to help you to create a code of conduct for the classroom. This lets the students be partially responsible for the classroom rules, which they will be expected to follow.

At this stage, students begin to think more about how their actions affect others. They may be less inclined to follow school rules if they can’t see a clear benefit to following the rules. By allowing students in this stage to have a hand in creating the code of conduct by discussing how different behaviors affect other students, students will be more willing to follow the rules. At this stage, students may start to become unwilling to blindly follow rules if they don’t understand the reasoning behind them.

At this stage, it is also important to continue to introduce activities and assignments that encourage students to work together toward a common goal to further strengthen your students’ moral character.

Older students may begin to reach level 4 by the time they reach the end of middle school or the beginning of high school. Allow ample time for group projects and activities that give students at different stages of development the opportunity to work together and to learn how their behaviors affect others in a social context.
Teachers can help to guide the moral development of students by using Kohlberg's six stage model of moral development. | Source

**Teachers Can Apply Kohlberg’s Model to Classroom Morality**

Kohlberg’s six stage model of moral development is an excellent tool for understanding students at different stages of moral understanding. By understanding this theory of moral development, teachers can help to guide the moral characters of their students and help them to become the best that they can be.
CAROL GILLIGAN

This is an advancement of Kohlberg’s theory. It had been observed that Kohlberg’s theory was proposed based on the moral thinking of privileged white men and boys. Hence this theory was popularized by taking both male and female thinking capabilities into account.

Carol Gilligan, a psychological theorist was born on Nov 28, 1936 in the New York city. She pursued her doctorate degree in Social Psychology from the Harvard University. Gilligan was a research assistant for Lawrence Kohlberg, but she eventually became independent and criticized some of his theories.

Gilligan’s Theory

Carol Gilligan opines that Kohlberg’s theories are biased upon the male thinking process. According to Gilligan, Kohlberg seemed to have studied only privileged men and boys. She believed that women face a lot of psychological challenges and they are not moral widgets. The women’s point of view on moral development involves caring which shows its effect on human relationships.

Hence she proposed a theory which has the same three stages of Kohlberg but with different stages of moral development. Let us understand the stages in detail.

Though the names of the stages are the same, the stages differ in this method. The moral development in Gilligan’s theory are based on pro-social behaviors such as Altruism, caring and helping and the traits such as honesty, fairness and respect.

**Pre-conventional Level**
- A person in this stage cares for oneself to ensure survival.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVELS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE-CONVENTIONAL LEVEL</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONVENTIONAL LEVEL</td>
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<tr>
<td>POST-CONVENTIONAL LEVEL</td>
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</table>
• Though the person’s attitude is selfish, this is the transition phase, where the person finds the connection between oneself and others.

**Conventional Level**

• In this stage, the person feels responsible and shows care towards other people.

• Carol Gilligan believes that this moral thinking can be identified in the role of a mother and a wife. This sometimes leads to the ignorance of the self.

**Post-conventional Level**

• This is the stage, where the principle of care for self as well as others, is accepted.

• However, a section of people may never reach this level.

According to the Carol Gilligan’s theory of moral development, changes occur due to the change of self rather than the critical thinking. It was stated that the post-conventional level of Kohlberg is not attained by women. But Carol Gilligan researched and found that the post-conventional level of thinking is not being easy for women to go through because they care for the relationships.

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**Levels of Thinking**

Carol Gilligan states that the post-conventional level of moral thinking can be dealt based on the two types of thinking. Gilligan’s theory is based on the two main ideas, the care-based morality (usually found in women) and the justice-based morality (usually found in men).
Care-based Morality

Care-based morality is the kind of thinking found in women. This is based on the following principles.

- More emphasis is given to inter-connected relationships and universality.
- Acting justly focuses on avoidance of violence.
- Women with this are usually interested in helping others.
- More common in girls because of their connections to their mothers.
- Because girls remain connected to their mothers, they are less inclined to worry about issues of fairness.

Justice-based Morality

Justice-based morality is the kind of thinking found in men. This is based on the following principles.

- They view the world as being composed of autonomous individuals who interact with one another.
- Acting justly means avoiding inequality.
- Individuals with this are usually interested in protecting individuality.
- Thought to be more common among boys because of their need to differentiate between themselves and their mothers.
- Because they are separated from their mothers, boys become more concerned with the concept of inequality.

The Carol Gilligan’s theory can be better understood if explained with an example.

Example of Gilligan’s Theory

In order to understand Gilligan’s theory, a popular example is usually considered. A group of moles give shelter to a porcupine. But they are being continuously stabbed by the porcupine’s quills. Now, what should they do?
The Pre-conventional level of thinking states that to think for the good of oneself, either the moles or the porcupine only can live there. The other has to leave the place.

According to the Conventional level of thinking, which brings a transition, from self to the good of others and which might even lead to sacrifice, either the moles or the porcupine has to sacrifice and again this leads to a stage where only moles or the porcupine can live in the burrow.

According to the Post-conventional level of thinking, which states that the good of both the parties has to be considered, both the moles and the porcupine come to an agreement that both will have separate places in the same burrow, where they limit to behave themselves and will not cause any trouble to other. This helps both of them to live in the same place with peace.

The researchers found that the solution to this scenario is different with different individuals; gender also plays an important role. The thinkers were observed viewing the problem in two different perspectives, the care-based and the justice-based.

In a Justice-based perspective, the solution to the problem is viewed as a conflict between two individual groups. Only one of them can have the property. Either moles or the porcupine will get the place in the burrow. Hence the solution to the dilemma, is not a resolution of the conflict, it is a verdict.

In a Care-based perspective, the approach differs. The problem is viewed as a difficult situation faced by both the parties together, rather than a fight between both of them. Hence the solution is sought in a way around the problem or to remove the problem completely. The solution may sound compromising but not damaging. The relationship will still be the same, after the resolution.

Researchers found that Justice-based perspective is pre-dominant among males while Care-based prospective is among females.

Consensus and Controversy

The moral judgment may lead to conflicts if they are not delivered properly without hurting the feelings of the persons involved. There are two stages after the judgement. The stages are described below –

Consensus

This is that state where people come into agreement with the judgement given by getting convinced with the moral reasons. This will leave the persons with a feel that justice has been done, the verdict may favor any party.
Controversy

This is that state where the persons involved in an issue are not satisfied by the verdict and might feel that it was decided on partial interests. This will leave the people with a sense of dissatisfaction that justice was not done, which might lead to another conflict.