# Kohlberg's Stages

Major Concept Summary: Kohlberg’s Stages

ED 304: Ed Psych and Human Development

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Lawrence Kohlberg was a developmental psychologist who is best known for his theory of moral development. Kohlberg proposed that moral development is a continuous process that occurs throughout a person's lifetime and that it follows a series of predictable stages. He identified three levels of moral development: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Kohlberg's theory emphasizes the cognitive aspect of moral development, and he believes that moral reasoning, rather than moral behavior, is the best indicator of moral development. His theory was heavily influenced by the work of Jean Piaget, who also proposed a stage theory of development. However, while Piaget focused on cognitive development, Kohlberg focused on moral development.

### Kohlberg in the Classroom

Any educator who looks at educational theories wonders how they could apply them to the classroom. Kohlberg's theory of moral development can be applied in the classroom in several ways, including:

1. Creating an environment where students can grow to be moral and good members of society. Teaching students knowledge is a teacher's job, and it is so important, but it is equally important that teachers help to create students who have strong moral values and beliefs
2. Encouraging critical thinking: Teachers can use Kohlberg's stages of moral development to help students understand the reasoning behind different moral perspectives. By encouraging students to consider the reasoning behind their own moral beliefs as well as the beliefs of their classmates, teachers can help students develop their critical thinking skills and become more open-minded.
3. Facilitating discussions and debates: Teachers can use Kohlberg's theory to facilitate classroom discussions and debates about moral issues. By encouraging students to consider different perspectives on a topic and to defend their positions using reasoning, teachers can help students develop their reasoning and argumentation skills.

Most of Kohlberg's stages could be incorporated into the classroom, depending on which stage the teacher would like their students to focus on.

Kohlberg's first level of moral development is called the pre-conventional level. This level is characterized by a focus on avoiding punishment and seeking rewards. It is typically seen in children and individuals who have not yet developed a sense of morality based on social norms and conventions.

* (1) The first stage within the pre-conventional level is called the punishment-obedience orientation. At this stage, individuals view rules and authority as absolute and unchangeable. They believe that the only way to avoid punishment is to obey the rules, regardless of the circumstances. This stage is often seen in very young children who are just learning about rules and authority. An example of this is when a child obeys orders from their parents because they are afraid of getting punished for disobeying.
* (2) The second stage within the pre-conventional level is called the instrumental-relativist orientation. At this stage, individuals begin to understand that rules can be changed and that they can be manipulated to serve their interests. They view rules as a means to an end, and they will only obey them if they believe that doing so will lead to a desired outcome. This stage is often seen in older children and adolescents who are beginning to develop a sense of self-interest. An example of this would be teenagers putting together a study group and helping each other with their homework. It's a trade of favors and exchanging help.

Kohlberg's second level of moral development is called the conventional level. This level is distinguished by a focus on following rules and maintaining social order. It is usually seen in individuals who have developed a sense of morality based on social norms and conventions.

* (3)The first stage within the conventional level is called the "good boy-nice girl" orientation. At this stage, individuals view morality as a way to gain the approval and acceptance of others. They believe that being a "good boy" or "nice girl" means following the rules and living up to the expectations of others, such as family, friends, and community. This stage is often seen in individuals who are highly concerned with fitting in and being liked by others. An example of this is when a student shares their lunch with a classmate who forgot theirs because they want to be seen as a caring and generous person.
* (4) The second stage within the conventional level is called the "law and order" orientation. At this stage, individuals view morality as a way to maintain social order and ensure the well-being of society. They believe that rules and laws are necessary to maintain order and protect the rights of individuals. This stage is often seen in individuals who are highly concerned with maintaining social order and upholding the law. An example of this is following rules that you disagree with because you understand that those rules are important to others.

Kohlberg's third level of moral development is called the post-conventional level. This level is characterized by a focus on individual principles and universal ethical guidelines. It is typically seen in individuals who have developed a sense of morality that is not based solely on social norms and conventions, but on personal values and principles.

* (5) The first stage within the post-conventional level is called the "social contract" orientation. At this stage, individuals view morality as a set of agreements and contracts that are made between individuals and society for the greater good. They believe that laws and rules should be just and fair and that they should be followed as long as they align with their values and principles. This stage is often seen in individuals who are highly concerned with social justice and fairness. An example of this is employees finding out that their company has been manipulating financial records, but putting their job at risk to expose the wrongdoings.
* (6) The second stage within the post-conventional level is called the "universal ethical principles'' orientation. At this stage, individuals view morality as a set of universal principles that should be followed regardless of the situation. They believe that there are certain moral principles, such as the principle of autonomy or the principle of non-violence, that are always important and should be upheld in all situations. This stage is often seen in individuals who are highly concerned with personal integrity and moral consistency. An example of this is when an individual advocates for something they believe in, like protesting.

It's important to note that these stages are not necessarily linear, and people can move back and forth between them depending on the situation. Additionally, not everyone will reach the highest stages of moral development.

Kohlberg's theory has been widely studied and is applicable across different cultures and age groups. However, it has also been criticized for being overly focused on justice and rights, and for not taking into account the role of emotions and social context in moral development. Despite these criticisms, Kohlberg's theory has had a significant impact on the field of psychology and has provided a framework for understanding how and why people's moral beliefs and behaviors change over time.

### These are some other pieces and critiques of Kohlberg's theories

Gender bias: A criticism of Kohlberg's theory which posits that the theory is biased in favor of males and does not accurately reflect the moral development of females. This theory was developed by Carol Gilligan, who worked under Kohlberg during his study of moral development

Subject-centered morality: A type of moral reasoning that is centered on the needs and desires of the individual, rather than on societal norms.

Social-order-maintaining morality: A type of moral reasoning that is centered on maintaining social order and adhering to societal expectations.

Cultural bias: A criticism of Kohlberg's theory which posits that the theory is biased towards Western cultures and does not accurately reflect the moral development of non-Western cultures.    Kohlberg's theory has been widely studied and is applicable across different cultures and age groups. However, it has also been criticized for being overly focused on justice and rights, and for not taking into account the role of emotions and social context in moral development. Despite these criticisms, Kohlberg's theory has had a significant impact on the field of psychology and has provided a framework for understanding how and why people's moral beliefs and behaviors change over time.

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A modern example of Kohlberg's stages in action is how his stages work with the COVID-19 virus. In [this](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(22)00282-8/fulltext) article, the author speaks of the different ways COVID-19 has entered into the classroom on the arm of Kohlberg's stages of development.

Some disagreements that people have with Kholbeg, is that not every student progresses the same, and therefore people of all different stages will be in the same classroom. This also leads to the case, what if some never progress through the stages at all? Linked below, Phil Temple gives an excellent Ted Talk on the development and teaching of Moral Reasoning. This video highlights what can happen when people don't progress through Kohlberg's stages. Temple gives the argument that instead of leaving Koholbergs stages up to chance, and hoping that children progress through them, he would have moral reasoning be taught. To paraphrase him, “Moral reasoning is too important to be left up to chance, that is why we must take it into our own hands and teach students it.”

Just to recap: Kohlberg's theory of moral development suggests that individuals progress through a series of stages in a predetermined order as they develop morally. The theory emphasizes the importance of moral reasoning, or the process of making moral judgments, in moral development. The theory consists of three levels: the pre-conventional level, the conventional level, and the post-conventional level. Kohlberg's theory has been influential in the field of moral development, but it has also been criticized for its supposed gender bias and cultural bias. Other researchers have expanded upon and built on Kohlberg's theory, highlighting the importance of social interactions and cultural experiences in moral development, and proposing alternative approaches.

### Further Reading

* [This Website](https://www.simplypsychology.org/kohlberg.html) gives an overview of Kohlberg's research and theories.
* [This is Kohlberg’s](https://www.amazon.com/Moral-Development-Couple-Therapy-Kohlbergs/dp/1138678112/ref=asc_df_1138678112/?tag=hyprod-20&amp;linkCode=df0&amp;hvadid=598225245735&amp;hvpos=&amp;hvnetw=g&amp;hvrand=9127091846360163905&amp;hvpone=&amp;hvptwo=&amp;hvqmt=&amp;hvdev=c&amp;hvdvcmdl=&amp;hvlocint=&amp;hvlocphy=9029499&amp;hvtargid=pla-1391676479409&amp;psc=1) book, need to buy it to read
* [More](https://www.britannica.com/science/Lawrence-Kohlbergs-stages-of-moral-development) information on Kohlberg
* [This](https://revistadepedagogia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/1-Critiques-of-Kohlberg%C2%B4s-Model-of-Moral-Development.pdf) is a criticism of Kohlberg's work if you want a different opinion

Sources

* <https://www.simplypsychology.org/kohlberg.html>
* <https://www.psychologynoteshq.com/kohlbergstheory/>
* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bounwXLkme4&vl=en](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bounwXLkme4&amp;vl=en)
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