# Moral Development: Kohlberg

## MORAL DEVELOPMENT: KOHLBERG

### KEY TERMS:

Moral Development: the process by which people develop the distinction between right and wrong (morality) and engage in reasoning between the two (moral reasoning).

Moral Reasoning: process of making moral judgments

### Who is this guy?

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 that follows a series of predictable stages. He identified three stages of moral development: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional.
Kohlberg believed 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.
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.

### What is the Preconventional Stage?

This stage 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.    Punishment-Obedience: Individuals view rules and authority as absolute and unchangeable. This stage is often seen in very young children who are just learning about rules and authority, typically in infancy.
Example: A child obeys orders from their parents because they are afraid of getting punished for disobeying.
2.    Instrumental-Relativist: Individuals begin to understand that rules can be manipulated to serve their own interests. They will only obey the rules if they believe doing so will lead to a desired outcome. This stage is often seen for pre-school age children.
Example: Teenagers put together a study group and help each other with their homework as a trade of favors and exchanging help.

### What is the Conventional Stage?

This stage 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.    "Good Boy-Nice Girl": 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 early school-age children.
Example: A student shares their lunch with a classmate who forgot theirs because they want to be seen as a caring and generous person.
4.    "Law and Order": 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 later school-aged children.
Example: Following rules that you personally disagree with because you understand that those rules are important to others.

### What is the Postconventional Stage?

This stage 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.    "Social Contract": 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 align with their own personal values and principles. This stage is often seen in teens.
Example: Employees discover their company manipulating financial records and put their own jobs at risk to expose the wrongdoings.
6.    "Universal Ethical Principles”: 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—which are always important and should be upheld in all situations. This stage is often seen in adults.
Example: An individual advocates for something they believe in, such as protesting.

### Who disagreed with Kohlberg?

Kohlberg's theory has been widely studied and has been found to be applicable across different cultures and age groups. However, it has also been criticized for being overly focused on justice and rights, and for disregarding 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.
For example, Carol Gilligan, who worked under Kohlberg during his study of moral development, claimed that his theory was biased in favor of males and did not accurately reflect the moral development of females. She went on to develop her own theory of moral development based on Kohlberg’s overarching stages.

### How is this applicable in a classroom?

Kohlberg's theory of moral development can be applied in the classroom in a number of ways, including:
1.    Creating an environment where students can grow to be moral and good members of society.
2.    Encouraging critical thinking by helping students understand the reasoning behind different moral perspectives.
3.    Facilitating discussions and debates about moral issues. This can help students develop strong moral values and beliefs and good critical thinking skills.
Most of Kohlberg's stages could be incorporated into the classroom, depending on which stage the teacher would like his/her students to focus on.

### What did I just learn?

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 in moral development. The theory consists of three stages: the preconventional stage, the conventional stage, and the postconventional stage. 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.

[approved graphic: Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development]

[A Critique on Kohlberg's Stages](https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.17763/haer.47.1.x011p7x226k3722x)

Read this online at <https://books.byui.edu/the_science_of_learning/moral_development_kohlberg_and_gilligan>