

# **Moral and Pro-Social Development – Kohlberg's Theory**

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# Moral Development

- Moral development is the process by which people develop the distinction between right and wrong (morality) and engage in reasoning between the two (moral reasoning).
- American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg developed one of the best-known theories exploring some of these basic questions. His work modified and expanded upon Jean Piaget's previous work but was more centered on explaining how children develop moral reasoning.
- Kohlberg extended Piaget's theory, proposing that moral development is a continual process that occurs throughout the lifespan. Kohlberg's theory outlines six stages of moral development within three different levels.

# Development of the Theory

- Kohlberg based his theory on a series of moral dilemmas presented to his study subjects. Participants were also interviewed to determine the reasoning behind their judgments in each scenario.
- One example was “Heinz Steals the Drug.” In this scenario, a woman has cancer and her doctors believe only one drug might save her. This drug had been discovered by a local pharmacist and he was able to make it for \$200 per dose and sell it for \$2,000 per dose. The woman’s husband, Heinz, could only raise \$1,000 to buy the drug.

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- He tried to negotiate with the pharmacist for a lower price or to be extended credit to pay for it over time. But the pharmacist refused to sell it for any less or to accept partial payments. Rebuffed, Heinz instead broke into the pharmacy and stole the drug to save his wife. Kohlberg asked, “Should the husband have done that?”
- Kohlberg was not interested so much in the answer to whether Heinz was wrong or right but in the *reasoning* for each participant’s decision. He then classified their reasoning into the stages of his theory of moral development.

# Stages of Moral Development

Levels of Moral Development	Age	Stages
<b>Pre-Conventional Morality</b>	0 to 9	<b>Stage 1:</b> Obedience and Punishment. <b>Stage 2:</b> Individualism and Exchange.
<b>Conventional Morality</b>	Early adolescence to adulthood	<b>Stage 3:</b> Developing good interpersonal relationships. <b>Stage 4:</b> Maintaining social order.
<b>Post-Conventional Morality</b>	Some adults; rare	<b>Stage 5:</b> Social contract and individual rights . <b>Stage 6:</b> Universal principles.

## **Level-1: Pre-Conventional Morality**

- **Stage 1 (Obedience and Punishment):** The earliest stages of moral development, obedience and punishment are especially common in young children, but adults are also capable of expressing this type of reasoning. According to Kohlberg, people at this stage see rules as fixed and absolute. Obeying the rules is important because it is a way to avoid punishment.
- **Stage 2 (Individualism and Exchange):** At the individualism and exchange stage of moral development, children account for individual points of view and judge actions based on how they serve individual needs. In the Heinz dilemma, children argued that the best course of action was the choice that best served Heinz's needs. Reciprocity is possible at this point in moral development, but only if it serves one's own interests.

## **Level-2: Conventional Morality**

- **Stage 3 (Developing Good Interpersonal Relationships):** Often referred to as the “good boy-good girl” orientation, this stage of the interpersonal relationship of moral development is focused on living up to social expectations and roles. There is an emphasis on conformity, being “nice,” and consideration of how choices influence relationships.
- **Stage 4 (Maintaining Social Order):** This stage is focused on ensuring that social order is maintained. At this stage of moral development, people begin to consider society as a whole when making judgments. The focus is on maintaining law and order by following the rules, doing one’s duty, and respecting authority.

## **Level-3: Post-Conventional Morality**

- **Stage 5 (Social Contract and Individual Rights):** The ideas of a social contract and individual rights cause people in the next stage to begin to account for the differing values, opinions, and beliefs of other people. Rules of law are important for maintaining a society, but members of the society should agree upon these standards.
- **Stage 6 (Universal Principles):** Kohlberg's final level of moral reasoning is based on universal ethical principles and abstract reasoning. At this stage, people follow these internalized principles of justice, even if they conflict with laws and rules.

# Applications for Kohlberg's Theory

- Understanding Kohlberg's theory of moral development is important in that it can help parents guide their children as they develop their moral character. Parents with younger children might work on rule obedience, for instance, whereas they might teach older children about social expectations.
- Teachers and other educators can also apply Kohlberg's theory in the classroom, providing additional moral guidance. A kindergarten teacher could help enhance moral development by setting clear rules for the classroom, and the consequences for violating them. This helps kids at stage one of moral development.

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- A teacher in high school might focus more on the development that occurs in stage three (developing good interpersonal relationships) and stage four (maintaining social order). This could be accomplished by having the students take part in setting the rules to be followed in the classroom, giving them a better idea of the reasoning behind these rules.

# Criticisms

- **Moral reasoning does not equal moral behavior:** Kohlberg's theory is concerned with moral thinking, but there is a big difference between knowing what we ought to do versus our actual actions. Moral reasoning, therefore, may not lead to moral behavior.
- **Overemphasizes justice:** Critics have pointed out that Kohlberg's theory of moral development overemphasizes the concept of justice when making moral choices. Factors such as compassion, caring, and other interpersonal feelings may play an important part in moral reasoning.
- **Cultural bias:** Individualist cultures emphasize personal rights, while collectivist cultures stress the importance of society and community. Eastern, collectivist cultures may have different moral outlooks that Kohlberg's theory does not take into account.

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- **Age bias:** Most of his subjects were children under the age of 16 who obviously had no experience with marriage. The Heinz dilemma may have been too abstract for these children to understand, and a scenario more applicable to their everyday concerns might have led to different results.
- **Gender bias:** Kohlberg's critics, including Carol Gilligan, have suggested that Kohlberg's theory was gender-biased since all of the subjects in his sample were male. Kohlberg believed that women tended to remain at the third level of moral development because they place a stronger emphasis on things such as social relationships and the welfare of others.

**THANK YOU**