**Moral Development - Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development and Education**

Bottom of Form

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, author of the 1932 book *The Moral Judgment of the Child,* is among the first psychologists whose work remains directly relevant to contemporary theories of moral development and education. From his observations and interviews of children, Piaget concluded that children begin in a "heteronomous" stage of moral reasoning, characterized by a strict adherence to rules and duties and obedience to authority. This heteronomy results from two factors. The first factor is the young child's cognitive structure. According to Piaget, the thinking of young children is characterized by egocentrism. Young children are unable to simultaneously take into account their own view of things with the perspective of someone else. This egocentrism leads children to project their own thoughts and wishes onto others. It is also associated with the unidirectional view of rules and power associated with heteronomous moral thought and with various forms of "moral realism." Moral realism is associated with "objective responsibility," which is valuing the letter of the law above the purpose of the law. This is why young children are more concerned about the outcomes of actions rather than the intentions of the person doing the act. Moral realism is also associated with the young child's belief in "immanent justice." This is the expectation that punishments automatically follow acts of wrongdoing.

The second major contributor to young children's heteronomous moral thinking is their relative social relationship with adults. In the natural authority relationship between adults and children, power is handed down from above. The relative powerlessness of young children, coupled with childhood egocentrism, feeds into a heteronomous moral orientation. Nevertheless, through interactions with other children in which the group seeks to play together in a way all find fair, children find this strict heteronomous adherence to rules sometimes problematic. As children consider these situations, they develop towards an "autonomous" stage of moral reasoning, characterized by the ability to consider rules critically and to selectively apply these rules based on a goal of mutual respect and cooperation. The ability to act from a sense of reciprocity and mutual respect is associated with a shift in the child's cognitive structure from egocentrism to perspective taking. Coordinating one's own perspective with that of others means that what is right needs to be based on solutions that meet the requirements of fair reciprocity.

Piaget concluded from this work that schools should emphasize cooperative decision-making and problem solving, nurturing moral development by requiring students to work out common rules based on fairness. He believed individuals define morality individually through their struggles to arrive at fair solutions. Given this view, Piaget suggested that classroom teachers should provide students with opportunities for personal discovery through problem solving, rather than indoctrinating students with norms.

**Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development and Education**

The American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg modified and elaborated Piaget's work and determined that the process of attaining moral maturity took longer and was more gradual than Piaget had proposed. On the basis of his research, Kohlberg identified six stages of moral reasoning grouped into three major levels. At the first, *preconventional* level, a person's moral judgments are characterized by a concrete, individual perspective. Within this level, a Stage 1 heteronomous orientation focuses on avoiding breaking rules that are backed by punishment, obedience for its own sake, and avoiding the physical consequences of an action. At Stage 2 a moral orientation emerges that focuses on the instrumental, pragmatic values of actions. Reciprocity is of the form: "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

Individuals at the second, *conventional,* level reason about moral situations with an understanding that norms and conventions are necessary to uphold society. Within this level, individuals at Stage 3 define what is right in terms of what is expected by people close to them and in terms of the stereo-typic roles that define being good–for example, a good brother, mother, teacher. Stage 4 marks the shift from defining what is right in terms of local norms and role expectations to defining right in terms of the laws and norms established by the larger social system. This is the "member of society" perspective in which one is moral by fulfilling the actual duties defining one's social responsibilities.

Finally, the *postconventional* level is characterized by reasoning based on principles, using a "prior to society" perspective. These individuals reason on the basis of principles that underlie rules and norms. While two stages have been presented within the theory, only one, Stage 5, has received substantial empirical support. Stage 6 remains a theoretical endpoint that rationally follows from the preceding five stages. In essence this last level of moral judgment entails reasoning rooted in the ethical fairness principles from which moral laws would be devised. Laws are evaluated in terms of their coherence with basic principles of fairness rather than upheld simply on the basis of their place within an existing social order.

Kohlberg used findings from his research to reject traditional character education practices that are premised in the idea that virtues and vices are the basis to moral behavior, or that moral character is comprised of a "bag of virtues," such as honesty, kindness, patience, and strength. Kohlberg believed a better approach to affecting moral behavior would focus on stages of moral development. Initial educational efforts employing Kohlberg's theory sought to engage students in classroom discussions of moral dilemmas that would lead to an awareness of contradictions inherent in students' present level of moral reasoning and to shifts toward the next stage of moral judgment. Kohlberg and his colleagues eventually developed the "just community" schools approach toward promoting moral development, described in the 1989 book *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education.* These schools seek to enhance moral development by offering students the chance to participate in community discussions to arrive at consensual resolutions of the actual moral problems and issues students face as members of the school community.

**Domain Theory: Distinguishing Morality and Convention**

In the early 1970s, longitudinal studies conducted by the Kohlberg research group began to reveal anomalies in the stage sequence. One of the most productive lines of research to come out of that period has been the domain theory advanced by Elliot Turiel and his colleagues. Within domain theory a distinction is drawn between the child's developing concepts of morality and other domains of social knowledge, such as social convention. According to domain theory, the child's concepts of morality and social convention emerge out of the child's attempts to account for qualitatively differing forms of social experience associated with these two classes of social events. Actions within the moral domain, such as unprovoked hitting of someone, have intrinsic effects (i.e., the harm that is caused) on the welfare of another person. Such intrinsic effects occur regardless of the nature of social rules that may or may not be in place regarding the action. Because of this, the core features of moral cognition are centered around considerations of the effects that actions have upon the well-being of persons. Morality is structured by concepts of harm, welfare, and fairness. In contrast, actions that are matters of social convention have no intrinsic interpersonal consequences. For example, there is nothing intrinsic to forms of address that makes calling a college teacher "professor" better or worse than calling the person Ms. or simply using her given name. What makes one form of address better than another is the existence of socially agreed-upon rules. These conventions, while arbitrary, are nonetheless important to the smooth functioning of any social group. Conventions provide a way for members of the group to coordinate their social exchanges through a set of agreed-upon and predictable modes of conduct. Concepts of convention, then, are structured by the child's understandings of social organization. These hypothesized distinctions have been sustained through studies since the mid-1970s that have included interviews with children, adolescents, and adults; observations of child-child and adult-child social interactions; cross-cultural studies; and longitudinal studies examining the changes in children's thinking as they grow older.

Educational research from within domain theory has resulted in a set of recommendations for what is termed "domain appropriate" values education. This approach entails the teacher's analysis and identification of the moral or conventional nature of social values issues to be employed in lessons. Such an analysis contributes to the likelihood that the issues discussed are concordant with the domain of the values dimension they are intended to affect. Teachers are also better enabled to lead students through consideration of more complex issues that contain elements from more than one domain.

**Carol Gilligan and the Morality of Care**

Carol Gilligan, in a 1982 book titled *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development,* suggested that a morality of care can serve in the place of the morality of justice and rights espoused by Kohlberg. A way to look at how these differ is to view these two moralities as providing two distinct injunctions–the injunction not to treat others unfairly (justice) and the injunction not to turn away from someone in need (care). She presents these moralities as distinct, although potentially connected. In her initial work, Gilligan emphasized the gender differences thought to be associated with these two orientations. Further research has suggested, however, that moral reasoning does not follow the distinct gender lines that Gilligan originally reported. The preponderance of evidence is that both males and females reason based on justice and care. While this gender debate is unsettled, Gilligan's work has contributed to an increased awareness that care is an integral component of moral reasoning. Educational approaches based on Gilligan's work have emphasized efforts to foster empathy and care responses in students.

**Persisting Controversies**

Three primary controversies persist in the field of moral development research. First, there is disagreement over whether morality has universal elements or is cross-cultural. Second, there is disagreement over whether morality develops in stages or levels. Finally, there are unresolved issues regarding the connections between moral judgments and action. The latter is of greatest concern to educators because one of the primary goals of education is to produce citizens who will lead moral lives. The most promising line of work attempting to deal with this issue is exploring the development of what is referred to as the "moral self." This approach assumes that people act on the basis of their moral judgments if being moral is a central part of their sense of personal identity.

***See also:*** [CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1820/Character-Development.html); [KOHLBERG, LAWRENCE](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2150/Kohlberg-Lawrence-1927-1987.html); [MORAL EDUCATION](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2246/Moral-Education.html); [PIAGET, JEAN.](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2325/Piaget-Jean-1896-1980.html)

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