Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–87) was a Jewish American psychologist born in Bronxville, New York. Specializing in research on moral education and reasoning, he is best known for his theory about stages of moral development, which first appeared in his 1958 dissertation. Moral development focuses on the emergence, evolution, and understanding of morality in a person’s method or structure of thought. A central theme for moral development, and for criminal justice, is whether humans are born good or bad, or whether they become good or bad from life events.

Kohlberg began his academic career as an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University (1958–61). He then spent a year (1961–62) at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, in Palo Alto, California, before joining the Psychology Department at the University of Chicago (1962–67). Kohlberg later held a visiting appointment at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (1967–68), was appointed Professor of Education and Social Psychology in 1968, and remained at Harvard until his death in 1987.

Kohlberg extended Piaget’s work to more fully describe the stages that each individual passes through in moral and cognitive development. Consistent with Piaget, Kohlberg proposed that children form ways of thinking through their experiences, which include understandings of moral concepts such as justice, rights, equality, and human welfare. Similar to Piaget, Kohlberg believed that development does not reflect an increase in the content of thinking, but rather a qualitative transformation in the form of the child’s thoughts or actions.

Kohlberg’s theory holds that moral reasoning, which is the basis for ethical behavior, has six developmental stages, each more adequate at responding to moral dilemmas than the previous. Kohlberg identified three distinct levels of moral reasoning with two substages at each level: the preconventional level (stages one and two), the conventional level (stages three and four), and the postconventional level (stages five and six). At the preconventional level, children are responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad or right and wrong. Stage one of the preconventional level is oriented around punishment and obedience. Children are subjected to adult authority and focus on behaviors that result in either praise or punishment. At stage two of the preconventional level, children become aware of and concerned with the needs of others and begin to act accordingly. Increased awareness and concern allows for development at the conventional level.

At the conventional level, individuals perceive themselves as members of society and form a desire to fulfill role expectations and responsibilities in order to maintain social order. At stage three of the conventional level, individuals engage in conventionally determined good behavior to be considered a good person. Thus, individuals choose behaviors that will neither hurt others’ feelings nor allow them to be thought of as bad. At stage four of the conventional level, law and order becomes very important. The individual is concerned with the rules set down by society and is reluctant to disregard the law even if he or she disagrees with certain laws that are decided upon.

At the postconventional level a person moves beyond the norms and laws of society to determine universal good, or what is good for all people and societies. At this level, a person assumes the
responsible of judging laws and social conventions. At stage five of the postconventional level a personal recognizes larger interests and additional social systems beyond current laws; a person who has reached stage six bases moral judgments on the higher abstract laws of truth, justice, and morality. Kohlberg declared that only a few individuals would reach this level of autonomous moral reasoning.

Kohlberg also advanced the notion of a seventh stage, characterized as a stage of ethical awareness centered on cosmic or religious thinking. At this stage, a person views him or herself as part of a larger whole and humanity as only part of a larger cosmic structure. Rather than viewing it as a higher level of thinking, Kohlberg suggests it is qualitatively different. The stages are critical to Kohlberg's theory as they provide a framework for understanding how individuals organize their values, norms, and partiality for rules into a moral decision. Furthermore, individuals can only pass through these levels in the order listed, and each new stage replaces the moral reasoning identifiable in the previous stage.

There has been much criticism about Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Critics have argued against his claims that individuals advance in the same manner through the various stages and against his assumption that some individuals do not regress. His research has also been criticized for using hypothetical dilemmas rather than real-life dilemmas and for interviewing males only in his early research. The strongest criticism was of sexual bias, which came primarily from one of Kohlberg's former students, Carol Gilligan. This concern was highlighted when Kohlberg reported that most men analyzed moral decisions with a justice orientation (stage four), whereas many women would analyze moral decisions with a needs orientation (stage three) that emphasized relationships. Gilligan proposed that women may possess a different morality from men, offering that a morality of care could serve in place of a morality of justice and rights. Despite these criticisms, Kohlberg's theory of moral development continues to be used as a theoretical basis for moral development research and continues to influence teacher education and classroom practices.

See Also: Absolutism, Ethical; Gender; Kant, Immanuel; Minimalism, Ethical; Moralism, Legal; Morality Versus Law; Objectivism, Ethical; Pragmatism, Ethical; Universalism, Ethical; Virtue

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