

Lawrence Kohlberg: An Introduction to the Stages of Moral Development



Christopher Berghout

Objective:

- To examine the stages of moral development as described by Lawrence Kohlberg and accurately apply it to specific moral dilemmas.



Lawrence Kohlberg: Who Is He?


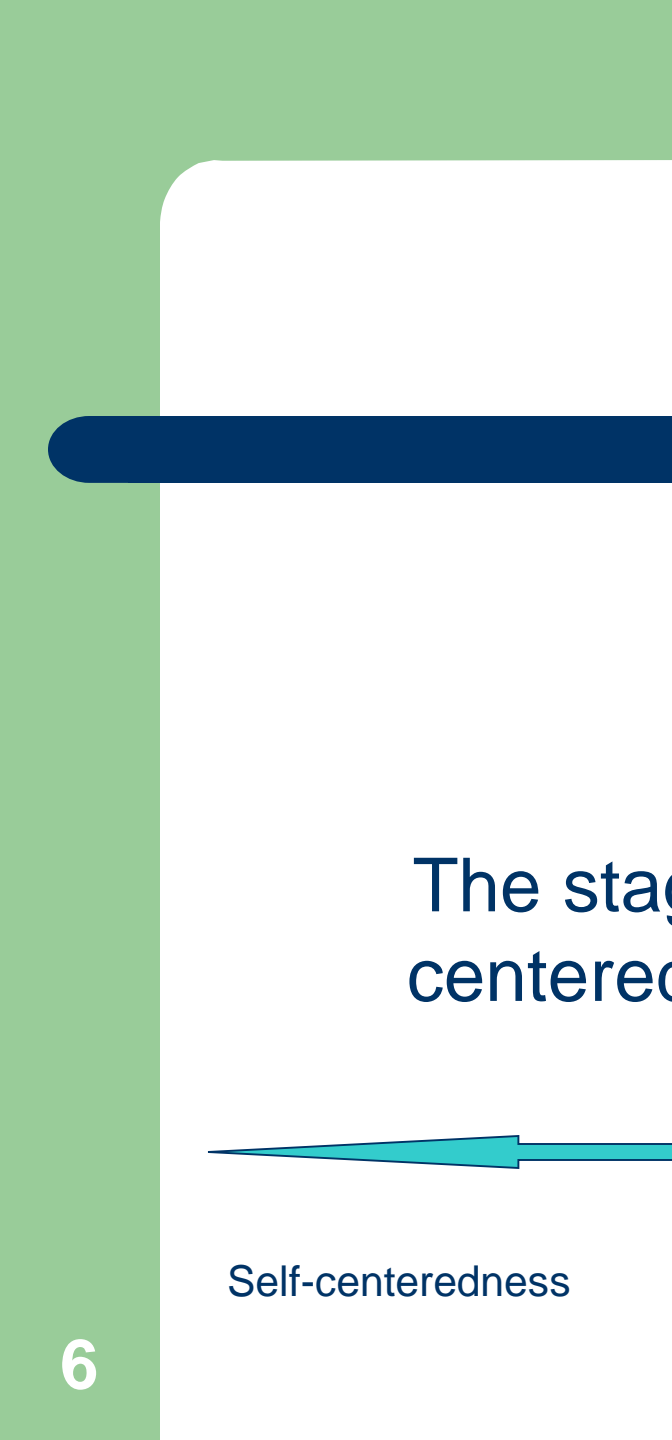
Lawrence Kohlberg was, for many years, a professor at Harvard University. He became famous for his work there beginning in the early 1970s. He started as a developmental psychologist and then moved to the field of moral education. He was particularly well-known for his theory of moral development which he popularized through research studies conducted at Harvard's Center for Moral Education.

Lawrence Kohlberg

His theory of moral development was dependent on the thinking of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget and the American philosopher John Dewey. He was also inspired by James Mark Baldwin. These men had emphasized that human beings develop philosophically and psychologically in a progressive fashion.



Kohlberg believed...and was able to demonstrate through studies...that people progressed in their moral reasoning (i.e., in their bases for ethical behavior) through a series of stages. He believed that there were six identifiable stages which could be more generally classified into three levels.



The stages include growth from self-centeredness to other-centeredness.



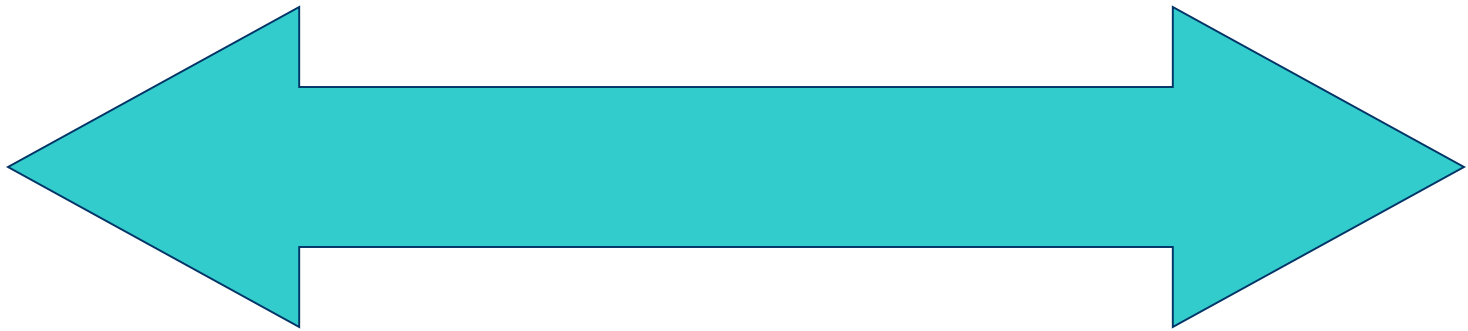
Self-centeredness

Other-centeredness

The capacity to reason also grows from reliance on external authority to fidelity to internalized values

External Authority

Internalized Values



6 Key Points to Keep in Mind. . .

1. One must progress through the stages in order, and one cannot get to a higher stage w/o passing through the stage immediately preceding it.
 - Moral development is growth, and like all growth, takes place according to a pre-determined sequence.
 - Can't walk before you crawl

Continued:

2. In stage development, subjects cannot comprehend moral reasoning at a stage more than one stage beyond their own.
 - E.g. If Johnny is orientated to see the good almost exclusively as that which brings him satisfaction, how will he understand a concept of good in which the “good” may bring him no tangible pleasure at all.

Continued:

-The moral maxim *“It is better to give than to receive”* reflects a high level of development. The child who honestly asks you why it is better to give than to receive, does so because he does not and cannot understand such thinking. To him “better” means better for him. And how can it be better for him to give, than to get.

Continued:

3. In stage development individuals are cognitively attracted to reasoning one level above their own present predominant level
 - The person has questions and problems the solutions for which are less satisfying at his present level. Since reasoning at one stage higher is intelligible, and since it makes sense and resolves more difficulties, it is more attractive.

Continued:

4. In stage development, movement through the stages is effected when cognitive disequilibrium is created, that is, when a person's cognitive outlook is not adequate to cope with a given moral dilemma.
 - The person who is growing, will look for more adequate ways of solving problems. If he has no problems or dilemmas, he is not likely to look for solutions. He will not grow morally.

Continued:

5. It is quite possible for a human being to physically mature but not morally mature.
 - If a child is spoiled, never having to accommodate for others needs, he may never generate enough questions to propel him to a higher level of moral reasoning.

Continued

6. Kohlberg believed that only about 25% of persons ever grow to level six, the majority remaining at level four.
 - The Scriptures speak of principles of modesty, humility, and wise stewardship of money. Application of these principles might preclude the purchase of expensive jewelry, furs, flashy cars, or other items primarily for show.
 - If Kohlberg's observations are true, then level 6 thinkers would be in the minority. In fact, they might even be misunderstood and persecuted by a level 4 majority - Christ being the primary example.

Level One: Comply/Compete – Self-Centered Ages 7 - 11

Description

A person's moral reasoning results from consequences of actions, such as punishment, reward, or exchange of favors, and from the physical power of authority figures. The first level of moral thinking is that generally found at the elementary school level.

Stage 1: Fear of Punishment

- ❖ Not law or justice, but cost to me
- ❖ Conscience = self-protection

Stage 2: Profit

- ❖ Minimize the pain; maximize the pleasure
- ❖ Right behavior means acting in one's own best interests.
- ❖ Reasoning is largely based on an attitude of “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.”
- ❖ Conscience = cunning

Level Two: The Conventional Level

Group Centered

Ages 15 - 25

Description:

A person's moral reasoning involves maintaining the expectations of one's family, peer group, or nation for one's own sake regardless of the immediate consequences, and a desire to respect, maintain, support, and justify the existing social order.

Stage 3: Group Loyalty

- ❏ Obligation to ones family, gang, etc.
- ❏ One earns acceptance by being “nice.”
- ❏ Behavior is often judged by intention – “Well, they mean well.”
- ❏ Conscience = loyalty

Stage 4: Law and Order (Begins around age 15, increases to age 25)

- ❏ Without laws, society would be chaos
- ❏ Right behavior consists of doing one's duty and respecting authority.
- ❏ Flaws in the system are due to the failure of individuals who do not obey the system.
- ❏ Conscience = good citizenship

Level Three: Post Conventional Level- Internalized-Truth-Centered

Description:

A person reasons according to moral values and principles which are valid and applicable apart from the authority of the groups.

Moral reasoning becomes more comprehensive, reflects universal principles, and is based on internalized norms.

Stage 5: The Common Good

Ages 21 - 25

- ❖ Loyalty to truth

- ❖ Conscience = reason

Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles- Integrity

(Can be reached beginning in the late 20s)



- ❏ Principles, no matter what the price
- ❏ Choices are grounded in genuine moral interest in the well-being of others, regardless of who they are.
- ❏ Conscience = personal integrity

Stages of Moral Development
Lawrence Kohlberg


Level	Stage	Ages	Social Orientation
Pre-Conventional	1	2-4	Obedience and Punishment
	2	4-7	Individualism, Instrumentalism
Conventional	3	7-10	Good Boy/Girl
	4	10-12	Law and Order
Post-Conventional	5	Teens	Social Contract
	6	Adult	Principled Conscience

Some Final Thoughts

- A. Kohlberg's scale has to do with moral thinking, not moral action. As everyone knows, people who can talk at a high moral level may not behave accordingly.
- B. Consequently, we would not expect perfect correlations between moral judgment and moral action. Still, Kohlberg thinks that there should be some relationship.



C. As a general hypothesis, he proposes that moral behavior is more consistent, predictable, and responsible at the higher stages (Kohlberg et al., 1975). Why?



Because the stages themselves increasingly employ more stable and general standards, i.e. principles.

For example, whereas stage 3 bases decisions on others' feelings, which can vary, stage 4 refers to set rules and laws. Thus, we can expect that moral behavior, too, will become more consistent as people move up the sequence.

Let's Practice!

Situation 1

Ashley borrowed her father's car. She and her friend Kayla were very late coming home that evening. They were further delayed at a stop light on a quiet street. After what seemed to be an unnecessary long wait, Kayla reminded Ashley that they were late. Ashley continued to wait, insisting that if everyone ignored stop lights when it was personally convenient to do so, no street would be safe.

- At what stage do you think Ashley's decision was? Why?

Situation 2

Jordan was not prepared for a difficult chem. Exam, so he wrote some important formulas on a slip of paper which he put in his pocket before the test. Just before the test began, the teacher informed the class that any student caught cheating would automatically fail the test. Even though Jordan needed the information he wrote, he didn't use it because the teacher stood too close to his desk during the entire exam.

- At what stage? Why?

Situation 3

Early in the school year, DeShawn who started at varsity basketball, asked Caitlin for a date. Caitlin was not attracted to DeShawn and politely declined. A few weeks later Caitlin tried out for cheerleading and made it. Several of the other cheerleaders were dating boys on the team. When DeShawn asked Caitlin to go with him to a party that the team was having after an important game, she accepted.

- At what stage? Why?

Situation 4

Kyle asked his older sister, Gabby, if he could borrow her car so that he and his friend could go to the beach. Gabby reminded her brother that she never wanted him to drive her car. She suggested, however, that if it was all right with him, they could all go together. Soon after they got to the beach, Kyle's friend got ill. Kyle asked Gabby if she could drive his friend home. Gabby refused, saying that she had just come all that way and she was not going to turn around and go right back. Kyle tried unsuccessfully to find a way to get his friend home. Finally, while Gabby was swimming, he wrote her a note telling her he would be back soon as possible, took her car keys, and drove his friend back home.

- What stage? Why?

Situation 5

As Jason's father was leaving for work in the morning, he asked Jason to clean out the garage sometime during the day. Jason responded, saying he already had plans to play tennis that day. Around noon, Jason and two friends made plans that required Jason to borrow his father's car that evening. Jason decided to skip playing tennis and clean the garage.

- What stage? Why?