

Critically consider one theory of the development of moral understanding

According to Haste et al. (1998), historically four questions have been asked about moral development. One of these concerns how we come to understand the basis of rules and moral principles, so that we can make judgements about our own and others' behaviour. This relates to the cognitive-developmental theories of Piaget, Kohlberg and Eisenberg. This question has dominated research into moral development for 30 years. Piaget (1932) pioneered this approach, but Kohlberg built on Piaget's work and has been the focus of research during this time. Like Piaget, Kohlberg believed that morality develops gradually during childhood and adolescence. They were also both more interested in people's reasons for their moral judgements than the judgements themselves. Kohlberg assessed people's moral reasoning through the use of moral dilemmas. These typically involved a choice between two alternatives, both of which would be considered socially unacceptable. Probably his most famous dilemma concerned Heinz, whose wife was dying from cancer and who could only be saved by a drug which he couldn't afford. The dilemma centres around whether or not he should steal the prohibitively expensive drug in order to save her life.

Kohlberg first started using the Heinz (and other) dilemma in 1956, with 72 Chicago boys (10–16 years), 58 of whom were followed up at three-yearly intervals for 20 years (Kohlberg, 1984; Colby et al., 1983; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). Based on their answers to the dilemmas, Kohlberg identified six qualitatively different stages of moral development. These differ in complexity, with more complex types being displayed by older individuals. The six stages span three levels of moral reasoning. At the pre-conventional level (most nine-year-olds and younger, some over nine), we don't have a personal code of morality. Instead, our moral code is shaped by the standards of adults and the consequences of following or breaking their rules. At the conventional level (most adolescents and adults), we begin to internalise the moral standards of valued adult role models. At the post-conventional level (10–15% of adult, not before mid-30s), society's values (such as individual rights), the need for democratically determined rules, and reciprocity are affirmed (stage 5). In stage 6, individuals are guided by universal ethical principles, doing what their conscience dictates – even if this conflicts with society's rules.

According to Gilligan (1982, 1993), because Kohlberg's theory was based on an all-male sample, the stages reflect a male definition of morality (it's androcentric). Men's morality is based on abstract principles of law and justice, while women's is based on principles of compassion and care. But not everyone agrees with Gilligan. Johnston (1988), for example, argues that each sex is competent in each mode, but there are gender-linked preferences. Boys tended to use a justice orientation, but they also switched easily. Haste et al. (1998) believe that Johnston's findings support Gilligan's claim that there's more than one moral 'voice', but not her claim that the caring voice is more apparent in women. Several studies have shown that sex differences in moral orientation are less important than the kind of dilemmas used. For example, Walker (1989) studied males and females (5–63) using both hypothetical dilemmas (such as Heinz) and personally generated, real-life dilemmas. The only evidence of sex differences was for adults on real-life dilemmas, with females reporting more relational/personal ones and males more non-relational/impersonal ones. Both sexes tended to use the ethic of care mostly in personal dilemmas, and most people used both orientations. The nature of the dilemmas is a better predictor of moral orientation than gender (Walker, 1996).

Kohlberg's longitudinal study showed that those who were initially at lower stages had progressed to higher stages. This suggests 'moral progression' (Colby et al., 1983), consistent with the theory. Based on these findings, Kohlberg argued that stages 1–5 are universal, occurring in an invariant (fixed) sequence. Rest's (1983) 20-year longitudinal study of men from adolescence to their mid-30s also showed that the stages seem to occur in the order Kohlberg described. Also, Snarey's (1987) review of 45 studies conducted in 27 different countries provides striking support for the universality of the first four stages. But the results of Kohlberg & Nisan's (1987) 12-year study of Turkish youngsters, from both a rural village and a city, contradict this conclusion. Their overall scores were lower than the Americans', and rural youngsters' scores were lower than the urban youngsters. These findings suggest that cultural factors play a significant part in moral reasoning. According to the socio-cultural approach, what develops is the individual's skill in managing the moral expectations of his/her culture. Kohlberg's theory focuses on what goes on inside the individual's head (Haste et al., 1998). Stage 6 is itself culturally biased, because it's based on supposedly universal ethical principles (such as

justice, equality, and respect for life) which aren't universally shared (Shweder, 1991; Eckensberger, 1994). But Eckensberger (1999) also believes that Kohlberg's theory isn't as ethnocentric as some have claimed.