

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Kohlberg's moral dilemma:

In Europe, a woman was near death from cancer. There was one drug the doctors thought might save her. A druggist in the same town had discovered it, but he was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make.

The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow money, but he could only get together half of what it cost. The druggist refused to sell it cheaper or let Heinz pay later.

So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should Heinz have done that? Why or why not?

The levels and stages of Kohlberg's theory was developed according to children's reasons for stealing or not stealing the drug. Not for stating whether he should steal or not.

Ethical Theories: Kohlberg

- Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning development
 - Built on Jean Piaget's theory of developmental stages
 - A transitional development process occurring through maturation from childhood to adulthood.
 - Six (6) stages across three (3) levels
 - Moral reasoning is not learned but constructed through interaction with society and environment
 - Environmental factors may affect the speed of development, but not the direction.
 - Stages cannot be skipped

Piaget's theory

- Piaget's theory of development is based upon the concept that we develop through defined stages in a sequential manner.
- Piaget's theory was applied to *cognitive* development. For example, a toddler (2-year old) will often cover their eyes to play “hide and seek”—developmentally they are still egocentric—the cannot view the world from someone else's perspective and feel if they are hiding behind their hands that Mommy and Daddy won't see them either.
- Around the age of 6-7 a child will be able to grasp the concept of conservation—namely when a short wide glass of liquid is poured into a tall narrow glass (resulting in a “higher” water level then before) the amount of liquid has not increased. Before passing this stage, the child will identify the tall glass a “having more” than the short glass, solely on the basis of “height of the water level.”
- Kohlberg felt that *moral* development might also develop in the same sequential manner.

Kohlberg's Stages

Pre-conventional level

- Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation
- Stage 2: The instrumental purpose orientation

Conventional level

- Stage 3: The "good boy-good girl" orientation
- Stage 4: The social-order-maintaining orientation

Post-conventional level

- Stage 5: The social-contract orientation
- Stage 6: The universal ethical principle orientation

PRECONVENTIONAL LEVEL

- Punishments and rewards dominate the sense of right & wrong
- Morality is externally controlled
- Rules of authority figures must be respected.
- Behaviour that results in punishment are bad
- Behaviour that results in rewards are good

Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation

- Ignore people's intentions; focus on fear of authority and avoidance of punishments as reasons for behaving morally

Possible answers for Kohlberg's dilemma by children of Stage 1

For stealing: If you let your wife die, you will get into trouble. You'll be blamed for not spending your money to save her and there will be an investigation of you and the druggist for your wife's death.

Against stealing: You should not steal the drug because you'll be caught and sent to jail if you do. If you do get away, your conscience would bother you thinking how the police would catch you at any minute.

Stage 2: The instrumental purpose orientation

- Can understand that two people may have different perspectives in a situation
- Believe that satisfying personal needs determines moral choice
- Very concrete understanding
- **Possible answers for Kohlberg's dilemma by children of Stage 2**
- **For stealing:** If you do happen to get caught you could give the drug back and you wouldn't get much of a sentence. It wouldn't bother you much to serve a little jail term if you have your wife when you get out.
- **Against stealing :** He may not get much of a jail term if steals the drug, but his wife will probably die before he gets out so it won't do him much good. If his wife dies, he shouldn't blame himself. It wasn't his fault that she has cancer.

THE CONVENTIONAL LEVEL

- Needs of Laws and society are the defining features.
- “Don't steal” because it is against the law
- Good behaviour is motivated to maintain the affection and approval of friends and relatives
- Understand that standards are set for the current social system, not getting that there is self-interest involved (e.g., no such thing as a bad law)

Stage 3: The "good boy-good girl" orientation

- Morality of interpersonal cooperation
- People obey rules to promote social harmony
- You will be judged for breaking the rules it isn't just the druggist who will think that you are a criminal, everyone else will and you will feel bad afterwards
- Justifies moral conformity

- **Possible answers for Kohlberg's dilemma by children of Stage 3**
- **For stealing:** Nobody will think you're bad if you steal the drug but your family will think you're an inhuman husband if you don't. If you let your wife die, you'll never be able to look anybody in the face again.
- **Against stealing:** It isn't just the druggist who will think you are a criminal, everyone else will, too. After you steal it, you'll feel bad thinking about how you've brought dishonor on your family and yourself. You won't be able to face anyone again.

Stage 4: The social-order-maintaining orientation

- Each member of society is duty-bound to uphold rules as rules are vital for ensuring societal order
- **Possible answers for Kohlberg's dilemma by children of Stage 4**
- **For stealing:** If you have any sense of honor, you won't let your wife die because you're afraid to do the only thing that will save her. You'll always feel guilty that you caused her death if you don't do your duty to her.
- **Against stealing:** You're desperate and you may not know you're doing wrong when you steal the drug. But you'll know you did wrong after you're punished and sent to jail. You'll always feel guilty for your dishonesty and lawbreaking

THE POSTCONVENTIONAL LEVEL

- Personal moral beliefs and values

Stage 5: The social-contract orientation

- Laws and rules can be flexible
- Can understand the alternatives to social order and emphasize fair procedures
- Possible answers for Kohlberg's dilemma by children of Stage 5
- **For stealing:** The law wasn't set up for these circumstances. Taking the drug in this situation isn't really right, but it's justified to do it.
- **Against stealing:** You can't completely blame someone for stealing but extreme circumstances don't really justify taking the law in your own hands. You can't have everyone stealing whenever they get desperate. The end may be good, but the ends don't justify the means

Stage 6: The universal ethical principle orientation

- The correct action is defined by self-chosen ethical principles of conscience that are valid for all humanity, regardless of law and social agreement
- Values are more abstract and internal

- **Possible answers for Kohlberg's dilemma by children of Stage 6**
- **For stealing:** This is a situation which forces him to choose between stealing and letting his wife die. In a situation where the choice must be made, it is morally right to steal. He has to act in terms of the principle of preserving and respecting life.
- **Against stealing:** Heinz is faced with the decision of whether to consider the other people who need the drug just as badly as his wife. Heinz ought to act not according to his particular feelings toward his wife, but considering the value of all the lives involved.

Ethical Theories: Kohlberg

- Criticisms
 - Moral reasoning does not necessarily correlate with moral *behavior* (action)
 - Culturally-biased toward democratic societies backing strong “individual rights”
 - A “community-centered” viewpoint was a significant omission in Levels 2 and 3
 - Research, however, tends to support the “universality” of the theory for Stages 1 through 5