KOHLBERG’S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

Kohlberg was born in 1927, grew up in Bronxville, New York, and attended the Andover Academy in Massachusetts, a private high school for bright students. In 1948, he enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he scored so high on admission tests that he had to take only a few courses to graduate in just one year. He stayed at Chicago for graduate work in psychology, at first thinking he would become a clinical psychologist. However, he soon became interested in children’s views on moral issues. He has thought long and deeply about a wide range of issues in both psychology and philosophy. Kohlberg taught at the University of Chicago (1962-1968) and at Harvard University. He died in 1987.

KOHLBERG’S METHOD

Kohlberg’s basic interview with children consisted of a series of dilemmas such as the following:

Heinz Steals the Drug

A woman was near death from a rare kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a pharmacist in the same town had recently discovered. It cost $200 for the radium but the pharmacist charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman’s husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get about $1,000. He told the pharmacist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the pharmacist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the pharmacy to steal the drug for his wife. Should the Heinz have done that? (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 19)

Kohlberg is not really interested in whether the subject says "yes" or "no" to this dilemma but in the reasoning behind the answer. For example, children are asked if Heinz had the right to steal the drug, if he was violating the pharmacist’s rights, and what sentence the judge should give Heinz once he was caught. Kohlberg’s interviews then go on to give more dilemmas in order to get a good sampling of a child’s moral thinking.

KOHLBERG'S SIX STAGES

Level 1. Preconventional Morality

Stage 1. Obedience and Punishment Orientation. At Kohlberg’s stage 1, the child assumes that powerful authorities hand down a fixed set of rules to which he or she must unquestioningly obey. To the Heinz dilemma, the child typically says that Heinz was wrong to steal the drug because “It’s against the law,” or “It’s bad to steal,” as if this were all there were to it. When asked to elaborate, the child usually responds in terms of the consequences involved, explaining that stealing is bad "because you'll get punished" (Kohlberg, 1958b).

Although the vast majority of children at stage 1 oppose Heinz’s theft, it is still possible for a child to support the action with stage 1 reasoning. For example, a child might say, "Heinz can steal it because he asked first and it's not like he stole something big; he won't get punished" (see Rest, 1973). Even though the child agrees with Heinz’s action, the reasoning is still stage 1; the concern is with what authorities permit and punish.
Kohlberg calls stage 1 thinking "preconventional" because children do not yet speak as members of society. Instead, they see morality as something external to themselves, as that which the big people say they must do.

**Stage 2. Individualism and Exchange.** At this stage children recognize that there is not just one right view that is handed down by the authorities. Different individuals have different viewpoints. "Heinz," they might point out, "might think it's right to take the drug, the pharmacist would not." Since everything is relative, each person is free to pursue his or her individual interests. One boy said that Heinz might steal the drug if he wanted his wife to live, but that he doesn't have to if he wants to marry someone younger and better-looking (!) (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 24). Another boy said Heinz might steal it because maybe they had children and he might need someone at home to look after them (Colby and Kauffman, 1983, p. 300). What is right for Heinz, then, is what meets his own self-interests.

Children at both stages 1 and 2 talk about punishment. However, they perceive it differently. At stage 1, punishment is tied up in the child's mind with wrongness; punishment "proves" that disobedience is wrong. At stage 2, in contrast, punishment is simply a risk that one naturally wants to avoid.

Although stage 2 respondents sometimes sound amoral, they do have some sense of right action. This is a notion of fair exchange. To the Heinz story, subjects often say that Heinz was right to steal the drug because the pharmacist was unwilling to make a fair deal (Gibbs et al., 1983, p. 19).

Respondents at stage 2 are still said to reason at the preconventional level because they speak as isolated individuals rather than as members of society. They see individuals exchanging favors, but there is still no identification with the values of the family or community.

**Level II. Conventional Morality**

**Stage 3. Good Interpersonal Relationships.** At this stage children--who are entering their teens--see morality as more than simple deals. They believe that people should live up to the expectations of the family and community and behave in "good" ways. Good behavior means having good motives and interpersonal feelings such as love, empathy, trust, and concern for others. Heinz, they typically argue, was right to steal the drug because "He was a good man for wanting to save her," and "His intentions were good, that of saving the life of someone he loves." Even if Heinz doesn't love his wife, these subjects often say, he should steal the drug because "I don't think any husband should sit back and watch his wife die" (Gibbs et al., 1983, pp. 36-42; Kohlberg, 1958b).

If Heinz’s motives were good, then the pharmacist’s were bad. The pharmacist, stage 3 subjects emphasize, was "selfish," "greedy," and "only interested in himself, not another life." Sometimes the respondents even suggest that the pharmacist ought to be put in jail (Gibbs et al., 1983, pp. 26-29, 40-42). We can see that stage 3 adolescents focus on the actors’ character traits and motives.

Stage 3 responses such as the ones above, deserve the label "conventional "morality" because the adolescents assume that the attitude expressed would be shared by the entire community—"anyone" would be right to do what Heinz did (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 25).

**Stage 4. Maintaining the Social Order.** Stage 3 reasoning works best in two-person relationships with family members or close friends, where one can make a real effort to get to know the other's feelings and needs and try to help. At stage 4, in contrast, the respondent becomes more broadly concerned with the society as a whole. Now the emphasis is on obeying laws, respecting authority, and performing one's duties so that the social order is
maintained. In response to the Heinz story, many subjects say they understand that Heinz's motives were good, but they cannot condone the theft. What would happen if we all started breaking the laws whenever we felt we had a good reason? The result would be chaos; society couldn't function (Gibbs et al., 1983, pp. 140-41).

Because stage 4 subjects make moral decisions from the perspective of society as a whole, they fully condone “Conventional Morality” (Colby and Kohlberg, 1983, p. 27). You will recall that stage 1 children also generally oppose stealing because it breaks the law, but they focus on the penalty for violating the law. Stage 4 respondents, in contrast, have a conception of the function of laws for the society as a whole.

**Level III. Postconventional Morality**

**Stage 5. Social Contract and Individual Rights.** At stage 4, people want to keep society functioning. However, a smoothly functioning society is not necessarily a good one. A totalitarian society might be well-organized, but it is definitely not the moral ideal. At stage 5, people begin to question "What makes for a good society?" They step back from their own society and consider the rights and values that a society ought to uphold. They then evaluate existing societies in terms of these prior considerations. They are said to take a “post-conventional” perspective (Colby and Kohlberg, 1983, p. 22).

Stage 5 respondents believe that a good society is best conceived as a social contract into which people freely enter to work toward the benefit of all. They recognize that different social groups within a society will have different values, but they believe that all people would agree on two points. First they would all want certain basic rights, such as liberty and life to be protected. Second, they would want some democratic procedures for changing unfair laws and for improving society.

In response to the Heinz dilemma, stage 5 respondents make it clear that they do not generally favor breaking laws. Nevertheless, the wife’s right to live is a moral right that must be protected. Usually the moral and legal standpoints coincide. Here they conflict. The judge should weigh the moral standpoint more heavily but preserve the legal law in punishing Heinz lightly (Kohlberg, 1976, p. 38).

Stage 5 respondents are working toward a conception of the good society that (a) protects certain individual rights, and (b) operates by democratic processes. However, democratic processes alone do not always result in outcomes that we intuitively sense are just. A majority, for example, may vote for a law that hinders a minority. Thus, Kohlberg believes that there must be a higher stage--stage 6--which defines the principles by which we achieve justice.

**Stage 6: Universal Principles.** Kohlberg’s conception of justice follows that of the philosophers Kant and Rawls, as well as great moral leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. According to these people, the principles of justice require us to treat the claims of all parties in an impartial manner, respecting the basic dignity of all people as individuals.

In practice, Kohlberg says, we can reach moral decisions by looking at a situation through another's eyes. In the Heinz dilemma, this would mean that all parties--the pharmacist, Heinz, and his wife--take the roles of the others. If the pharmacist did this, even he would recognize that life must take priority over property; for he wouldn't want to find himself in the wife's shoes with property valued over life. If the wife were given less respect than the pharmacist, a just solution could not be reached.

Theoretically, one issue that distinguishes stage 5 from stage 6 is civil disobedience. Stage 5 would be more hesitant to endorse civil disobedience because of its commitment to the social
contract and to changing laws through democratic agreements. At stage 5, violating the law
seem justified only when an individual right is clearly at stake. At stage 6, in contrast, it is
possible to believe that a higher principle of justice (or morality, or a concern for the natural
environment) may require civil disobedience (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 43). [This may help you
rethink the Gezi events of 2013.]

THEORETICAL ISSUES

How Development Occurs

Kohlberg (e.g., 1968; 1981, Ch. 3) says that his stages do not simply unfold according to a
biological blueprint for age-related maturation. Neither are the stages the product of
socialization. That is, parents and teachers do not directly teach new forms of thinking. The
stages emerge, instead, from our own thinking about moral problems. Social experiences do
promote development, but they do so by stimulating our mental processes. As we get into
discussions and debates with others, we find our views questioned and challenged and are
therefore motivated to come up with new, more comprehensive positions. Kohlberg says that
such discussions work best when they are open and democratic (Kohlberg et al., 1975).

The Stage Concept

Kohlberg shows how his stages meet the criteria of being developmental “stages”.

1. Qualitative differences. It seems fairly clear that Kohlberg's stages are qualitatively
different from one another. For example, stage 1 thinking which focuses on obedience to
authority, sound very different from stage 2 thinking, which argues that each person is free to
behave as he or she wishes. There are clear breaks in the way moral choices are made in
different stages.

2. Structured wholes. The stages are not just isolated responses but are general patterns of
thought that consistently show up across many different issues. Kohlberg researched this point
and found that subjects responded to different dilemmas with a substantial degree of
consistency, suggesting that the stages reflect general modes of thought.

3. Invariant sequence. Kohlberg believes that his stages unfold with the same sequence for
everyone. Children always go from stage 1 to stage 2 to stage 3 and so forth. They do not skip
stages or move through them in a mixed-up order. Not all children reach the highest stages,
however to the extent that they do, they proceed through the stages in order.

4. Hierarchic integration. “Hierarchically integrated” means that people do not lose the
insights gained at earlier stages, but integrate them into new, broader frameworks. For
example, people at stage 4 can still understand stage 3 arguments, but they now consider
broader principles. If Kohlberg is right about the hierarchic nature of his stages, we would
expect that people would still be able to understand earlier stages but consider them inferior.
In fact, when researchers presented adolescents with arguments from different stages, this is
what they found. They understood lower-stage reasoning, but they disliked it.

5. Universal sequence. Kohlberg, like all stage theorists, maintains that his stage sequence is
universal; it is the same in all cultures. At the first glance, this proposal might be surprising.
Don't different cultures socialize their children differently, teaching them very different moral
beliefs? Kohlberg's response is that different cultures do teach different beliefs, but that his
stages refer not to specific beliefs but to underlying modes of reasoning (Kohlberg and
Gilligan, 1971). For example, one culture might discourage physical fighting, while another
encourages it more. As a result, children will have different beliefs about fighting, but they
will still reason about it in the same way at the same stage. Kohlberg and other researchers
have studied children and adults in a variety of cultures, including Mexico, Taiwan, Turkey,
Israel, the Yucatan, Kenya, the Bahamas, and India. Thus far, these studies have supported Kohlberg's stage sequence.

**Moral Thought and Moral Behavior**

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

As a general hypothesis, he proposes that moral behavior is more consistent, predictable and responsible at the higher stages (Kohlberg et al., 1975), because the stages themselves increasingly employ more stable and general standards. 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.

**EVALUATION**

Kohlberg's theory has provoked a good deal of criticism. Not everyone is enthusiastic about the concept of a postconventional morality. Hogan (1973, 1975), for example, feels that it is dangerous for people to place their own principles above society and the law. It may be that many psychologists react to Kohlberg in a similar way, and that this reaction underlies many of the debates over the scientific merits of his research.

Others have argued that Kohlberg's stages are culturally biased. Simpson (1974), for example, says that Kohlberg has developed a stage model based on the Western philosophical tradition and has then applied this model to non-Western cultures without considering the extent to which they have different moral outlooks. This criticism may have merit. One wonders how well Kohlberg's stages apply to the great Eastern philosophies.

Another criticism is that Kohlberg's theory is sex-biased, a view that has been thoughtfully expressed by one of Kohlberg's associates and co-authors, Carol Gilligan (1982). Gilligan observes that Kohlberg's stages were based on interviews with males, and she charges that the stages reflect a male orientation. Gilligan says that for women morality focuses on the ethics of compassion and care. Other researchers (e.g., Rest), argues that Gilligan has exaggerated the extent of sex differences in Kohlberg's stages.

Whatever criticisms and questions we might have, there is no doubt that Kohlberg's accomplishment is great. Although few people may ever begin to think about moral issues like Socrates, Kant, or Martin Luther King, Kohlberg has nonetheless provided us with a challenging vision of what development of morality might be.