

STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT



I. Piaget's Stages. Jean Piaget, Swiss developmental psychologist developed a stage theory of child cognitive development

- A. Birth to age 2: Stage-- **Sensorimotor** . Object permanence recognized by a child
- B. Age 2 to 7: Stage-- **Preoperational** . Egocentric thought, child lacks ability to decenter.
- C. Age 7 to 11: Stage-- **Concrete operations** . No abstract reasoning or the ability to test hypotheses
- D. Starting at age 11 or 12: Stage-- **Formal operations** . Children begin to reason abstractly

II. Kohlberg's Stages. Lawrence Kohlberg, Harvard professor of psychology, developed a theory of stages of ethical development.

A. Assumptions:

- 1. Individuals move through stages in understanding of moral issues as they grow and mature
- 2. Stages cannot be skipped (ie., jumping from stage 2 to 4 without experiencing stage 3)
- 3. Most adults do not advance past stage 4 in their development
- 4. Studying ethical cases can help individuals develop their moral senses and thus advance

B. Level One--preconventional morality

1. Stage 1-- **Punishment-obedience orientation** --physical consequences of an action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order.

2. Stage 2-- **Individualism/egoism** --right action is that which satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the marketplace with elements of fairness, sharing, and reciprocity present, but always interpreted in a physical or pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours," not of loyalty, gratitude or justice.

C. Level Two--conventional morality

1. Stage 3-- **Good boy nice girl orientation** --good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. Behavior is frequently judged by intention ("he means well"). One earns approval by being nice. The concern is "What will people think of me?" and the desire is for group approval. Right action is that which would please or impress others.

2. Stage 4-- **Law and order orientation** --Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake. The concern goes beyond one's immediate groups to the larger society--to the maintenance of law and order. One's obligation to the law overrides one's obligations to family or friends. No one group is above the law.

D. Level Three--postconventional morality

1. Stage 5-- **Social contract orientation** --right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and standards that have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of individual values and opinions and an emphasis on procedure for reaching consensus. Aside from what is democratically agreed upon, right action is a matter of personal values and opinions. It assumes a legal point of view, with the possibility of changing the law because of rational considerations. It is not a strict "law and order" approach. While rules are needed to maintain social order, they should not be blindly obeyed but should be evaluated or changed for the good of society. Right action is that which protects the rights of the individual according to rules agreed on by the whole society.

2. Stage 6-- **Universal ethical principle orientation** --right action is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative), not concrete moral rules (the Ten Commandments). At heart, these are universal principles of justice, equal rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.

III. Gilligan's Response (Carol Gilligan, a student of Kohlberg's, took issue with his method and his conclusions. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*.)

A. Kohlberg only interviewed boys and men for his study. Gilligan contends that girls and women tend to approach moral issues differently, are more focused on caring than on rules and duty.

B. Gilligan developed her own set of stages:

1. **Preconventional** --Goal is individual survival
2. Transition is from selfishness to a recognition of responsibility to others
3. **Conventional** --Self sacrifice is goodness
4. Transition is from goodness to the truth that she is a person too
5. **Postconventional** --Principle of nonviolence: do not hurt others or self

C. Gilligan asserts that women have differing moral and psychological tendencies than men. According to Gilligan, men think in terms of rules and justice while women are more inclined to think in terms of caring and relationships.