

Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, a [comprehensive](#) stage theory of [moral](#) development based on [Jean Piaget](#)'s theory of moral judgment for children (1932) and developed by [Lawrence Kohlberg](#) in 1958. [Cognitive](#) in nature, Kohlberg's theory focuses on the thinking process that occurs when one decides whether a behaviour is right or wrong. Thus, the theoretical emphasis is on how one decides to respond to a moral dilemma, not what one decides or what one actually does.

Kohlberg's theory, though extremely influential, was based on research that used only boys as subjects. In the 1980s the theory was criticized by the American psychologist [Carol Gilligan](#) for universalizing patterns of moral development exhibited by boys and ignoring the distinct patterns characteristic of girls.

Theoretical framework

The framework of Kohlberg's theory consists of six stages arranged sequentially in successive tiers of complexity. He organized his six stages into three general levels of moral development.

Level 1: Preconventional level

At the preconventional level, [morality](#) is externally controlled. Rules imposed by authority figures are conformed to in order to avoid punishment or receive rewards. This perspective involves the idea that what is right is what one can get away with or what is personally satisfying. Level 1 has two stages.

Stage 1: Punishment/obedience orientation

Behaviour is determined by consequences. The individual will obey in order to avoid punishment.

Stage 2: Instrumental purpose orientation

Behaviour is determined again by consequences. The individual focuses on receiving rewards or satisfying personal needs.

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Level 2: Conventional level

At the conventional level, conformity to social rules remains important to the individual. However, the [emphasis](#) shifts from self-interest to relationships with other people and social systems. The individual strives to support rules that are set forth by others such as parents, peers, and the government in order to win their approval or to maintain social order.

Stage 3: Good Boy/Nice Girl orientation

Behaviour is determined by social approval. The individual wants to maintain or win the affection and approval of others by being a “good person.”

Stage 4: Law and order orientation

Social rules and laws determine behaviour. The individual now takes into consideration a larger perspective, that of societal laws. Moral [decision making](#) becomes more than consideration of close ties to others. The individual believes that rules and laws maintain social order that is worth preserving.

Level 3: Postconventional or principled level

At the postconventional level, the individual moves beyond the perspective of his or her own society. Morality is defined in terms of abstract principles and values that apply to all situations and societies. The individual attempts to take the perspective of all individuals.

Stage 5: Social contract orientation

Individual rights determine behaviour. The individual views laws and rules as flexible tools for improving human purposes. That is, given the right situation, there are exceptions to rules. When laws are not consistent with individual rights and the interests of the majority, they do not bring about good for people and [alternatives](#) should be considered.

Stage 6: Universal ethical principle orientation

According to Kohlberg, this is the highest stage of functioning. However, he claimed that some individuals will never reach this level. At this stage, the appropriate action is determined by one’s self-chosen [ethical](#) principles of [conscience](#). These principles are abstract and universal in application. This type of [reasoning](#) involves taking the perspective of every person or group that could potentially be affected by the decision.