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| **Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development** | | |
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|  | |  |  | | --- | --- | | Level One: **Pre-conventional Morality** | Stage 1: Punishment-Obedience Orientation | | Stage 2: Instrumental Relativist Orientation | | Level Two: **Conventional Morality** | Stage 3: Good Boy-Nice Girl Orientation | | Stage 4: Law and Order Orientation | | Level Three: **Post-Conventional Morality** | Stage 5: Social Contract Orientation | | Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principle Orientation | |  |
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**Kohlberg's Level One - Preconventional Morality**

... so-called because people at this stage do not really understand the [conventions](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) / rules of a society.

**Stage 1: Punishment-Obedience Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "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 supported by punishment and authority." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)   
  
Summary: The concern is for self - "Will I get into trouble for doing (or not doing) it?" Good behavior is associated with avoiding punishment.

**Possible Stage 1 responses to** [**Heinz Dilemma**](javascript:void)**:**

* Heinz should not steal the [drug](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) because he might be caught and [sent to jail](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm).
* Heinz should steal the drug because if he doesn't then his wife might scold him.

**Stage 2: Instrumental Relativist Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: Right action is "that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others." "Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the marketplace; elements of fairness, reciprocity and equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical or pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of 'you scratch my [back](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) and I'll scratch yours,' not of loyalty, gratitude or justice." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)  
  
Summary: The concern is "What's in it for me?" Still egocentric in outlook but with a growing ability to see things from another person's perspective. Action is judged right if it helps in satisfying one's needs or involves a fair exchange.

**Possible Stage 2 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* It is right for Heinz to steal the drug because it can cure his wife and then she can cook for him.
* The doctor scientist had spent [lots of money](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl1.htm) and many years of his life to develop the cure so it's not fair to him if Heinz stole the drug.

**Kohlberg's Level Two - Conventional Morality**

... so-called because people at this stage conform to the conventions / rules of a society.

**Stage 3: Good Boy-Nice Girl Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or 'natural' behaviour. Behavior is frequently judged by intention. 'He means well' becomes important for the first time. One earns approval by being 'nice.'" (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)   
  
Summary: The concern is "What will people think of me?" and the desire is for group approval. Right action is one that would please or impress others. This often involves self-sacrifice but it provides the psychological pleasure of 'approval of others.' Actions are also judged in relation to their intention.

**Possible Stage 3 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* Yes, Heinz should steal the drug. He probably will go to jail for a short time for stealing but his in-laws will think he is a good husband.
* Brown, the police officer should report that he saw Heinz behaving suspiciously and running away from the laboratory because his boss would be pleased. [ See [Scenario 2](javascript:void) of Heinz Dilemma ]
* Officer Brown should not report what he saw because his [friend](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl2.htm) Heinz would be pleased.
* The judge should not sentence Heinz to jail for stealing the drug because he meant well ... he stole it to cure his wife. [ See [Scenario 3](javascript:void) of Heinz Dilemma ]

**Stage 4: Law and Order Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Right behavior consists in doing one's duty, showing respect for authority and maintaining the given social order for its own sake." A person in this stage "orients to society as a system of fixed rule, law and authority with the prospect of any deviation from rules as leading to social chaos." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)  
  
Summary: The concern now goes beyond one's immediate group(s) to the larger society ... to the maintenance of law and order. One's obligation to the law overrides one's obligations of loyalty to one's family, friends and groups. To put it simply, no one or group is above the law.

**Possible Stage 4 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* As her husband, Heinz has a duty to save his wife's life so he should steal the drug. But it's wrong to steal, so Heinz should be prepared to accept the penalty for breaking the law.
* The judge should sentence Heinz to jail. Stealing is against the law! He should not make any exceptions even though Heinz' wife is dying. If the judge does not sentence Heinz to jail then others may think it's right to steal and there will be chaos in the society.

**Kohlberg's Level Three - Postconventional Morality**

... so-called because the moral principles that underline the conventions of a society are understood.

**Stage 5: Social Contract Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Generally with utilitarian overtones. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and in terms of standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society ... with an emphasis upon the possibility of changing [law](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm) in terms of rational consideration of social utility (rather than rigidly maintaining it in terms of Stage 4 law and order)." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)   
  
Summary: The concern is social utility or public interest. While rules are needed to maintain social order, they should not be blindly obeyed but should be set up (even changed) by social contract for the greater good of society. Right action is one that protects the rights of the individual according to rules agreed upon by the whole society.

**Possible Stage 5 responses to Heinz Dilemma:**

* Heinz should steal the [drug](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm) because everyone has the right to life regardless of the law against stealing. Should Heinz be caught and prosecuted for stealing then the law (against stealing) needs to be reinterpreted because a person's life is at stake.
* The [doctor](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm) scientist's decision is despicable but his right to fair compensation (for his discovery) must be maintained. Therefore, Heinz should not steal the drug.

**Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principle Orientation**

Lawrence Kohlberg: "Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the golden rule, the categorical imperative) and are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At [heart](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm), these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons." (Duska, R. and Whelan, M., 1975)  
  
Explanatory Notes:

* The Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."
* The Categorical Imperative: "Act so as to treat any rational being as an end-in-himself and never merely as a means." In other words, a moral law that is unconditional or absolute and which does not depend on any ulterior motive or end. Compare "You shall not steal" with "Do not steal if you want respect in the [community](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohl3.htm)." The former is an end-in-itself ... a categorical imperative.

Summary: The concern is for moral principles ... an action is judged right if it is consistent with self-chosen ethical principles. These principles are not concrete moral rules but are universal principles of justice, reciprocity, equality and human dignity.

**Possible Stage 6 response to Heinz Dilemma:** Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife because preserving human life is a higher moral obligation than preserving property.

**Criticisms of Kohlberg**

Kohlberg's theory has provoked a good deal of criticism. Not everyone, first of all, 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.

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 derived exclusively from interviews with males, and she charges that the stages reflect a decidedly male orientation. For males, advanced moral thought revolves around rules, rights, and abstract principles. The ideal is formal justice, in which all parties evaluate one another's claims in an impartial manner. This conception of morality, Gilligan argues, fails to capture the distinctly female voice on moral matters.

For women, Gilligan says, morality centers not on rights and rules but on interpersonal relationships and the ethics of compassion and care. The ideal is not impersonal justice but more affiliative ways of living. Women's morality, in addition, is more contextualized, it is tied to real, ongoing relationships rather than abstract solutions to hypothetical dilemmas.

Because of these sex differences, Gilligan says, men and women frequently score at different stages on Kohlberg's scale. Women typically score at stage 3, with its focus on interpersonal feelings, whereas men more commonly score at stages 4 and 5, which reflect more abstract conceptions of social organization. Thus, women score lower than men. If, however, Kohlberg's scale were more sensitive to women's distinctly interpersonal orientations, it would show that women also continue to develop their thinking beyond stage 3.

**Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development - Explained & Illustrated**

[Lawrence Kohlberg](http://faculty.frostburg.edu/mbradley/psyography/kohlberg.html) (1927-1987) was a well-known theorist in the field of moral [development](http://www.vtaide.com/blessing/Kohlberg.htm). He posed moral dilemmas (e.g., Heinz Dilemma) to his subjects then asked questions to probe their reasons for recommending a specific course of action.

**The Heinz Dilemma**

1. **Scenario 1**  
     
   A woman was near death from a unique kind of cancer. There is a drug that might save her. The drug costs $4,000 per dosage. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money and tried every legal means, but he could only get together about $2,000. He asked the doctor scientist who discovered the drug for a discount or let him pay later. But the doctor scientist refused.  
     
   Should Heinz break into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?
2. **Scenario 2**  
     
   Heinz broke into the laboratory and stole the drug. The next day, the newspapers reported the break-in and theft. Brown, a police officer and a friend of Heinz remembered seeing Heinz last evening, behaving suspiciously near the laboratory. Later that night, he saw Heinz running away from the laboratory.  
     
   Should Brown report what he saw? Why or why not?
3. **Scenario 3**  
     
   Officer Brown reported what he saw. Heinz was arrested and brought to court. If convicted, he faces up to two years' jail. Heinz was found guilty.  
     
   Should the judge sentence Heinz to prison? Why or why not?

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