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Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development and Intervention Studies

In a short paper of this nature it is very difficult to do justice to the complexity and richness of Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The best I can do is to present the principal features of the theory and show how these have been adapted to education.

Kohlberg's theory is based on the cognitive developmental approach to an understanding of moral reasoning. The appeal of this approach is in its basis in psychological research and moral philosophy. In terms of this approach moral refers basically to thought process, i.e., to judgement, reasoning or decision-making in situations wherein the person has conflicting responsibilities. Kohlberg claims that the developmental-philosophic strategy which emerges from the work of Dewey and Piaget, is a theoretical rationale that withstands logical criticism and is consistent with current research findings.¹ The theory rests on the claim that cognitive structures form the basis for the moral judgement, and the existing evidence broadly supports this.² Piaget maintains that levels of intellectual growth in children are explained in terms of attaining cognitive equilibrium leading to structural change. These changes are cognitive stages which are sequential and universal. Kohlberg argues that moral reasoning changes systematically with age in a way which fits a stage-developmental model. Progression through the stages reflects a progressive differentiation between moral and non-moral considerations, which have their basis in principles of justice and fairness.³

Kohlberg's original study was with children aged ten to sixteen, and since the publication of this research in 1963 a large body of knowledge has been accumulated. He presented his subjects with complex moral dilemmas and interviewed them about what each considered should be done in a particular situation and why it should be done. As a result he identified six stages of moral reasoning;

Stage	What is Right
1	Right is sticking to rules backed by punishment; obedience for its own sake; avoiding physical damage to persons and property.
2	Right is what is fair or what is an equal exchange, deal, agreement.
3	Right is being good; having good motives; showing concern for others; it also means keeping mutual relationships such as trust, loyalty, respect and gratitude.

- 4 Right is fulfilling duties to which you have agreed; contributing to the society, group or institution.
- 5 Right is being aware that people hold a variety of values and opinions and that most of their rules and values are relative to their group. Some non-relative values and rights (e.g. life and liberty) must be upheld in any society and regardless of majority opinion.
- 6 Right is following self-chosen ethical principles of universal justice; equality of human rights and respect for the dignity of human beings as individuals.⁴

All people move through these stages in invariant sequence, although any individual may stop at a particular stage. People can understand moral arguments at their own stage, at all stages beneath their own, and usually at one stage higher than their own. Higher stages are more adequate because they are more differentiated (i.e., people make a distinction between the value of life and the value of property), more integrated (i.e., life and property are integrated with other items such as justice and law) and more universal (i.e., appeal to universal principles such as the social contract or fundamental principles of justice).⁵ Stage transition takes place primarily because real life or hypothetical moral dilemmas set up cognitive conflict in a person's mind a drive or search for equilibrium which results in stage movement. Role-playing sessions and moral dilemma discussions facilitate this upward moral movement.⁶

Early researchers focused on examining the theory 'itself', later researchers have emphasised the educational application of the theory. The variety of studies and their major aims can be outlined as follows;

1. Cross-sectional comparisons of older subjects with younger subjects, to show that older subjects tend to use higher stages of moral judgement.
2. Longitudinal studies following subjects over several years and consecutively testing them to see if changes are as expected, i.e., upward according to the hierarchical order of the stages.
3. Cross-cultural studies to see if age trends in moral judgement follow the same sequence as American subjects.
4. Comprehension studies which aim to show that comprehension of the stages is cumulative, i.e., if a subject understands stage 3 he/she also understands the lower stages but not necessarily the higher stages.
5. Correlation studies relating moral judgement to behaviour e.g., cheating.
6. Studies of prerequisite components of moral judgement, e.g., Piagetian Formal Operations and social role-taking.⁷

The most reliable way to determine a stage of moral thought is through a moral interview. Kohlberg has devised a number of hypothetical moral dilemmas for this assessment, and has been refining these and improving their reliability over the years. Pagliuso⁸ has produced a Programmed Learning Workbook which is very helpful in understanding how to assess

responses at the different stages. Rest⁹ has created a moral judgement measurement test, called the Defining Issues Test, which has advantages over the Kohlberg dilemma interviews in that it can be administered to a large number of subjects over a short period of time. This test also uses moral dilemmas but in a multiple choice format. It is based on the assumption that people at different stages perceive moral dilemmas differently and when presented with a number of statements about the crucial issue of a dilemma will choose the statement closest to their developmental stage.

Before embarking on a discussion of intervention studies it is helpful to reiterate, very briefly, the principal features of Kohlberg's theory;

1. It is a 'stage' theory.
2. Role-playing and discussion of moral dilemmas will stimulate upward stage movement.
3. These stages are sequential and universal, although there is controversy about stages 5 and 6.¹⁰
4. There is a strong tendency to prefer higher stage moral reasoning to lower stage once both are understood.
5. At the pre-conventional level (stages 1 and 2) the person views rules and adult/social expectations as external to himself; at the conventional level (stages 3 and 4) the person has internalised the expectations of society and authorities; at the post-conventional level (stages 5 and 6) the person adopts self-chosen principles which may coincide with the expectations of society but are not chosen because they do so.

The conclusion is that the individual is seen as developing through stages from a position of blind reliance on adult and social influences to a position of self-reliance and individual commitment to self-chosen principles.¹¹

In discussing Intervention Studies one has to look at two different approaches used to induce change in moral judgement level. One is the use of specially designed curricula to promote change and the second is the Just Community approach. The former focus on the classroom, the latter on the structure of the school experience. Blatt and Kohlberg (1975)¹² designed the first set of studies to explore moral judgement change by the application of developmental principles to a programme of moral education in which

... cognitive conflict and exposure to higher stages of reasoning occurs in the context of continuing and intense moral discussion between peers in a classroom setting.¹³

The subjects were pre-adolescent i.e., the first study was a pilot study with twelve children aged 11-12 in an upper middle-class Jewish Sunday school. The second was a replication in public schools with four groups varying in age and social class, and with matched controls. All experimental and control subjects were pre-tested on Kohlberg's moral judgement interview.

The teaching programme began immediately after pre-testing, it lasted twelve weeks, a total of twelve hours of discussion. The children were presented with a conflict situation and were asked to supply possible ways of resolving it. The suggested solutions were written on the blackboard and the children were then asked to consider the consequences of each solution.

As arguments developed the teacher would take the solution proposed by the child who was one stage above the majority of the children. This solution was discussed until the children understood its logic and seemed convinced it was a fair solution. The procedure was based on the assumption that higher stage subjects would influence lower stage subjects. The only prepared curriculum materials were a set of 'open' moral dilemmas designed to arouse genuine conflict as to moral reasoning and choice. The subjects were post-tested at the end of the programme and again a year later. The major findings were that the classroom experience led to a significant increase in moral judgement maturity and that the increase was still evident one year later, in contrast to changes in the control groups.

The second study was an extension and replication of the pilot study. One hundred and thirty-two subjects were chosen, equal number of both sexes. There were eighteen discussion sessions of forty-five minutes each, over a period of nine weeks. Dilemmas were organised around Law, Rules and their functions, Issues of conscience, Family and parent-child relationships, Authority and its relation to the individual, Property issues and rights, Punishment and justice in relation to crime, Value of life, Truth, Love and sexual relationships. As before these subjects were pre and post tested and had a follow-up test one year later. The results were less than the change achieved in the first study but still clearly indicated significant upward change in the experimental moral discussion groups as compared to controls. As before this change was still evident one year later.

Another study which supplies convincing evidence that deliberate intervention can change moral level score is the Panowitsch-Balcum investigation into what kind of philosophical education is most conducive to development in moral judgement. The subjects were undergraduates aged 17 to 44, in a two year general arts and sciences college in Minneapolis. 73 had enrolled on an ethics course and 28 on a logic course. The former gave the students a concentrated experience in solving complex moral dilemmas, and an exposure to classical moral thinkers. The latter was aimed at rigorous and systematic thinking not specifically centered on moral thinking. The subjects were pre and post-tested on moral judgement level (Defining Issues Test) and critical thinking (Cornell Critical Thinking Test). The results are shown below,

	% Gainers on D.I.T.	% Gainers on C.C.T.T.¹³
Ethics Class	32	22
Logic Class	14	50
$x^2 = 6.9$, significant at .01 level		

From this study it would seem that a course in ethics is more likely to lead to moral judgement development than a course in logic. However, the subjects were not randomly assigned so it may be the case that the ethics students were more disposed and 'ripe' for change than those not selecting the ethics course.¹⁴

A year long intervention study by Sullivan¹⁵ is very interesting in that the subjects, during the course, spent time themselves leading discussion sessions in elementary schools. The subjects

were high-school seniors on an elective course in Psychology. The course was divided into four basic phases. Phase one focused on the formal discussion of ethical issues. Films, novels, plays, television shows, all provided rich sources of moral conflict.

Phase two involved teaching counselling skills to the students. Counselling that involves moral issues can encourage the person who is being the counsellor to put herself/himself in the place of the person in the dilemma and see the situation from that persons point of view (role-taking). Phase three involved tuition in the psychology of moral development and how individuals develop in their moral thinking. Various aspects of moral philosophy were discussed in the second part of this phase. Phase four involved the practical application of what had been learned. The students led moral discussions with elementary school pupils and created a Board of Appeals for their high-school. The idea for the latter grew out of a discussion in which each student could cite instances where he or she felt that the school had acted unjustly. The students who participated in this moral reasoning course were compared to two other groups in the same school. The first of these was a class taking a one-semester course in psychology (group B). This group was as comparable to the experimental group as possible. A second group (C) taking a full-year course in science permitted comparison of the experimental group to another group who worked together as a class for a full year. All three groups were pre- and post-tested with Kohlberg's moral judgement interview and the Loevinger Sentence Completion test. The data from the Kohlberg measure for the experimental group indicated an advance of 44 points or almost a half stage. Comparison groups B and C advanced 9 and 5 points respectively. The analysis of covariance demonstrated a significant difference between experimental and control groups ($F=9.64$, $p<.001$). There was an upward movement on the Kohlberg measure for all the students in the experimental group.¹⁶

While classroom programmes may be a powerful stimulus to individual development, Kohlberg's concern has also been to affect development on a social and institutional level. This goal is in keeping with Dewey's statement that;

The course of education is one of development, focusing indeed in the growth of students, but to be conceived as part of the larger development of society.¹⁷

Kohlberg became involved in what came to be known as alternative schools when he realised that a more complete moral education would deal with real moral dilemmas rather than hypothetical ones. Alternative schools were small schools within large schools. these small schools were characterised by full student participation in a school in which justice is a living matter.

In a democratic community teachers and students are equal members with the same rights and privileges. They share a common project, the building of a just community, which entails making those rules which they feel are necessary to their endeavour.¹⁸

Wasserman¹⁹ describes the evolution of one of these schools during its first three years. She includes a brief historical development of the school, a description of the students and staff, a discussion of the curriculum. Core curricula in English and social studies centered on moral discussion, role-taking and communications, and on relating to governance structure of the

school to that of the wider society. Early community meetings reflected the difficulties the students and staff encountered as they tried to develop a successful democratic community. Race relations in the school, expulsion, admissions, drug use, requirements for being a participating member of the community, stealing and other moral issues were discussed on a regular basis. The consideration of moral issues should be a gradual shift from pre-conventional to conventional thinking. The school-within-a-school has come in for a certain amount of criticism. Kohlberg is insistent that education in values clarification is not enough. "In matters of justice the teacher is not the 'expert', he or she is at best a more mature or wiser voice among many. The emphasis must be on moral reasoning. What if students reason their way toward conclusions which violate society norms?." ²⁰ Kohlberg answers,

so much the better if they are developing to a higher stage and toward principles of justice, and if societies norms,... are racist as they are in many communities in America. ²¹

Mosher's conclusions about one four year research programme in an alternative school are that students can learn to govern themselves; they learn skills, e.g., chairing meetings; taking other peoples' view into consideration; there is preliminary evidence that students who participate in democratic classrooms or alternative schools show significant gains in their measured moral reasoning. ²² Masterson's data indicates that a students stage of moral and ego development are related to how he behaves toward classmates. ²³

In conclusion to this article, there are two approaches taken in intervention studies to promote change in moral judgement level;

1. The use of curricular interventions based on the Socratic inquiry method of reasoning about matters of social fact in relation to value issues.
2. The use of alternative schools to provide students with direct or participatory democracy.

Although moral development theory is focused on the way thoughts are structured about moral issues, the substance and content embodied within that structure is also important. ²⁴ Moral issues do not end at the classroom door, they often involve the school as a whole, or larger units within a school. Efforts have been made to create alternative schools-within-a-school that incorporate aspects of Kohlberg's theory. In these units attempts are made to implement a Just Community approach to moral education. The evidence to date from both approaches is encouraging.

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Abstract

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by

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This article contains a brief discussion of the principal features of Kohlberg's theory of moral development, and examples of the two approaches taken in the application of the theory to education. These are (a) the use of specially designed curricula to promote change and (b) the 'Just Community' or alternative school approach. The former are focused on the classroom and rely on Socratic discussion of real-life and hypothetical moral dilemmas. The latter are concerned with democracy in the school and provide students with experience in direct participatory democracy. The evidence to date supports the thesis that students involved in either approach will be helped toward a justice orientation in the solution of moral dilemmas. There are criticisms of the theory which are not discussed, and which in the author's opinion, do not in any way detract from the value of and need for this theory to be incorporated into the Irish Educational System.