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# Lesson 19

## Moral Development: Lawrence Kohlberg

### Objectives

- To identify the ways people judge what is right or wrong
- To examine the stages of moral development as described by Lawrence Kohlberg
- To evaluate Kohlberg's stages of moral development

### Notes to the Teacher

The issues surrounding moral development are somewhat controversial, so teachers need to be sensitive to the various values that students bring to the classroom. Lawrence Kohlberg was one of the few psychologists who ventured into this delicate area. The approach that he presented is a cognitive one, that is, that the individual's stage of mental processing influences the way a person makes moral decisions. Kohlberg believed that people in a particular stage of development make moral judgments consistently. This premise of his theory has been criticized. Another criticism has been leveled by Carol Gilligan, who thinks that Kohlberg's approach is male biased. She, on the other hand, considers that women make moral choices based on nurturing concerns.

This lesson offers students the opportunity to consider hypothetical moral dilemmas that they face in daily living. They speculate as to the method they use to judge an action. Then they examine the stages of moral development as proposed by Kohlberg and apply his theory to specific situations. The lesson concludes with an analysis and evaluation of this theory.

### Procedure

1. Ask students to write a description of a situation that involves making a moral decision. Ask a few students to read their dilemmas. Conduct a brief discussion on how each of these dilemmas could be resolved. Ask students to explain their rationale for their choices in each of the cases presented. Explain that a cognitive psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, developed a theory to explain how people make moral judgments.

2. Distribute **Handout 45** and have students complete it. Have students discuss their answers in class. Stress the importance of the reasoning process employed, rather than whether Jonathan should or shouldn't act in a certain way. Explain the importance of question 4 (Kohlberg's contention that our rationale in decision making is consistent). After listening to students' answers and explanations of their rationale, ask if the class agrees or disagrees with Kohlberg on this issue and why.
3. Distribute **Handout 46**, and have students study the stages outlined by Kohlberg in part A. Then assign part B of the handout. Review students' responses. Be sure students explain why they selected a particular Kohlberg stage.

### Suggested Responses:

1. Stage 2—*Tamara is using the rule of reciprocity.*
  2. Stage 1—*Skip acts based on the fear of punishment.*
  3. Stage 4—*Juanita is acting in accordance with law or religion. Her friends, however, are in stage 1 because they are concerned with external consequences.*
  4. Either stage 3 or 5—*If he is in stage 3, Muhammed is motivated by his love for his mother. If he is in stage 5, his primary motivation would be his concern for life, any life.*
  5. Stage 5—*Martina risks her life and defies the law because of her concern for human life.*
  6. Stage 3—*Grant seeks the approval of significant people in his life (in this case, his friends and coach).*
4. Distribute and assign **Handout 47**, which outlines a procedure for evaluating such theories. Review and discuss students' responses to the first three questions. Conclude the lesson by having students share their essays. Consider using the essays in a point/counterpoint panel presentation on Kohlberg's theory.

**Suggested Responses:**

1.
  - a. Kohlberg's theory formulates a complete and plausible procedure for studying moral development.
  - b. The theory allows moral development to parallel cognitive development.
  - c. It allows either a positive or negative decision in a moral dilemma to exist because the stages are based on motivation, not action.
2.
  - a. Kohlberg believes that people are consistent in making moral judgments despite the situation.
  - b. The theory may be male-oriented in its hierarchy of stages.
  - c. The theory may be too cognitive in its approach and not take into account emotional decisions.
3. *religious text; conscience; what feels right; absence of moral decision making; etc.*

**Extension**

1. Read Carol Gilligan's book *In a Different Voice*. Give an oral report about her arguments concerning moral decision making.
2. Working in a self-selected small group, write a fifteen-minute skit that illustrates Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Present the skit to the class.



## Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

### Part A.

Read and study the stages of moral development as described by Lawrence Kohlberg.

#### Stage 1—Preconventional

Moral decisions are based on the consequences of the action. "Will I be punished?"

#### Stage 2—Preconventional

Moral decisions are decided on the benefits derived from the action. "Will I get what I want?" In this stage, decisions are also made on the principle of reciprocity. "Does the victim deserve it?"

#### Stage 3—Conventional

Moral decisions are determined by evaluating the action in terms of love and approval of family and friends. "Will my family or friends get mad at me?"

#### Stage 4—Conventional

Moral decisions are based on the precepts of law and/or religion. "Is it right according to the law?"

#### Stage 5—Postconventional

Moral decisions are based on fairness, justice, and truth. Oftentimes, civil law is superceded by a higher moral law as determined by conscience. "Is there a higher good that can come from the action I do?"

### Part B.

For each situation, decide in which stage of Kohlberg's theory the person is responding. On a different piece of paper, write the stage and the reason for your response. Be prepared to explain your rationale for choosing a particular stage.

1. Tamara has five tests in one day. She is a good student but did not have time to study for her French test. She knows the person who sits next to her in French class is also a good student. This girl has copied from Tamara on occasion. Tamara decides to look at the other girl's test for the questions she doesn't know. Besides, thinks Tamara, "I never should have five tests in one day anyway."
2. Scott thought about leaving school early and going to a baseball game. He stayed in school because he was afraid of getting caught.
3. Juanita's friends were at the mall, and someone suggested they do a little shoplifting just to see if they could get away with it. Juanita wouldn't participate and said stealing is wrong.
4. Muhammed lives with his mother in a poor section of the city. His mother is quite ill and needs outpatient services daily at a hospital some miles away from their home. Muhammed steals a car to take his mother to the hospital.
5. Martina, a young woman living in a war-torn region of the world, distributes food to orphans living in the streets. This activity is actually against the law. She frequently has to deceive the authorities in order to keep these children alive.
6. Grant wants to spend time after school volunteering at the hospital. However, he is a good basketball player, and practice interferes with this volunteer program. The coach and other teammates pressure him to play. Grant decides to play with the team.

