



Highlights From Kohlberg's Research¹

Ted Ward

1. Three kinds of structure account for moral judgment in human beings.
2. The moral judgment of a human being develops through a series of three distinct levels, or stops, along the way.
3. The three levels, or kinds of structure, can be described as orientations to external authority:
 - Level I Right and wrong is determined by ego, shaped in response to rewards and punishments from outside.
 - Level II Right and wrong is recognized as originating and being determined by authority, through responsible persons (models) and through collective expressions of morality (rules and laws.)
 - Level III Right and wrong is determined inside oneself, on the basis of principles that have been freely chosen and willingly embraced by the person.
4. The three kinds of structure emerge in a predictable and invariable sequence. (No regression has been found.)
5. Distinct developmental hurdles (potential stalemates of development) exist between Levels I and II and between Levels II and III.
6. A person hears moral messages in terms of his or her level of moral development. Messages intended to represent a structural position more than a half-level beyond the hearer will be distorted by the hearer to bring it into a structural level supportive of his or her present state of development.
7. Certain key concepts run through the levels of development, substantively shifting in specific meaning in accord with each stage: *justice* is the most notable; others are *authority*, *obedience*, and *responsibility*.
8. At the highest level of structure (Level III,) justice emerges as the controlling or dominant structural value. Thus development to Level III involves a natural process through which value *contents* are altered (changed, abandoned, or deepened) in accord with the principle of justice.
9. The quality of justice in a person's environment is closely related to the facilitation of development. When the quality of justice is high, development is enhanced and facilitated—stalemate is less likely.

¹ Handout 1976

Kohlberg's Inquiry

Question

Is there a typical or predictable pattern of stages through which moral judgment develops?
If so, what are the characteristics of the stages?

Method

Interview and content analysis of the apparent rationale given in response to why-type questions.

Subjects

American men and boys.²

Procedure

Longitudinal analysis, based on time-spaced interviewing; the protocol for interviewing presents an anecdotal (situational) moral dilemma, inquiry focuses on the structure of the subject's decisions.

Analysis

Examination of the rationale stated with reference to the holding of particular moral value contents.

Kohlberg's Assumptions

1. Moral judgment and moral action are not the same thing.
2. Moral judgment is a rational process.
3. Moral judgment depends, in part, on cognitive development.
4. Moral judgment consists of two aspects:
 - A. Content
 - B. Structure

Definitions:

Content is the specific what of the value judgment—what is held to be valuable.

Structure is the supporting rationale that represents the *why* of the value judgment—why the particular of content is held to be valuable.

5. People can be helped to identify and verbally relate their structure of moral judgment.
6. Moral judgment is a developmental attribute.

² Refers to Kohlberg's basic longitudinal study which began with his doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago; other studies have been made of other populations, American and other.