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Moral reasoning refers to the processes in which individuals evaluate issues of right and wrong and justify moral decisions. Moral reasoning is fundamental to both individual development and social change, as it enables individuals to identify unfair practices, challenge existing norms, and justify arguments for equality and justice (Killen & Dahl, 2021). Researchers have examined how reasoning changes across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Jensen, 2020). One influential theoretical account of moral reasoning is the stage-theory framework proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984), extending Piaget's constructivist theory into adolescence and adulthood. Building on work by Jean Piaget (1932), Kohlberg argued moral reasoning progresses through a universal, sequence of stages organised into preconventional, conventional and postconventional levels. According to this model, progression through these stages reflects abstract, principled reasoning grounded in justice, rights and universal ethical principles (Kohlberg, 1984).

Kohlberg's theory is regarded as a major advance in developmental psychology by extending the study of morality beyond childhood and introducing systematic methods for assessing moral judgement using structured dilemmas (Colby et al., 1983; Rest, 1979). However, several aspects of the theory have been widely debated. In particular, researchers have questioned whether moral reasoning develops through a universal sequence across the lifespan and whether justice-based reasoning represents the highest form of moral development across cultures. Cross-cultural research suggests justice-based reasoning does not represent the highest form of moral reasoning across different moral traditions (Shweder et al., 1987; Snarey, 1985). Other perspectives have questioned whether Kohlberg's framework adequately captures relational forms of moral reasoning associated with care and responsibility (Gilligan, 1982). In addition, contemporary models highlight

the role of emotion and intuition in moral judgement, challenging the assumption that moral reasoning develops primarily through rational, stage-based cognition (Haidt, 2001).

This essay outlines the core principles underlying Kohlberg's theory before critically evaluating its assumptions in light of contemporary research. Evidence from lifespan and cross-cultural studies suggests that moral reasoning develops in flexible, context-dependent ways than the stage model proposed. Nevertheless, Kohlberg's framework remains foundational, providing a theoretical basis for research into moral reasoning development within diverse social and cultural contexts.

Kohlberg's theory conceptualises moral development as a sequence of distinct stages in moral reasoning. He proposed six stages organised into three broader levels: preconventional, conventional and postconventional (Kohlberg, 1984). Each stage reflects a different basis for moral judgement, with development associated with increasing perspective-taking and reasoning in relation to social rules and ethical principles (Kohlberg, 1984). Longitudinal research provided early support for age-related progression through these stages, particularly across childhood and adolescence (Colby et al., 1983).

At the preconventional level, typical of early childhood, moral reasoning is largely externally controlled and based on the consequences of actions. Stage 1 obedience and punishment orientation defines right and wrong in terms of avoiding pain and punishment, while Stage 2, instrumental orientation reflects an individualistic perspective in which actions are guided by self-interest and mutual interpersonal exchange (Kohlberg, 1984).

At the conventional level, typically emerging in late childhood and adolescence, individuals increasingly internalise social expectations. Stage 3, interpersonal concordance emphasises maintaining approval and being perceived as a “good” person within close relationships. Stage 4, law and order orientation prioritises obedience to authority and the maintenance of social order and laws (Kohlberg, 1984).

The postconventional level involves reasoning based on abstract moral principles. Stage 5, social contract orientation recognises that laws are social agreements that should promote the greatest good and can be changed if unjust. Stage 6, universal ethical principles represent the highest stage, in which moral judgement is guided by internally consistent principles of justice, equality, and human rights that transcend specific laws (Kohlberg, 1984).

Kohlberg assessed moral development using structured moral dilemmas, most famously the “Heinz dilemma”, in which participants evaluate whether a man should steal a drug to save his dying wife. Although participants were asked to make moral judgements about the dilemma, Kohlberg’s primary interest was in the reasoning used to justify those judgements, arguing that development occurs in the structure of moral reasoning rather than the decisions themselves (Colby et al., 1983; Kohlberg, 1984). This methodological approach reinforced Kohlberg’s central claim that moral development concerns qualitative changes in reasoning structure rather than behavioural conformity.

Kohlberg proposed that moral reasoning progresses through an invariant and hierarchical sequence leading to postconventional reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984). Although early stages of moral reasoning development are consistently observed

(Colby et al., 1983), evidence for consistent advancement into the higher stages in adulthood is less strongly supported (Gibbs, 2014). Empirical research indicates that most adults stabilise at conventional reasoning, particularly stage 4, with few individuals demonstrating postconventional reasoning (Rest, 1979; Walker, 1989). Furthermore, Stage 6 reasoning has rarely been identified in empirical studies, and Kohlberg himself noted that it was seldom observed outside small groups such as professional philosophers. These findings challenge Kohlberg's assumption that moral reasoning progresses uniformly across the lifespan, suggesting instead that development is concentrated in childhood and adolescence, with adulthood characterised by stability and plateau rather than continued stage advancement (Rest, 1979; Walker, 1989).

These findings suggest that advancement to Kohlberg's highest levels of moral reasoning appears to be context-dependent rather than representing a universal developmental endpoint that most individuals consistently reach. Nevertheless, early developmental changes in moral reasoning appears consistent with Kohlberg's lower stages, particularly across childhood and adolescence (Colby et al., 1983; Killen & Dahl, 2021).

Contemporary reassessments therefore move away from the assumption of a universal six-stage sequence, suggesting instead that individuals draw upon broader moral schemas — patterns of reasoning concerning personal interests, maintaining social norms, and postconventional principles, rather than progressing through fixed stages. This framework accounts more effectively for the variability, plateau effects, and contextual shifts observed across the lifespan (Jensen, 2020; Thoma & Dong, 2014).

Empirical research indicates that educational experiences and opportunities for reflective discussion can influence moral reasoning in adolescence and adulthood. Studies using the Defining Issues Test (DIT) have shown that moral reasoning scores can increase following structured ethics interventions and engagement with moral dilemmas. Intervention research highlights that discussion of complex ethical problems, particularly when participants are exposed to higher-level arguments, can support the development of more advanced moral reasoning (Juujärvi & Myyry, 2022; Roche, 2017). These findings suggest that moral development is shaped not only by cognitive maturation but also by opportunities for moral dialogue and ethical reflection.

Measurement issues further complicate claims regarding invariant stage progression. Kohlberg assessed moral reasoning using responses to hypothetical dilemmas that were scored according to stage-based reasoning structures. However, Gibbs (2014) highlights methodological concerns regarding the consistency of stage classification and the relatively weak relationship between moral reasoning scores and actual moral behaviour. If individuals draw upon multiple levels of reasoning depending on situational demands, this raises questions about whether stable stage dominance accurately captures how moral reasoning operates in real-world contexts (Gibbs, 2014; Jensen, 2020).

This challenges the assumption that stages represent discrete developmental structures rather than flexible patterns of reasoning.

Contemporary research questions the assumption that moral reasoning primarily develops through rational, stage-based cognition. The social intuitionist model proposes that moral judgement involves intuitive emotional responses with

reasoning often occurring afterwards to justify these responses (Haidt, 2001), indicating that moral evaluation may involve interactions between emotion and reasoning rather than the primarily cognitive progression proposed in Kohlberg's model. This shifts the focus of moral development away from progression through abstract reasoning stages and towards the changing relationship between intuition, emotion and reflection in moral judgement. Supporting this perspective, neurodevelopmental research demonstrates that emotional processes associated with empathy and affective regulation play a significant role in moral evaluation (Decety & Cowell, 2014). Together, these findings challenge Kohlberg's emphasis on cognitive structural progression by highlighting the central role of emotional and intuitive processes in moral judgement. As a result, Kohlberg's model may be limited in accounting for rapid moral judgements that occur without extensive deliberative reasoning.

While Kohlberg's theory helps to explain age-related increases in moral reasoning complexity, its assumptions of rigid and universal stage progression are difficult to sustain. Lifespan research suggests variability, plateau effects, and contextual modulation rather than inevitable progression towards principled moral reasoning. Developmental research further indicates that individuals increasingly use moral reasoning to evaluate fairness, equality, and rights across childhood and adolescence, often challenging unfair norms or practices when they conflict with moral principles (Killen & Dahl, 2021). This suggests that moral development cannot be fully understood through childhood stage progression alone. While early moral tendencies may be widely shared, moral reasoning becomes increasingly diverse across adulthood as individuals engage with different social roles and cultural contexts (Jensen, 2020), a pattern that is consistent with perspectives emphasising

care, relational responsibility and interpersonal obligations as important dimensions of moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006). Consequently, examining moral reasoning across the lifespan and broader social contexts has become an important focus of contemporary research. While lifespan research questions the inevitability of stage progression, cultural research further suggests that the forms of moral reasoning individuals develop may also reflect the social and cultural contexts in which moral judgements are learned and applied.

Cross-cultural research further highlights limitations to the universality of Kohlberg's higher stages, which are predominantly observed within Western, urban populations (Jensen, 2020).

A central assumption of Kohlberg's theory is that the structure of moral reasoning develops through universal stages that apply across cultures. Kohlberg argued that while the content of moral beliefs may vary across societies, the foundational structure of moral reasoning progresses through the same invariant stages across societies (Kohlberg, 1984). However, the assumption of universality has been extensively debated, with cross-cultural research suggesting that moral reasoning may be influenced by social, cultural and religious contexts. Early cross-cultural research provided partial support for age-related progression through the lower stages, particularly preconventional and conventional reasoning (Snarey, 1985). These findings suggest that some aspects of Kohlberg's developmental sequence, particularly the earlier stages, show cross-cultural consistency (Snarey, 1985). Evidence for the universality of postconventional reasoning remains mixed. Snarey's (1985) review of 45 cross-cultural studies found that postconventional

reasoning was rarely observed in small-scale non-industrial societies and appeared predominantly among participants from Western, urban contexts. Snarey (1985) also noted methodological limitations within cross-cultural studies, including inconsistent age reporting and uneven representation of cultural groups. Kohlberg himself acknowledged that higher-stage reasoning was more likely to emerge within complex, industrialised societies characterised by democratic institutions and pluralistic social structures (Jensen, 2020; Snarey, 1985). These findings indicate that the emergence of postconventional reasoning appears to depend on sociopolitical conditions rather than representing a universally attainable developmental endpoint. This pattern therefore leads researchers to question whether postconventional reasoning represents a universal stage of moral development or instead reflects the moral priorities of particular sociocultural contexts (Jensen, 2020).

Anthropological research has further challenged the assumption that justice-based reasoning represents a culturally neutral standard of moral maturity. Shweder et al. (1987) proposed that moral systems are organised around at least three ethics: autonomy (rights and justice), community (duty and hierarchy), and divinity (sacred order), offering an alternative framework to Kohlberg's justice-centred hierarchy. Within this framework, reasoning that prioritises authority or communal obligation, classified as "conventional" within Kohlberg's model, may reflect culturally coherent moral frameworks rather than developmental limitation alone (Shweder et al., 1987). This suggests that behaviours interpreted as less advanced within Kohlberg's hierarchy may instead reflect alternative moral priorities shaped by cultural traditions. From this perspective, Kohlberg's stage hierarchy can evaluate culturally normative

forms of moral reasoning according to standards derived primarily from Western moral traditions.

Cultural psychologists argue that moral reasoning is shaped by culturally embedded moral traditions rather than progressing through a universal developmental sequence. For example, Jensen and McKenzie (2016) examined moral reasoning among evangelical and Protestant participants using three ethical frameworks: autonomy, community and divinity. Their findings show that Protestant participants relied more strongly on autonomy-based reasoning, whereas evangelical participants more frequently used community and divinity reasoning. Divinity reasoning also increased with age among evangelical participants when evaluating certain moral issues. These findings suggest that moral reasoning may be organised around culturally meaningful moral systems, challenging the assumption that moral development necessarily progresses towards a justice-based endpoint as proposed in Kohlberg's model.

Alternative perspectives have also questioned the normative assumptions embedded with Kohlberg's hierarchy. Gilligan (1982) argued that Kohlberg's focus on justice-based reasoning underrepresents forms of moral judgement grounded in care, relational responsibility, and sensitivity to interpersonal needs. Although empirical reviews indicate gender differences in stage attainment are generally modest (Walker, 1984), Gilligan's critique highlights potential bias in scoring systems that privilege justice reasoning over relational considerations. The ethic of care perspective proposes that moral reasoning may also involve evaluating responsibilities within relationships and attentiveness to the needs of others, rather than relying solely on abstract principles of justice (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013). In cultural contexts where moral values emphasise interpersonal obligations, social

harmony, and relational duties, care-orientated reasoning can therefore represent a culturally meaningful moral framework rather than a less advanced stage of moral development.

More recent cross-cultural research has further challenged the universality of Kohlberg's model by demonstrating systematic variation in moral priorities across societies. Research within Moral Foundations Theory suggests that Western, educated populations tend to emphasise the individualising foundations of harm and fairness, whereas non-Western and more collectivist cultures show stronger endorsement of the binding foundations of loyalty, authority and sanctity alongside individualising foundations (Graham et al., 2011). This suggests that moral reasoning may be organised around the values emphasised within particular cultures rather than progressing towards a universal developmental endpoint as implied by Kohlberg's stage theory, thereby challenging its claim to cultural neutrality. However, moral reasoning cannot be reduced solely to cultural norms. Developmental research shows that individuals frequently use moral reasoning to evaluate and challenge unfair social practices, suggesting that moral judgement can both reflect and critically transform the cultural contexts in which it develops (Killen & Dahl, 2021).

Moreover, contemporary cultural research has highlighted the predominance of Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) populations within psychological research. Many influential theories of moral development have therefore been based largely on Western samples that prioritise individual rights, fairness and personal autonomy (Bentahila et al., 2021). In contrast, collectivist cultures often place greater emphasis on social harmony, duty, and group obligations when evaluating moral situations (Bentahila et al., 2021). From this

perspective, postconventional reasoning may reflect the moral priorities of Western societies rather than a universally attainable stage of moral development.

Together, while structural similarities in moral reasoning have been identified across societies (Snarey, 1985), contemporary cross-cultural research indicates that moral development is embedded within culturally specific normative frameworks (Jensen, 2020). Cultural context may influence both the forms of moral reasoning individuals develop and the experiences through which more complex reasoning emerges across the lifespan. This complicates strong claims of universality and suggests that Kohlberg's postconventional stage may reflect culturally specific ideals rather than a universal developmental endpoint.

Despite extensive empirical and theoretical critique, Kohlberg's theory remains a major contribution to developmental psychology because it established moral reasoning as a developmental process grounded in changes in reasoning structure rather than behavioural conformity and provided systematic methods for investigating moral reasoning across age groups and cultural contexts (Kohlberg, 1984). Subsequent approaches, including Neo-Kohlbergian schema models, build upon this developmental framework while rejecting strict stage invariance, retaining the emphasis on increasingly complex moral justification.

Contemporary research therefore reconceptualises Kohlberg's stages as probabilistic patterns of moral reasoning shaped by contextual, emotional, and cultural influences, rather than fixed developmental endpoints (Jensen, 2020).

In conclusion, Kohlberg's stage theory provides an influential framework for understanding developmental changes in moral reasoning, but its claims of universal and invariant stage progression are difficult to sustain. Evidence from lifespan

trajectories, cultural variation, and affective influences suggests that moral reasoning operates in context-dependent ways rather than progressing through a universal stage sequence. Lifespan research indicates that, on balance, moral reasoning development is most pronounced in childhood and adolescence, with many individuals stabilising at conventional levels in adulthood rather than progressing towards postconventional reasoning. Cross-cultural research further demonstrates that moral reasoning reflects culturally embedded moral priorities rather than a universal developmental endpoint. These findings suggest that moral development is more flexible, context-dependent, and pluralistic than Kohlberg's original model suggested. Future research should examine moral development using longitudinal, cross-cultural designs that combine dilemma-based measures with ecologically valid behavioural outcomes, to clarify when reasoning predicts action and when context and emotion dominate. Moreover, providing opportunities for age-appropriate discussion of moral dilemmas may support the development of more advanced moral reasoning. Nevertheless, Kohlberg's framework remains foundational in influencing research and theoretical debate about how moral reasoning develops across the lifespan and cultures.

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