

With reference to individual differences across culture and lifespan, critically discuss the contribution of Kohlberg's theory of moral development to current understandings of the development of moral reasoning

AI Acknowledgement

This essay will discuss and critically evaluate Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, focusing on individual differences across culture and the lifespan, as well as examining how his stage-based model has influenced current understandings of moral reasoning. Additionally, it considers Kohlberg's idea that people progress through universal and hierarchical stages from childhood to adulthood. However, the essay will also consider the theory's limitations, such as cultural and gender biases, as well as the assumption of fixed stage progression, to provide a balanced and critical view of Kohlberg's contribution to understanding Moral Reasoning.

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development explains how individuals develop moral reasoning through three levels and six stages. The pre-conventional level focuses on self-interest, where individuals make decisions to avoid punishment or gain rewards. In addition, the conventional level emphasises social expectations, where people seek approval from others and follow laws to maintain social order. Furthermore, the post-conventional level represents more advanced moral thinking, where individuals base decisions on ethical principles such as justice and human rights. At this stage, people may question or challenge laws if they believe they are unfair or violate fundamental moral values (McLeod, 2025).

Killen and Dahl (2021) explain that moral reasoning shapes both personal development and societal change. However, Killen and Dahl (2021) argue that moral reasoning encompasses fairness, rights, welfare, and justice, and is central to both how people develop and how societies change. Furthermore, it shows that even young children balance concerns like equality and need when making judgments, and as they grow. In addition, they become better at identifying unfairness and resisting stereotypes. Moral reasoning not only guides personal development but also enables people to challenge unfair norms and push for social change throughout history.

According to Fine et al. (2016) A study looks at how people think about rules and laws. Additionally, the researchers created a 'Rule Orientation' scale to measure whether someone believes rules should always be followed or if breaking them can sometimes be justified. However, people with high rule orientation believe rules are strict and should rarely be broken. In addition, people with low rule orientation are more likely to think it is acceptable to break rules depending on the situation.

Furthermore, the study found that people with lower rule orientation are more likely to commit small illegal acts, such as Illegal file sharing, even when there are warnings or punishments. However, this suggests that not everyone responds the same way to threats of

punishment, and people's personal attitudes toward rules strongly affect whether they obey the law (2016).

According Mathes (2019) Kohlberg's theory explains how moral reasoning develops in stages as people grow. Additionally, research suggests that moral development and social evolution progress together. However, in the early stages, people focus on avoiding punishment and personal gain. In addition, they develop, and begin to consider fairness, social rules, and the needs of others, and at its highest stage, of moral reasoning is guided by universal ethical principles such as justice (treating people fairly), human rights (respecting everyone's dignity), equality (believing everyone deserves equal opportunities), respect for life (valuing human well-being), and fairness (making unbiased decisions). Furthermore, people follow these principles even when they conflict with laws because they believe they represent a higher moral standard.

A study by Cowell et al. (2017) looked at 999 children aged 5–12 from Canada, China, South Africa, Turkey, and the USA to see how generosity develops. Additionally, the study found that children become more generous as they grow older, mainly because of cognitive skills like self-control and understanding others' thoughts. In addition, the culture and economy of a country also affect how children share. However, empathy, gender, and family income had less impact. Furthermore, this shows that moral development depends on both thinking skills and the environment children grow up in as well as the study did not consider parenting, friends, religion, personality, or track children over time (2017).

Strauß and Bondü (2022), carried out a study examining how justice sensitivity influences moral development in children aged 5 to 12. Straub and Bondu (2022) argue that Justice sensitivity refers to how strongly children notice and react to unfairness toward themselves or others. According to this study, they found that children who are sensitive to injustice toward others tend to develop a stronger moral identity and show more prosocial attitudes. In addition, children who focus mainly on unfairness toward themselves may struggle to develop moral norms, as well as the study also found gender differences: girls generally showed higher justice sensitivity, moral reasoning, and moral identity than boys. Furthermore, these areas, justice, sensitivity, moral reasoning, and moral identity, are key parts of moral development. Additionally, older children also showed stronger development in these areas compared with younger children.

Toomey et al. (2020) argue that children's moral development around sexual and gender diversity is shaped by societal norms, discrimination, and personal experiences. In addition, heterosexism and cisgender bias give advantages to heterosexual and cisgender people, and children can adopt these unfair attitudes. In addition, moral thinking is influenced by fairness, social rules, and personal beliefs, while critical awareness helps youth's notice injustice and take action. Peers, family, education, and activism also shape attitudes. Positive contact with peers who are part of a sexual or gender minority group (SGM) helps reduce prejudice, as well as supportive groups like LGBTQ and student clubs, which foster alliances. Therefore, schools play a key role by providing inclusive policies, teacher training, safe spaces, and curricula reflecting diverse experiences. However, understanding these processes helps create

inclusive environments and guide interventions promoting equity and acceptance for all youth.

Bergen and Davis (2020) argue that play groups provide essential contexts for children to develop moral reasoning, emotions, and behaviour. Play is a key factor in children's moral development, providing safe, enjoyable opportunities to explore right and wrong. Additionally, it features autonomy, creativity, and imagination, as well as helps children practice moral behaviours, develop empathy, and reflect on ethical choices. Furthermore, family play introduces early lessons in social rules and emotional understanding, shaped by parental involvement and culture. In addition, peer play teaches negotiation, sharing, conflict resolution, and understanding diverse perspectives. In addition, community play expands these experiences, exposing children to broader social norms. Across all settings, play supports moral reasoning, emotional growth, and prosocial behaviour, making it essential for childhood moral development (2020).

Cesko (2025) highlights that preschool children develop moral reasoning sequentially, influenced by culture and parental modelling. According to Cesko (2025) their study explored moral development in preschool children ages 3–6 in Kosovo, using Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning and principles from 'Positive Psychotherapy'. However, the researchers predicted that children would progress through similar stages of moral development and that girls would show higher levels of altruism than boys. 100 children, evenly divided by gender, were assessed with the Early Development Instrument. Additionally, this evaluates moral reasoning, social skills, and altruistic behaviour.

Furthermore, results showed that children develop moral understanding and altruism in sequence, with girls slightly higher in altruistic behaviours. Moreover, parental modelling strongly influenced moral behaviour, and cultural context shaped how morality was expressed. The study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches, supportive environments, and strengths-based reinforcement in fostering moral reasoning, empathy, and social responsibility (2025).

Lawrence Kohlberg transformed our understanding of moral development, showing that individuals actively construct their development through social interaction and cognition. His stage theory explains how moral reasoning grows more complex over time, emphasising the importance of how clients think, not just what they believe.

In counselling, this means supporting meaning-making, encouraging higher-level thinking, and facilitating stage progression. Additionally, development occurs in context, so dialogue and group interaction foster moral growth, role-taking, and responsibility. However, constructivist approaches allow counsellors to guide holistic client development, focusing on growth rather than pathology. Kohlberg's insights remain central to modern counselling practice (1994).

Gibbs (2019) explains that Kohlberg studied how people develop a sense of right and wrong, an area previously overlooked in psychology. Additionally, based on Piaget's ideas about thinking and Dewey's ideas about learning, Kohlberg created a six-stage model showing that moral reasoning grows more advanced with age. Gibbs argue the stages

oversimplify moral development, as people do not always progress in order; reaching the highest stages is rare. However, later research suggests moral growth can go beyond these stages, including reflecting on life, choices, and values.

Kohlberg's theory of moral development builds on Piaget's framework, extending the study of moral reasoning from childhood into adolescence and adulthood while maintaining the principle that moral growth depends on cognitive development (Appleton, 1977).

Sham, Yaqin, and Wachidah (2021) compare Kohlberg's stages of moral development with al-Ghazali's moral levels and note similarities in hierarchical structure, but note these differences in emphasis on reasoning versus spiritual behaviour. Kohlberg claimed people grow from avoiding punishment or seeking rewards (pre-conventional) to following rules and society (conventional) and finally to thinking about universal principles like justice (post-conventional). Al-Ghazali explains growth from basic rule-following ('Awam) to self-discipline and improving character (Khawas) and finally to acting out of pure love for God (Khawas al-Khawas). Both focus on why people do good things, not just what they do. However, the difference is that Kohlberg focuses on thinking, while al-Ghazali focuses on spiritual motivation. Moral education works best when it teaches both reasoning and good habits.

Heiphetz and Oishi (2022) state that childhood, adolescence, and adulthood can be seen as distinct "cultures" with their own values, language, and rules. Children learn through parents, peers, and role models, often copying those they admire. Early thinking and social habits tend to persist into adulthood. In addition, understanding life stages as cultural groups can help reduce conflicts between age groups, improve perspective-taking, and explain why behaviours differ at each stage. However, this shows that human growth is shaped by both thinking and social environment.

According to Krettenauer (2022) moral identity develops over time, starting in childhood with concrete behaviours like sharing, and becoming abstract and internalised in adulthood. Additionally, early moral identity is influenced by external factors such as parental approval, while adults act from internalised values and strive to achieve moral ideals. However, children initially focus on avoiding being "bad", but over time, they adopt a promotion-oriented mindset, aiming to do good. Furthermore, moral identity is dynamic, refined across the lifespan through cognitive development, emotional regulation, and social learning, as well as explaining why moral behaviours become more stable and self-directed with age.

Malti, Galarneau, and Peplak (2021) carried out a study showing that adolescence is an important time for learning moral values and social responsibility. Moral development depends on emotions, thinking, as well as social relationships. Emotions like empathy and guilt help teens act kindly and avoid harmful behaviour. As well as family, friends, and mentors shape what is fair and acceptable, while group situations influence how they treat others. Furthermore, new research methods, such as tracking emotions in daily life, show how teens make moral decisions in real situations. However, the study highlights adolescence as a key period for developing ethical behaviour and calls for research on how culture, technology, and guidance can help teens grow into responsible, caring adults.

Weber and Urick (2023) argue that defining millennials solely by birth year is insufficient for understanding personal values and moral reasoning. Their study of 1,823 business students across eight countries found that cultural and geographic context better predicts differences in moral judgment and value orientations. Tools like the Rokeach Value Survey and Moral Reasoning Inventory showed significant variation across countries, as well as among individuals of the same age cohort. Additionally, the research warns that generational stereotypes can harm workplace inclusion and decision-making. However, organisations should prioritise individual and cultural differences. Future research should examine other cohorts and adopt cross-cultural methods to better understand moral reasoning and professional behaviour.

Dawson (2003) compared Kohlberg's Standard Issue Scoring System with a Hierarchical Complexity Scoring System to see if moral development reflects a unique moral domain or general cognitive growth. Using 637 moral judgment interviews, the study found high agreement at higher stages, but lower stages were often underestimated by Kohlberg's method. The hierarchical complexity system captures developmental patterns like spurts and plateaus, and separates the structure of thinking from content, reducing cultural bias. The findings suggest that moral reasoning largely reflects general cognitive development, and domain-general scoring provides a more reliable, flexible, and accurate way to assess human growth across the lifespan.

The Post-Conventional Level is the highest stage in Kohlberg's study of moral development. In addition, Stage 5 focuses on fair laws and social agreements, while Stage 6 follows universal principles like justice and human dignity. Lawrence Kohlberg introduced the Heinz Dilemma to study moral reasoning by analysing why Heinz should or should not steal a life-saving drug. However, Kohlberg argues that people reach these stages at different speeds depending on their thinking skills and empathy. Therefore, this level shows that moral growth is ongoing and helps people make fair and caring choices beyond simply following rules (Kohlberg, 1981).

Bentahila, Fontaine, and Pennequin (2021) argue that moral reasoning reflects both universal and culturally specific influences, as well as morality helps people know what is right and wrong, but it develops differently in different cultures. Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg stated that people go through stages of moral reasoning as they grow. In addition, their ideas focus on justice and individual rights. However, they don't always fit all cultures. Furthermore, later researchers, like Richard Shweder and Jonathan Haidt, show that morality is shaped by both human instincts and culture, using gut feelings and thinking to make moral decisions.

To conclude, Kohlberg's theory of moral development helps us understand how people learn to think about right and wrong, moving from self-interest to thinking about fairness and justice. His stages show how moral thinking grows with age and social experience, but research shows that culture, gender, family, friends, and society all affect how people develop morals. Studies also show the importance of empathy, fairness, and real-life situations, which Kohlberg's model does not fully capture. Despite its limits, his theory is still important in

education and counselling, helping us see moral reasoning as a process that develops throughout life.

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