Moral Development and Education: An Overview

Jean Piaget
The Shift from Heteronomy to Autonomy

Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget is among the first psychologists whose work remains directly relevant to contemporary theories of moral development. In his early writing, he focused specifically on the moral lives of children, studying the way children play games in order to learn more about children's beliefs about right and wrong(1932/65). According to Piaget, all development emerges from action; that is to say, individuals construct and reconstruct their knowledge of the world as a result of interactions with the environment. Based on his observations of children's application of rules when playing, Piaget determined that morality, too, can be considered a developmental process. For example, Ben, a ten year old studied by Piaget, provided the following critique of a rule made-up by a child playing marbles: "it isn't a rule! It's a wrong rule because it's outside of the rules. A fair rule is one that is in the game". Ben believed in the absolute and intrinsic truth of the rules, characteristic of early moral reasoning. In contrast, Vua, aged thirteen, illustrates an understanding of the reasoning behind the application of rules, characteristic of later moral thinking. When asked to consider the fairness of a made-up rule compared to a traditional rule, Vua replied "It is just as fair because the marbles are far apart"(making the game equally difficult).

In addition to examining children's understanding of rules about games, Piaget interviewed children regarding acts such as stealing and lying. When asked what a lie is, younger children consistently answered that they are "naughty words". When asked why they should not lie, younger children could rarely explain beyond the forbidden nature of the act: "because it is a naughty word". However, older children were able to explain "because it isn't right", and "it wasn't true". Even older children indicated an awareness of intention as relevant to the meaning of an act: "A lie is when you deceive someone else. To make a mistake is when you make a mistake". From his observations, Piaget concluded that children begin in a "heteronomous" stage of moral reasoning, characterized by a strict adherence to rules and duties, and obedience to authority.

This heteronomy results from two factors. The first factor is the young child's cognitive structure. According to Piaget, the thinking of young children is characterized by egocentrism. That is to say that young children are unable to simultaneously take into account their own view of things with the perspective of someone else. This egocentrism

leads children to project their own thoughts and wishes onto others. It is also associated with the uni-directional view of rules and power associated with heteronomous moral thought, and various forms of "moral realism." Moral realism is associated with "objective responsibility", which is valuing the letter of the law above the purpose of the law. This is why young children are more concerned about the outcomes of actions rather than the intentions of the person doing the act. Moral realism is also associated with the young child's belief in "immanent justice." This is the expectation that punishments automatically follow acts of wrong-doing. One of the most famous cases of such childhood thinking was that of the young boy who believed that his hitting a power pole with his baseball bat caused a major power blackout in the New York city area.

The second major contributor to heteronomous moral thinking in young children, is their relative social relationship with adults. In the natural authority relationship between adults and children, power is handed down from above. The relative powerlessness of young children, coupled with childhood egocentrism feeds into a heteronomous moral orientation.

However, through interactions with other children in which the group seeks a to play together in a way all find fair, children find this strict heteronomous adherence to rules sometimes problematic. As children consider these situations, they develop towards an "autonomous" stage of moral reasoning, characterized by the ability to consider rules critically, and selectively apply these rules based on a goal of mutual respect and cooperation. The ability to act from a sense of reciprocity and mutual respect is associated with a shift in the child's cognitive structure from egocentrism to perspective taking. Coordinating one's own perspective with that of others means that what is right needs to be based on solutions that meet the requirements of fair reciprocity. Thus, Piaget viewed moral development as the result of interpersonal interactions through which individuals work out resolutions which all deem fair. Paradoxically, this autonomous view of morality as fairness is more compelling and leads to more consistent behavior than the heteronomous orientation held by younger children.

Piaget concluded from this work that schools should emphasize cooperative decision-making and problem solving, nurturing moral development by requiring students to work out common rules based on fairness. This is a direct rejection of sociologists Emile Durkheim's view of proper moral education (1925/1961). Durkheim, similar to Piaget, believed that morality resulted from social interaction or immersion in a group. However, Durkheim believed moral development was a natural result of attachment to the group, an attachment which manifests itself in a respect for the symbols, rules, and authority of that group. Piaget rejected this belief that children simply learn and internalize the norms for a group; he believed individuals define morality individually through their struggles to arrive at fair solutions. Given this view, Piaget suggested that a classroom teacher perform a difficult task: the educator must provide students with opportunities for personal discovery through problem solving, rather than indoctrinating students with norms.

An excellent contemporary adaptation of Piaget's theory for moral development of young children may be found in DeVries, R. & Zan, B. (1994). "Moral Children: Constructing a Constructivist Atmosphere in Early Education." New York: Teachers College Press. You may preview some portions of that book within the Classroom Practices segment of this web site. DeVries and Zan go beyond Piaget's original work to include that of more recent theorists including Lawrence Kohlberg whose theory will be described next.

Lawrence Kohlberg
Stage Based Moral Development


Lawrence Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) modified and elaborated Piaget's work, and laid the groundwork for the current debate within psychology on moral development. Consistent with Piaget, he proposed that children form ways of thinking through their experiences which include understandings of moral concepts such as justice, rights, equality and human welfare. Kohlberg followed the development of moral judgment beyond the ages studied by Piaget, and determined that the process of attaining moral maturity took longer and was more gradual than Piaget had proposed. On the basis of his research, Kohlberg identified six stages of moral reasoning grouped into three major levels. Each level represented a fundamental shift in the social-moral perspective of the individual. At the first level, the preconventional level, a person's moral judgments are characterized by a concrete, individual perspective. Within this level, a Stage 1 heteronomous orientation focuses on avoiding breaking rules that are backed by punishment, obedience for its own sake and avoiding the physical consequences of an action to persons and property. As in Piaget's framework, the reasoning of Stage 1 is characterized by ego-centrism and the inability to consider the perspectives of others. At Stage 2 there is the early emergence of moral reciprocity. The Stage 2 orientation focuses on the instrumental, pragmatic value of an action. Reciprocity is of the form, "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." The Golden Rule becomes, "If someone hits you, you hit them back."

At Stage 2 one follows the rules only when it is to someone's immediate interests. What is right is what's fair in the sense of an equal exchange, a deal, an agreement. At Stage 2 there is an understanding that everybody has his(her) own interest to pursue and these conflict, so that right is relative (in the concrete individualist sense).
Individuals at the conventional level of reasoning, however, have a basic understanding of conventional morality, and reason with an understanding that norms and conventions are necessary to uphold society. They tend to be self-identified with these rules, and uphold them consistently, viewing morality as acting in accordance with what society defines as right. Within this level, individuals at Stage 3 are aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations which take primacy over individual interests. Persons at Stage 3 define what is right in terms of what is expected by people close to one's self, and in terms of the stereotypic roles that define being good - e.g., a good brother, mother, teacher. Being good means keeping mutual relationships, such as trust, loyalty, respect,

and gratitude. The perspective is that of the local community or family. There is not as yet a consideration of the generalized social system. Stage 4 marks the shift from defining what is right in terms of local norms and role expectations to defining right in terms of the laws and norms established by the larger social system. This is the "member of society" perspective in which one is moral by fulfilling the actual duties defining one's social responsibilities. One must obey the law except in extreme cases in which the law comes into conflict with other prescribed social duties. Obeying the law is seen as necessary in order to maintain the system of laws which protect everyone.

Finally, the post conventional level is characterized by reasoning based on principles, using a "prior to society" perspective. These individuals reason based on the principles which underlie rules and norms, but reject a uniform application of a rule or norm. While two stages have been presented within the theory, only one, Stage 5, has received substantial empirical support. Stage 6 remains as a theoretical endpoint which rationally follows from the preceding 5 stages. In essence this last level of moral judgment entails reasoning rooted in the ethical fairness principles from which moral laws would be devised. Laws are evaluated in terms of their coherence with basic principles of fairness rather than upheld simply on the basis of their place within an existing social order. Thus, there is an understanding that elements of morality such as regard for life and human welfare transcend particular cultures and societies and are to be upheld irrespective of other conventions or normative obligations. These stages (1-5) have been empirically supported by findings from longitudinal and cross-cultural research (Power et al., 1989).

Moral Education

Kohlberg used these findings to reject traditional character education practices. These approaches are premised in the idea that virtues and vices are the basis to moral behavior, or that moral character is comprised of a "bag of virtues", such as honesty, kindness, patience, strength, etc. According to the traditional approach, teachers are to teach these virtues through example and direct communication of convictions, by giving students an opportunity to practice these virtues, and by rewarding their expression. However, critiques of the traditional approach find flaws inherent in this model. This approach provides no guiding principle for defining what virtues are worthy of espousal, and wrongly assumes a community consensus on what are considered "positive values". In fact, teachers often end up arbitrarily imposing certain values depending upon their societal, cultural, and personal beliefs. In order to address this issue of ethical relativity, some have adopted the values-clarification approach to moral education. This teaching practice is based on the assumption that there are no single, correct answers to ethical dilemmas, but that there is value in holding clear views and acting accordingly. In addition, there is a value of toleration of divergent views. It follows, then, that the teacher's role is one of discussion moderator, with the goal of teaching merely that people hold different values; the teacher does attempt to present her views as the "right" views. Kohlberg rejected the focus on values and virtues, not only due to the lack of consensus on what virtues are to be taught, but also because of the complex nature of practicing such virtues. For example, people often make different decisions yet hold the same basic moral values. Kohlberg believed a better approach to affecting moral behavior should

focus on stages of moral development. These stages are critical, as they consider the way a person organizes their understanding of virtues, rules, and norms, and integrates these into a moral choice (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). In addition, he rejected the relativist view point in favor of the view that certain principles of justice and fairness represent the pinnacle of moral maturity, as he found that these basic moral principles are found in different cultures and subcultures around the world (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971).

The goal of moral education, it then follows, is to encourage individuals to develop to the next stage of moral reasoning. Initial educational efforts employing Kohlberg's theory were grounded in basic Piagetian assumptions of cognitive development. Development, in this model, is not merely the result of gaining more knowledge, but rather consists of a sequence of qualitative changes in the way an individual thinks. Within any stage of development, thought is organized according to the constraints of that stage. An individual then interacts with the environment according to their basic understandings of the environment. However, the child will at some point encounter information which does not fit into their world view, forcing the child to adjust their view to accommodate this new information. This process is called equilibration, and it is through equilibration that development occurs. Early moral development approaches to education, therefore, sought to force students to ponder contradiction inherent to their present level of moral reasoning.

The most common tool for doing this was to present a "moral dilemma" (see Classroom Practices) and require students to determine and justify what course the actor in the dilemma should take. Through discussion, students should then be forced to face the contradictions present in any course of action not based on principles of justice or fairness.

While Kohlberg appreciated the importance and value of such moral dilemma discussions, he held from very early on that moral education required more than individual reflection, but also needed to include experiences for students to operate as moral agents within a community. In this regard, Kohlberg reconciled some of the differences in orientation that existed between the theories of moral growth held by Piaget and Durkheim. In order to provide students with an optimal context within which to grow morally, Kohlberg and his colleagues developed the "just community" schools approach towards promoting moral development (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). The basic premise of these schools is to enhance students' moral development by offering them the chance to participate in a democratic community. Here, democracy refers to more than simply casting a vote. It entails full participation of community members in arriving at consensual rather than "majority rules" decision-making. One primary feature of these schools is their relatively small size (often they are actually schools within schools), aimed at providing the students with a sense of belonging to a group which is responsive to individual needs. The central institution of these schools is a community meeting in which issues related to life and discipline in the schools are discussed and democratically decided, with an equal value placed on the voices of students and teachers. An underlying goal of these meetings is to establish collective norms which express fairness for all members of the community. It is believed that by placing the

responsibility of determining and enforcing rules on students, they will take prosocial behavior more seriously. At the same time, this approach stems from the cognitive-developmentalist view that discussion of moral dilemmas can stimulate moral development.

However, this is not to say that just community school simply leaves students to their own devices; teachers play a crucial leadership role in these discussions, promoting rules and norms which have a concern for justice and community, and ultimately enforcing the rules. This role is not an easy one, as teachers must listen closely and understand a student's reasoning, in order to help the student to the next level of reasoning. This requires a delicate balance between letting the students make decisions, and advocating in a way which shows them the limits in their reasoning. A primary advantage to the Just Community approach is its effectiveness in affecting students actions, not just their reasoning. Students are, in effect, expected to "practice what they preach", by following the rules determined in community meetings.

The most comprehensive and authoritative source for work on Kohlberg's approach to moral education is to be found in : Power, F. C., Higgins, A., & Kohlberg, L. (1989). "Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education." New York: Columbia University Press.

Elliot Turiel
Social Domain Theory

In the early 1970s, longitudinal studies conducted by the Kohlberg research group began to reveal anomalies in the stage sequence. Researchers committed to the basic Kohlberg framework attempted to resolve those anomalies through adjustments in the stage descriptions (see the Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989 reference for an account of those changes). Other theorists, however, found that a comprehensive resolution to the anomalous data required substantial adjustments in the theory itself. One of the most productive lines of research to come out of that period has been the domain theory advanced by Elliot Turiel and his colleagues. Within domain theory a distinction is drawn between the child's developing concepts of morality, and other domains of social knowledge, such as social convention. According to domain theory, the child's concepts of morality and social convention emerge out of the child's attempts to account for qualitatively differing forms of social experience associated with these two classes of social events. Actions within the moral domain, such as unprovoked hitting of someone, have intrinsic effects (i.e., the harm that is caused) on the welfare of another person. Such intrinsic effects occur irregardless of the nature of social rules that may or may not be in place regarding the action. Because of this, the core features of moral cognition are centered around considerations of the effects which actions have upon the well-being of persons. Morality is structured by concepts of harm, welfare, and fairness.

In contrast, actions that are matters of social convention have no intrinsic interpersonal consequences. For example, there is nothing intrinsic to the forms of address we employ that makes calling a college teacher "professor" better or worse than calling the person Mr. or Ms., or simply using their given names. What makes one form of address better than another is the existence of socially agreed upon rules. These conventions, while arbitrary in the sense that they have no intrinsic status, are nonetheless important to the smooth functioning of any social group. Conventions provide a way for members of the group to coordinate their social exchanges through a set of agreed upon and predictable modes of conduct. Concepts of convention then, are structured by the child's understandings of social organization.

These hypothesized distinctions have been sustained through studies over the past 20 years. These studies have included interviews with children, adolescents and adults; observations of child-child and adult-child social interactions; cross-cultural studies; and longitudinal studies examining the changes in children's thinking as they grow older. An example of the distinction between morality and convention is given in the following excerpt from an interview with a four-year-old girl regarding her perceptions of spontaneously occurring transgressions at her preschool.

MORAL ISSUE: Did you see what happened? Yes. They were playing and John hit him too hard. Is that something you are supposed to do or not supposed to do? Not so hard to hurt. Is there a rule about that? Yes. What is the rule? You're not to hit hard. What if there were no rule about hitting hard, would it be all right to do then? No. Why not? Because he could get hurt and start to cry.

CONVENTIONAL ISSUE: Did you see what just happened? Yes. They were noisy. Is that something you are supposed to or not supposed to do? Not do. Is there a rule about that? Yes. We have to be quiet. What if there were no rule, would it be all right to do then? Yes. Why? Because there is no rule.

Morality and convention, then, are distinct, parallel developmental frameworks, rather than a single system as thought of by Kohlberg. However, because all social events, including moral ones, take place within the context of the larger society, a person's reasoning about the right course of action in any given social situation may require the person to access and coordinate their understandings from more than one of these two social cognitive frameworks. For, example, whether people line up to buy movie theater tickets is largely a matter of social convention. Anyone who has traveled outside of Northern Europe or North America can attest to the fact that lining up is not a shared social norm across cultures. Within the United States or England, for example, lining up is the conventional way in which turn-taking is established. The act of turn-taking has a moral consequence. It establishes a mechanism for sharing - an aspect of distributive justice. The act of breaking in line within the American or British context is more than merely a violation of convention. It is a violation of a basic set of rules that people hold to maintain fairness. How people coordinate the possible interactions that may arise between issues of morality and convention is a function of several factors including: the salience of the features of the act (what seems most important - the moral or conventional

elements); and the developmental level of the person (adolescents for example view conventions as unimportant and arbitrary norms established by adult authority).

It was Turiel's insight to recognize that what Kohlberg's theory attempts to account for within a single developmental framework is in fact the set of age-related efforts people make at different points in development to coordinate their social normative understandings from several different domains. Thus, domain theory posits a great deal more inconsistency in the judgments of individuals across contexts, and allows for a great deal more likelihood of morally (fairness and welfare) based decisions from younger and less developed people than would be expected from within the traditional Kohlberg paradigm.

Current work from within domain theory has sought to explore how the child's concepts of moral and conventional regulation relate to their developing understandings of personal prerogative and privacy. This work is exploring how children develop their concepts of autonomy and its relation to social authority. This has led to a fruitful series of studies of adolescent-parent conflict with important implications for ways in which parents may contribute to the healthy development of youth (Smetana, 1996). This work is also being extended into studies of how adolescents perceive the authority of teachers and school rules. Moral and Social Values Education The implications of domain theory for values education are several. First, the identification of a domain of moral cognition that is tied to the inherent features of human social interaction means that moral education may be grounded in universal concerns for fairness and human welfare, and is not limited to the particular conventions or norms of a given community or school district. By focusing on those universal features of human moral understanding, public schools may engage in fostering children's morality without being accused of promoting a particular religion, and without undercutting the basic moral core of all major religious systems.

Second, educational research from within domain theory has resulted in a set of recommendations for what is termed "domain appropriate" values education. This approach entails the teacher's analysis and identification of the moral or conventional nature of social values issues to be employed in values lessons. Such an analysis contributes to the likelihood that the issues discussed are concordant with the domain of the values dimension they are intended to affect. A discussion of dress codes, for example, would constitute a poor basis for moral discussion, since mode of dress is primarily a matter of convention. Likewise, consideration of whether it is right to steal to help a person in need, would be a poor issue with which to generate a lesson intended to foster students' understandings of social conventions. A related function of the teacher would be to focus student activity (verbal or written) on the underlying features concordant with the domain of the issue. Thus, students dealing with a moral issue would be directed to focus on the underlying justice or human welfare considerations of the episode. With respect to conventions, the focus of student activity would be on the role of social expectations and the social organizational functions of such social norms.

On the basis of this kind of analysis teachers are also better enabled to lead students through consideration of more complex issues which contain elements from more than one domain. By being aware of the developmental changes that occur in students' comprehension of the role of social convention, and related changes in students understanding of what it means to be fair or considerate of the welfare of others, teachers are able to frame consideration of complex social issues in ways that will maximize the ability of students to comprehend and act upon the moral and social meaning of particular courses of action.

The best sources for discussion of domain appropriate education, along with guidelines and examples for how teachers may select materials from existing school curricula from which to generate lessons and practices which will foster students' development within both the moral and conventional domains may be found in: Nucci, L. & Weber, E. (1991) "The domain approach to values education: From theory to practice" In W. Kurtines & J. Gewirtz (Eds.) "Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development (Volume 3: Applications)pp. 251 - 266). and also in: Nucci, L. (1989) "Challenging Conventional Wisdom About Morality: The Domain Approach to Values Education." In L. Nucci (Ed.) "Moral Development and Character Education: A Dialogue" Berkeley: McCutchan.

Examples of such materials and practices will be provided in coming months on the Classroom Practices segment of this web site

Carol Gilligan
A Theory of Care

Carol Gilligan

A second major critique of Kohlberg's work was put forth by Carol Gilligan, in her popular book, "In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development" (1982). She suggested that Kohlberg's theories were biased against women, as only males were used in his studies. By listening to women's experiences, Gilligan offered that a morality of care can serve in the place of the morality of justice and rights espoused by Kohlberg. In her view, the morality of caring and responsibility is premised in nonviolence, while the morality of justice and rights is based on equality. Another way to look at these differences is to view these two moralities as providing two distinct injunctions - the injunction not to treat others unfairly (justice) and the injunction not to turn away from someone in need (care). She presents these moralities as distinct, although potentially connected. In her initial work, Gilligan emphasized the gender differences thought to be associated with these two orientations. The morality of care emphasizes interconnectedness and presumably emerges to a greater degree in girls owing to their early connection in identity formation with their mothers. The morality of justice, on the other hand, is said to emerge within the context of coordinating the interactions of autonomous individuals. A moral orientation based on justice was proposed as more prevalent among boys because their attachment relations with the mother, and subsequent

masculine identity formation entailed that boys separate from that relationship and individuate from the mother.

For boys, this separation also heightens their awareness of the difference in power relations between themselves and the adult, and hence engenders an intense set of concerns over inequalities. Girls, however, because of their continued attachment to their mothers, are not as keenly aware of such inequalities, and are, hence, less concerned with fairness as an issue. Further research has suggested, however, that moral reasoning does not follow the distinct gender lines which Gilligan originally reported. The preponderance of evidence is that both males and females reason based on justice and care. While this gender debate is unsettled, Gilligan's work has contributed to an increased awareness that care is an integral component of moral reasoning.

Educational approaches based on Gilligan's work have emphasized efforts to foster empathy and care responses in students. Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of these issues may be found in Nel Noddings book, "The challenge to care in schools" New York: Teachers College Press, 1992.