

Six Stages of Kohlberg



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Introduction



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Kohlberg's six stages of moral development explain the viewpoint and decision rationale for an adolescent facing a moral dilemma. A case study follows an adolescent through the six stages as she navigates moral decisions between pursuing her educational dreams and adhering to her family's expectations. A comparison of Piaget's constructivist moral development and Erikson's developmental challenges with Kohlberg's moral development highlights similarities and differences. Next, the spiritual developmental process points out protective factors from a Christian worldview. Thesis: This presentation describes Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, focusing on adolescent moral decision-making, exploring how other developmental theories, including Piaget's, Erikson's, and Spiritual development theories, can help frame clinical counseling, as supported by scholarly evidence.



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Scenario

A young adolescent woman is caught between doing what her family wants and following her own dreams. She believes in the power of learning, but her parents would rather have her stay at home to help rather than go to school.

Kohlberg's Stage 1: Obedience

Description

- Kohlberg's Stage 1 embodies obedience to authority figures and rigid rules within the frame of avoiding externally imposed punishments to decide the rightness of actions (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022).
- A young adolescent woman decides to stay at home and not go to school to avoid her parents' anger and abide by the family's authority (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022).

Rationale

- The adolescent chooses to stay at home to avoid the uncomfortable reaction from her parents due to their pressure (McLeod, 2025). The decision would ensure avoiding parental repercussions and following family authority, overwhelming her desire for school. She decides using a stage 1 moral reasoning level (ages 3-7) (Ahmeti & Ramadani, 2021).



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Kohlberg's Stage 2: Self-Interest

Description

- In stage 2, a child seeks external rewards in a moral reciprocity rationale of decisions (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). The decisions reflect a self-interested, transactional mentality influenced by external authority.
- The young woman decides to stay home to gain the approval of her parents and family, securing her reward (McLeod, 2025).

Rationale

- The factors contributing to the young woman's decision to stay home and forego school include a self-serving reasoning to gain the rewards of family approval (McLeod, 2025). The approval meets the personal need to gain something in return or in exchange from the family for making the "right" decision (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). She uses a stage 2 moral reasoning level for her decision (ages 3-7) (Ahmeti & Ramadani, 2021).



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Kohlberg's Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships

Description

- Maintaining good boy, good girl interpersonal relationships dominates stage 3 (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). Motivations of moral decisions include abiding by and conforming to others' expectations as social norms.
- The young woman decides to stay home because of her family's expectations, the social norms, and subsequent positive views of her (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022).

Rationale

- The factors motivating the young woman's decision derive from the external social expectations she values. She must meet the family's expectations and please others with the proper decision (McLeod, 2025). The motivation will also position her as good by conforming to family expectations, conveying loyalty and trust (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). She decides using a stage 3 moral reasoning level (preadolescent) (Ahmeti & Ramadani, 2021).



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Kohlberg's Stage 4: Rules for Social Order

Description

- Observing social rules, roles, and following expectations maintains social order, defining stage 4 (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). Children's motivations revolve around obligations, social stability, and honoring authority, which govern moral decisions.
- The decision to forego school, though she dreams of learning and attending school, fulfills her obligation to honor her parents' and family's rules and keeps peace in the family (McLeod, 2025).



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Rationale

- The young woman wishes to maintain family stability, order, and well-being (McLeod, 2025). Her decision must strengthen the family's rules, value her parents as role models, and honor family traditions. This need to fulfill her obligations takes priority over her dreams and desires for school and learning. Abiding by social rules helps maintain order within her family and among her peers (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). She decides using a stage 4 moral reasoning level (adolescence to adulthood) (Ahmeti & Ramadani, 2021).

Kohlberg's Stage 5: Social Contract and Individualism

Description

- As an individual's stage 5 moral reasoning emerges, a personal code develops focused on the well-being of individuals through a social contract to benefit all group members (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). This contract applies unless it infringes on individual rights. It encompasses the complexities of many individuals and groups (McLeod, 2025).
- At this stage, the adolescent may decide that her family's common expectations infringe on her personal education dreams (McLeod, 2025). She decides to follow educational pursuits.

Rationale

- As she considers her decision for education, the personal rights of her education also include others' rights to education despite family and social common expectations (McLeod, 2025). The young woman's personal moral code begins to compel her to override common expectations in favor of her own and others' individual rights to education (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). Her moral reasoning moves to a stage 5 moral level.



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Kohlberg's Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles

Description

- Internalized and personalized universal moral principles, which take precedence over social or authority figures' expectations, dominate stage 6 moral reasoning (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). The abstract principles of justice, compassion, and equality for all drive the reasoning behind moral decisions.
- The young woman decides to pursue her education because it fits with her individual dreams of an education. She understands this will go against the social expectations of her family, yet her personal morals help her decide.

Rationale

- The young woman follows her own individual moral guidelines about equality and justice for personal decisions (McLeod, 2025). The decision builds upon universal ethical and moral principles of justice and equality, respecting the individual rights to education of both her and others (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). She relies on an internalized stage 6 moral reasoning level for her decision taking precedence over social expectations.



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Theories of Individual and Family Development Across the Lifespan



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- Distinct differences and yet complementary views exist between Piaget's and Erikson's theories and Kohlberg's moral reasoning development (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022).
- Piaget outlined cognitive development as well as moral developmental stages that complement Kohlberg's moral development, yet with significant differences (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022).
 - Piaget argued that a child constructs moral schemas through activities and social interactions.
 - Young children practice helping behaviors before transitioning to complex moral behaviors (Hammond, 2014).
 - Kohlberg's model focuses on discovering moral principles (i.e., rewards, social norms, and personal codes) that lead to universal principles (McLeod, 2024).
- Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development focus on overcoming challenges during each stage (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022).
 - Each challenge relates to a specific age range and social interactions, integrating biopsychosocial factors impacting each stage (McLeod, 2024).
 - Erikson's model emphasizes overcoming obstacles by adopting virtues, while Kohlberg focuses on discovering moral principles through rewards and punishments, social norms, and universal principles (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022).



Spiritual Development

- The spiritual development of the young woman creates many protective factors; supports her cognitive development, resilience, and coping; and offers her purpose (Hardy & Nelson, 2022).
- A Christian worldview brings the unique perspective that all are created in God's image, with a purpose, worthy of compassion and respect, and deserving of redemption as a believer (One Foundation, n.d.).

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Conclusion



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- This presentation describes Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, focusing on adolescent moral decision-making, and then explores how other developmental theories, including Piaget's, Erikson's, and Spiritual development theories, can help frame clinical counseling, as supported by scholarly evidence.
- Using a case study scenario, the presentation analyzed each of Kohlberg's stages, describing their characteristics, the young woman's viewpoint and decision, and her rationale behind her decision, providing a thorough explanation of an adolescent's decision-making process (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022).
- A comparison of Piaget's and Erikson's moral development with Kohlberg's highlighted the complementary nature of the theories, with similarities and differences (McLeod, 2024).
- Lastly, the presentation covered Spiritual development and how it can provide protective factors to help the adolescent navigate the moral dilemma she faced (Hardy & Nelson, 2024) from a Christian worldview (One Foundation, n.d.).

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