

Critical Evaluation

Problems with Kohlberg's Methods

1. The dilemmas are artificial (i.e. they lack ecological validity)

Most of the dilemmas are **unfamiliar to most people** (Rosen, 1980). For example it is all very well in the Heinz dilemma asking subjects whether Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife. However Kohlberg's subjects were aged between 7 and 16. They have never been married, and never been placed in a situation remotely like the one in the story. How should they know whether Heinz should steal the drug?

2. The sample is biased

According to Gilligan (1977), because Kohlberg's theory **was based on an all-male sample**, the stages reflect a male definition of morality (it's androcentric). Mens' morality is based on abstract principles of law and justice, while womens' is based on principles of compassion and care. Further, the gender bias issue raised by Gilligan is a reminder of the significant gender debate still present in psychology, which when ignored, can have a large impact on results obtained through psychological research.

3. The dilemmas are hypothetical (i.e. they are not real)

In a real situation what course of action a person takes will have real consequences – and sometimes very unpleasant ones for themselves. Would subjects reason in the same way if they were placed in a real situation? We just don't know. The fact that Kohlberg's theory is heavily dependent on an individual's response to an artificial dilemma brings question to the **validity** of the results obtained through this research. People may respond very differently to real life situations that they find themselves in than they do to an artificial dilemma presented to them in the comfort of a research environment.

4. Poor research design

The way in which Kohlberg carried out his research when constructing this theory may not have been the best way to test whether all children follow the same sequence of stage progression. His research was **cross-sectional**, meaning that he interviewed children of different ages to see what level of moral development they were at.

A better way to see if all children follow the same order through the stages would have been to carry out longitudinal research on the same children.

However, longitudinal research on Kohlberg's theory has since been carried out by Colby et al. (1983) who tested 58 male participants of Kohlberg's original study. She tested them 6 times in the span of 27 years and found support for Kohlberg's original conclusion, that we all pass through the stages of moral development in the same order.

Problems with Kohlberg's Theory

1. Are there distinct stages to moral development?

Kohlberg claims that there are but the evidence does not always support this conclusion. For example a person who justified a decision on the basis of principled reasoning in one situation (post conventional morality stage 5 or 6) would frequently fall back on conventional reasoning (stage 3 or 4) in another story. In practice it seems that reasoning about right and wrong depends more upon the situation than upon general rules.

What is more individuals do not always progress through the stages and Rest (1979) found that one in fourteen actually slipped backwards. The evidence for distinct stages to moral development looks very weak and some would argue that behind the theory is a culturally biased belief in the superiority of American values over those of other cultures and societies.

2. Does moral judgement match moral behavior?

Kohlberg never claimed that there would be a one to one correspondence between thinking and acting (what we say and what we do) but he does suggest that the two are linked. However Bee (1994) suggests that we also need to take account of:

- a) habits that people have developed over time.
- b) whether people see situations as demanding their participation.
- c) the costs and benefits of behaving in a particular way.
- d) competing motive such as peer pressure self-interest and so on.

Overall Bee points out that moral behavior is only partly a question of moral reasoning. It is also to do with social factors.

3. Is justice the most fundamental moral principle?

This is Kohlberg's view. However Gilligan (1977) suggests that the principle of caring for others is equally important. Furthermore Kohlberg claims that the moral reasoning of males is often in advance of that of females. Girls are often found to be at stage 3 in Kohlberg's system (good boy-nice girl orientation) whereas boys are more often found to be at stage 4 (Law and Order orientation). Gilligan replies:

"the very traits that have traditionally defined the goodness of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them out as deficient in moral development."

In other words Gilligan is claiming that there is a sex bias in Kohlberg's theory. He neglects the feminine voice of compassion, love and non-violence, which is associated with the socialization of girls. Gilligan reached the conclusion that Kohlberg's theory did not account for the fact that women approach moral problems from an 'ethics of care', rather than an 'ethics of justice' perspective, which challenges some of the fundamental assumptions of Kohlberg's theory.

<http://www.simplypsychology.org/kohlberg.html>