

Kohlberg and Perry: A Compare and Contrast Essay

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Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development provides a unique perspective and a framework on the process of how moral development occurs in college students. Likewise, William Perry also provides an interesting viewpoint and a theoretical framework for Intellectual and Ethical Development. Just as both theories are valuable and seek to understand the cognitive processes that contribute to the development of intellect, morals and ethics so to are they both equally flawed in their modern contribution.

Kohlberg offers six stages of moral reasoning broken down into three groups of two stages each (figure 1, pg 3), whereas Perry provides a series of nine positions (figure 2, pg 3). Perry chose position over stage because he made no expectation of duration in a position, because the positions may be held simultaneously and at different degrees and because this is the way in which people view the world they live in. In contrast Kohlberg's stages are progressive, each building upon the one that came before, each stage a prerequisite for the stages that follow. Yet even in the rigidity of the stages Kohlberg did allow for a straddling of stages, where a person could essentially exist in one stage but through experience or exposure begin to think one stage up from their own. Both Perry and Kohlberg's positions and stages respectively reflect an expected forward momentum in intellectual and emotional growth, where at the lowest level of their frameworks a person's cognitive response is at it's most underdeveloped, it's most basic and transitions into more and more complex patterns of understanding and response.

Level/Stage	Description
I: Obedience/Punishment	No difference between doing the right thing and avoiding punishment
I: Self-Interest	Interest shifts to rewards rather than punishment – effort is made to secure greatest benefit for oneself
II: Conformity and Interpersonal Accord	The “good boy/girl” level. Effort is made to secure approval and maintain friendly relations with others
II: Authority and Social Order	Orientation toward fixed rules. The purpose of morality is maintaining the social order. Interpersonal accord is expanded to include the entire society
III: Social Contract	Mutual benefit, reciprocity. Morally right and legally right are not always the same. Utilitarian rules that make life better for everyone
III: Universal Principles	Morality is based on principles that transcend mutual benefit.

Figure 2

Level	Position	Focus
Level 1: Dualism	1	‘Truth’ is black and white, absolutistic, polar terms
	2	Differing opinions are seen as errors, mistakes, or put forth by poorly qualified authority figures
Level 2: Multiplicity	3	Differing options are allowed, but seen as temporary until the ‘Truth’ is discovered
	4	Uncertainty is understood to be widespread, all opinions are seen as equally valid
Level 3: Relativism	5	Knowledge and values are understood to be correct based on context
	6	Acknowledgement of a relativistic world causes anxiety due to understanding commitments must be made
Level 4: Commitment In Relativism	7	Commitments to life direction and values begin to be made
	8	Responsibility to selected commitments is explored
	9	Affirmation of multiple commitments, responsibilities, and consequences occur

Kohlberg's theory begins with a cognitive response of doing what is right to avoid punishment and then shifts into a structure where behavior is chosen based upon rewards assumed or available, whereas Perry defines the beginning processes as choosing between right and wrong as a black and white decision and then recognition of differing opinions though still viewed through the lens of right and wrong based upon the authority of the individual espousing the opinion. Each theory then progresses in layers of complexity, moving into Kohlberg's conformity stage where students respond to and in fact desire to win approval and conform to the law and rules of social order and Perry's theory where students now accept differing opinions and then the uncertainties of life. Kohlberg's theory then proceeds to the final two stages where students begin to make decisions based upon mutual understanding, where morals and laws might diverge and students begin to choose morals over laws and move into a cognitive response to "universal generalizable principles that apply in all situations, for example, the equality of human rights" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton and Renn, 2010, p. 105). Perry's theory proceeds into a realm where students "rationale for current adherence to beliefs reflects a more complex process of coming to conclusions, a process that includes some questioning and a contextual basis for the stance taken" (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 87). Finally, Perry concludes his theory with commitment. "The commitment process involves choices, decisions, and affirmations that are made from the vantage point of relativism" (Evans, et al., 2010, p.87).

Both Kohlberg and Perry's theories have proven instrumental tools in student development, providing a foundation for college administration, faculty and staff to create policies and curriculums that can identify and propel student engagement and learning. However, both Kohlberg and Perry's research is dated and they fail to deliver on

generalizability. Their research conducted in the 1960's consisted largely of typically college-age white males. The age of the studies and the lack of diversity within the participant pool make both studies inadequate in their use on modern campuses, where today student populations are often dominated by female students, and further student populations whose racial and ethnic backgrounds are as varied and diverse as the global population.

Despite these failings however, the theories can be valuable as long as those using these frameworks are aware of the limitations and adapt them accordingly to a given population. They are especially useful if other and more diverse studies are included in the formation of any policy or curriculum measures, studies that include females and racial or religious minorities. With careful consideration both of these theories, combined with more specific, more inclusive and more recent research can function as a tool for measuring student progress and learning.

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