8

Moral development

- **Moral development**
  - **Cognitive-developmental theories of moral reasoning**
    - Jean Piaget
    - Lawrence Kohlberg
  - **Domain theory**
  - **Pro-social reasoning**
  - **Theory of mind (TOM)**
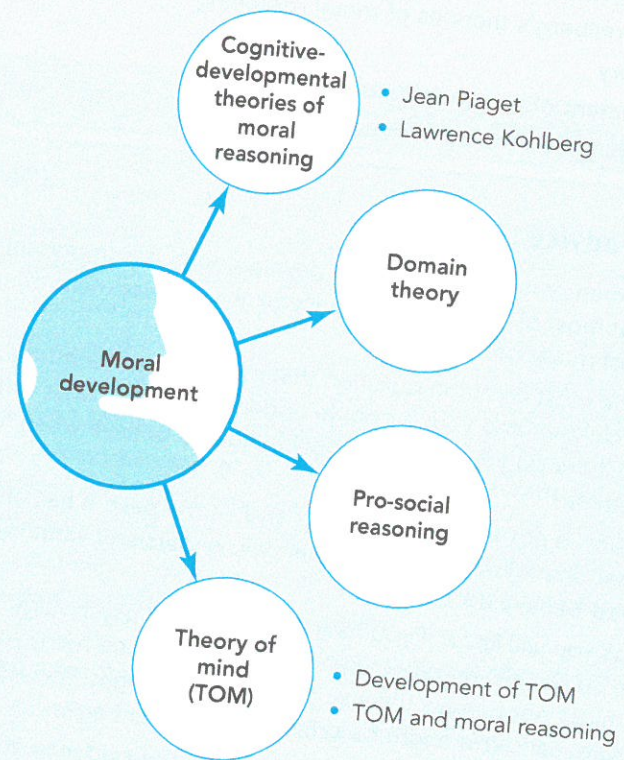   - Development of TOM
    - TOM and moral reasoning

A printable version of this topic map is available from
www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

Introduction

Moral development refers to our understanding of right and wrong. Theories of moral development usually focus on our moral reasoning – how we make judgements about whether something is right or wrong. As children develop they become less dependent on external rewards and punishments and more reliant on a personal sense of right and wrong. This is thought to reflect their internalisation of society's moral code. This shift from external to internal moral code has been the main focus of a lot of the research and theory in this area.

→ Revision checklist

Essential points to revise are:

❑ Piaget and Kohlberg's theories of moral reasoning
❑ Domain theory
❑ The development of pro-social reasoning
❑ Moral reasoning and theory of mind

Assessment advice

- In any assessment you do about moral development, it is important to be aware that most of the literature concerns the development of moral reasoning, not moral behaviour.

- Therefore, the most common question that most of the literature addresses is 'What do children and young people understand about what is right and wrong?' **not** 'How do young people decide how to behave when faced with a moral dilemma?'

- This distinction is not always made clear and, in the past, it has often been assumed that one follows from the other: you understand what is right and wrong so you behave accordingly.

- However, as you will know if you have studied social psychology, our behaviours do not always reflect our attitudes. There are many reasons why someone might not behave the way they say is the 'right' way – for example, peer pressure – and this might be different at different ages.

- You must therefore be careful that you interpret the evidence accurately – if a study only shows a child's ability to reason then say so – and if you can link to evidence from social psychology about the differences between attitudes and behaviour, then you will be showing synthesis of your knowledge and understanding of psychology.

Sample question

Could you answer this question? Below is a typical essay question that could arise on this topic.

✳ Sample question   *Essay*

Critically evaluate the factors that influence the development of moral reasoning.

Guidelines on answering this question are included at the end of this chapter, whilst further guidance on tackling other exam questions can be found on the companion website at: **www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress**

Cognitive-developmental theories of moral reasoning

Jean Piaget

According to Piaget (1932), an understanding of right and wrong reflects increasing sophistication in a child's thinking processes.

- Children under five years of age have no understanding of morality.

- Between the ages of five and seven years children believe rules and justice are unchangeable and beyond our control. They also judge whether an action is right or wrong by its consequences (heteronomous morality).

- From around seven to ten years of age children are in transition, showing some features of heteronomous morality and autonomous morality.

- At around the age of 10–12 years children's understanding shifts to autonomous morality, recognising that rules are created by people and intentions are as important as consequences.

Piaget believed that the shift from heteronomous to autonomous morality depended upon three things.

- Changes in cognitive skills as described in Chapter 7 (see Table 8.1).

- He believed that the decline in egocentrism and increase in operational thinking allowed children to view problems from different perspectives and so understand how their actions might affect others.

- Peer interactions – in particular, playing games.

  - Through the give and take of social interactions and playing games, children experience disagreements that have to be solved.

- They also learn to negotiate the rules of a game, thereby recognising that rules are man-made rather than handed down from a greater authority.
- In this way, children learn that social rules make co-operation with others possible.
- Piaget believed that games act as models of society.
  - Rule-based games stay the same as they are passed from one generation to the next; in the same way, social institutions provide rules about how to behave in certain social situations.
  - Rule-based games only exist if people agree to participate in them; social institutions only exist because people want to be members of those institutions.
- According to Piaget, children shift from judging right and wrong based on cause to judging it based on intention as they move into adolescence (Cushman, 2008).

Table 8.1 Piaget's stages of cognitive and moral development

Level of moral reasoning	Age	Stage of cognitive development
Pre-moral judgement	0–5 years	Sensorimotor stage and pre-operational stage (symbolic functioning)
Heteronomous morality	5–7+ years	Pre-operational stage (intuitive thinking) and concrete operational stage
Autonomous morality	10–12 years	Formal operational stage

? Sample question — Information provider

According to Piaget, children learn about morality through games in the playground. Your local schools are thinking of cutting back playtime because of worries about supervision and bullying. As a developmental psychologist you are worried about the impact this might have on children's development. Design a poster to persuade teachers and parents about the importance of playtime for the development of moral reasoning.

Lawrence Kohlberg

Piaget's theory of moral development was developed further by Lawrence Kohlberg during the 1950s (Kohlberg, 1958). According to Kohlberg there are three universal levels of moral development, each divided into two stages (see Table 8.2).

- Initially children make judgements about right or wrong based solely on how actions will affect them.
- Over time they recognise that they may need to take others needs into account when determining what is right or wrong.
- Eventually it is recognised that morality concerns a set of standards and principles that account for human rights, not individual needs.
- Kohlberg suggested that most adolescents reach Level II and most of us stay at this level of reasoning during adulthood.
- Only a few individuals reach the post-conventional level of reasoning, Level III.
- Stage 6 is so rare that it has since been removed.

Evidence supports the view that children and adolescents progress through the stages Kohlberg suggested, even if they may not reach the level of post-conventional reasoning (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993; Walker, 1989). Cross-cultural studies also provide some evidence for the universality of Kohlberg's first four stages (Snarey, 1985). However, this theory is not without criticism and Kohlberg's model has been accused of both cultural and gender biases.

- Kohlberg's theory is said to be culturally biased because it emphasises ideals such as individual rights and social justice found mainly in Western cultures (Shweder, 1994).
- Some cultures (for example, American) have been found to place greater value on a justice orientation (Stage 4); other cultures (for example, Indian) place a greater weight on interpersonal responsibilities, such as upholding obligations to others and being responsive to other people's needs (Stage 3) (Miller & Bersoff, 1992).
- It has also been observed that women are more likely to use Stage 3 than Stage 4 reasoning.
- According to Gilligan (1982; 1996) the ordering of the stages reflects a gender bias: placing abstract principles of justice (Stage 4) above relationships and concern for others (Stage 3) is based on a male norm and reflects the fact that most of Kohlberg's research used male participants.
- Gilligan argues that these orientations are different, but one is not necessarily better than the other.
- However, there is some debate about the extent of the evidence to support Gilligan's claims of gender differences in moral reasoning. Jaffee and Hyde (2000) found that gender differences in reasoning were small and usually better explained by the nature of the dilemma than by gender.
- The evidence now seems to suggest that care-based reasoning is used by both males and females to evaluate interpersonal dilemmas, while justice reasoning is applied to societal dilemmas.
- Kohlberg has also been criticised by proponents of domain theory for not differentiating reasoning about morality from reasoning about social conventions (Turiel, 1983).

Table 8.2 Kohlberg's stages of moral development

Level and stage		Description
Level I: Pre-conventional reasoning	Stage 1: Heteronomous morality	Moral behaviour is tied to punishment. Whatever is rewarded is good; whatever is punished is bad. Children obey because they fear punishment
	Stage 2: Individualism, instrumental purpose and exchange	Pursuit of individual interests is seen as the right thing to do. Behaviour is therefore judged good when it serves personal needs or interests. Reciprocity is viewed as a necessity; 'I'll do something good for you if you do something good for me.' Fairness means treating everyone the same
Level II: Conventional reasoning	Stage 3: Mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships and interpersonal conformity	Trust, caring and loyalty are valued and seen as the basis for moral judgements. Children and adolescents may adopt the moral standards of their parents in order to be seen as a 'good' boy or girl
	Stage 4: Social systems morality	Good is defined by the laws of society, by doing one's duty. A law should be obeyed, even if it's not fair. Rules and laws are obeyed because they are needed to maintain social order. Justice must be seen to be done
Level III: Post-conventional reasoning	Stage 5: Social contract and individual rights	Values, rights and principles transcend the law. Good is understood in terms of the values and principles that the society has agreed upon. The validity of laws is evaluated and it is believed that these should be changed if they do not preserve and protect fundamental human rights and values.
	Stage 6: Universal ethical principles	At this stage the individual has developed an internal moral code based on universal values and human rights that takes precedence over social rules and laws. When faced with a conflict between law and conscience, conscience will be followed even though this may involve personal risk.

KEY STUDY

Jaffee and Hyde (2000). Gender differences in moral orientation: A meta-analysis

This study was a meta-analysis of 113 studies of gender differences in moral reasoning. A *meta-analysis* is a statistical technique that combines the findings from a number of independent studies in order to give a more robust answer to a specific research question. Jaffee and Hyde were interested in finding out the extent to which the evidence supported Gilligan's (1982) critique of Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning and her claim that justice and care orientations are strongly gender differentiated. They found that the effect size for gender differences in care reasoning was -.28, indicating a small difference favouring females. Likewise, the effect size for gender differences in justice reasoning was .19, indicating a small difference favouring males. Therefore they found no strong support for the claim that the care orientation is used predominantly by women and the justice orientation is used by men. Rather, they suggest that the type of moral reasoning an individual uses is highly sensitive to the context and content of the dilemma. In other words, individual differences and context are more important than gender for moral reasoning.

Jaffee, S. & Hyde, J. S. (2000). Gender differences in moral orientation: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(5), 703–726

CRITICAL FOCUS

Kohlberg's moral dilemmas

Kohlberg used a range of moral dilemmas in his studies of moral reasoning. Perhaps the most famous is that of Heinz:

> A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $1000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, 'No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it.' So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Kohlberg then asked the children: Should Heinz have broken into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?

Kohlberg was less interested in whether the child felt Heinz should steal the drug or not and more interested in their justifications for Heinz' behaviour. For example, a child at Stage 1 would justify Heinz not stealing the drug by saying that he would be put in prison, meaning he is a bad person. Using the information provided in Table 8.2, can you work out what sort of justification a child in Stages 2–5 would provide to support Heinz not stealing the drug?

Test your knowledge

8.1 How do the stages of moral development outlined by Piaget link to his theory of cognitive development?

8.2 What are the two main factors thought to influence the development of moral reasoning?

8.3 Does the evidence support Kohlberg's stages of moral development?

Answers to these questions can be found on the companion website at:
www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

Further reading Cognitive-developmental theories

Topic	Key reading
Culture and morality	Shweder, R. A. (1994). Are moral intuitions self-evident truths? *Criminal Justice Ethics, 13*(2), 24–31.
Cause and intention	Cushman, F. (2008). Crime and punishment: Distinguishing the roles of causal and intentional analyses in moral judgement. *Cognition, 108*(2), 353–380.

Domain theory

- Turiel (1983) argues that the child's concepts of morality and social convention develop from the recognition that certain actions or behaviours are intrinsically harmful and these are therefore different from other actions having only social consequences.
- For example, hitting another person has intrinsic effects (the harm that is caused) on the well-being of the other person.
- Such intrinsic effects occur regardless of any social rules that may or may not be in place concerning hitting.
- The core features of moral cognition are therefore centred around considerations of the impact of actions on well-being and 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 instance, in school, children usually address their teacher using their title and surname (for example, 'Mr Smith').
  - However, there is no intrinsic reason that this is any better than addressing the teacher by their first name (for example, 'Joe').
  - Only social convention – a socially agreed upon rule – makes the use of 'Mr Smith' more appropriate than 'Joe'.

- These conventions are arbitrary, in the sense that they have no intrinsic status, but they are important to the smooth functioning of the social group as they provide a way for members of society to co-ordinate their social exchanges.
  - Understanding of convention is therefore linked to the child's understanding of social organisation.
- Recent research that has looked at children's beliefs about social exclusion suggests children are able to separate these two aspects of moral reasoning, but their ability to differentiate morality and social convention increases during adolescence (Killen, 2007; Killen & Stangor, 2001).

Test your knowledge

8.4 What is the difference between social convention and morality?

Answers to this question can be found on the companion website at:
www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

Further reading Domain theory

Topic	Key reading
Social exclusion	Killen, M. (2007). Children's social and moral reasoning about exclusion. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 16*, 32–36.

Pro-social reasoning

- This refers to the thinking involved in deciding whether or not to engage in pro-social behaviours – in other words to share or help others – when doing so may be costly to oneself.
- It has been suggested that this type of reasoning also goes through stage-like developmental changes (Eisenberg & Fabes, 2006).
- Eisenberg used stories that presented a dilemma contrasting self-interest and the interst of another child. For example, a child has to choose between going to a birthday party and stopping to help someone who has hurt themselves.
- Younger children focus on the gains to themselves by helping, whereas older children express more empathy for the injured person.
- A link has been found between more empathetic reasoning and higher pro-social behaviour: children with high levels of pro-social reasoning are less likely to cheat than those who score at lower levels (Eisenberg et al. 2003).
- It is possible that the changes seen in pro-social behaviour link to the development of another cognitive and social skill: theory of mind.

Theory of mind (TOM)

- This refers to the understanding that other people may have different mental states from us – that is, different thoughts, knowledge, desires, feelings and beliefs (Harris, 2006).

- TOM develops mainly over the first seven years of life, but is not fully complete until adolescence (see Table 8.3).

- TOM is important for social and emotional functioning: if you have TOM you are able to put yourself in somebody else's shoes, to imagine what it is they are feeling. It is therefore a part of empathy – our ability to understand and identify with another person's feelings.

- It has been noted that children with autism lack a TOM and this is thought to help explain the difficulty they have with social functioning (Baron Cohen, 2001).

- TOM is thought to be important for the development of moral reasoning because it allows us to think about other people's mental states and answer questions about wrongdoing, such as:
  - Did that person intentionally do wrong?
  - Was their behaviour premeditated?

These sorts of questions are key in a criminal case where questions of intention and premeditation are important.

Table 8.3 Development of theory of mind (TOM)

18 months–3 years	Recognise that other people see what is in front of their eyes, not what is in front of the child's eyes
	Can distinguish between positive and negative emotions and recognise those emotions in others
	Recognise that others have different desires
3–5 years	Realisation of false beliefs
5–7 years	Recognise that behaviours may not reflect thoughts and feelings
7+ years	Recognition of ambivalence occurs during adolescence

Development of TOM

- Although preschoolers try to attribute knowledge and mental states to others, it is not until around the age of four years that children demonstrate a coherent TOM (Gopnik, 1993).

- TOM is suggested to demonstrate a qualitative shift in children's thinking (for example, Wellman & Gelman, 1998).

- It is most commonly assessed by the 'false belief task' (Wimmer & Perner, 1983), such as the Sally Anne task shown in see Figure 8.1. TOM is demonstrated if the child answers that Sally will look in the basket for her ball as they recognise that Sally has a different mental representation of the situation from them – they possess knowledge Sally does not.

- Most typically, developing children do not answer correctly until they are four years old.

- However, it has been suggested that the TOM tasks underestimate children's abilities (Siegal & Peterson, 1994) for two reasons.
  - Younger children misinterpret the key false belief question – 'Where *will* Sally look?' – to mean 'Where *should* Sally look?' (Siegal & Peterson, 1994). Three-year-olds have been found to perform better when the question is reworded in a less ambiguous form – for example, 'Where should Sally look *first of all*' (Siegal & Beattie, 1991).
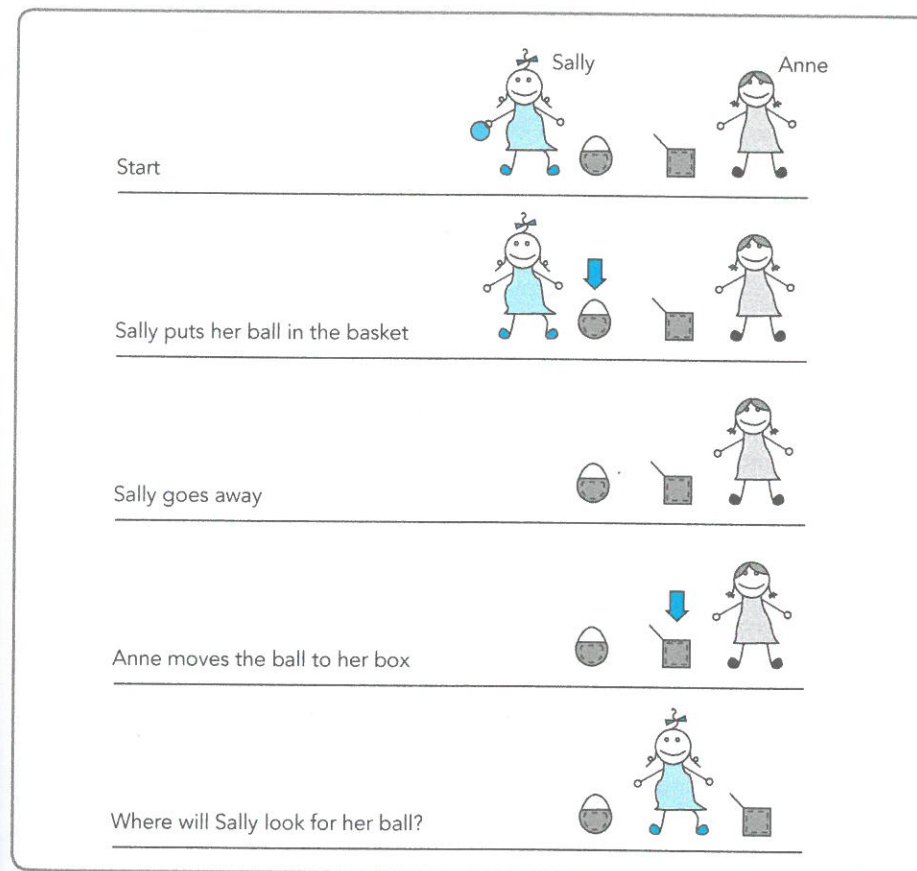

Figure 8.1 **The Sally Anne task**

- The burden on immature processing skills such as memory and reasoning are also too great (Flavell & Miller, 1998). This has been tested by the 'false photograph' task (Leslie & Thaiss, 1992), which has the same burden in terms of memory and inference, but does not require children to consider another's mind.
  - The child is shown a doll placed sitting on a box.
  - They are given an instant camera and asked to take a photo.
  - The doll is moved to a new position (for example, sitting on a mat).
  - The child is asked 'Where will the doll be in the developing photo?'
  - Four-year-olds are able to answer this question correctly – three-year-olds are not, suggesting that the three-year-olds' inability to answer the false belief task is related to poorer processing skills.

TOM and moral reasoning

- Sokol, Chandler and Jones (2004) explored the idea that TOM and moral reasoning were linked by showing children Punch and Judy shows. In one scenario Punch pushes a box off the stage because he thinks Judy is in there and he will be rid of her – she is not and no one is hurt. In the other scene Punch goes to help Judy, but accidentally knocks her off the stage.
- They found that children with more developed TOM were more likely to make judgements based on intention, suggesting a link between empathy and understanding of right and wrong

Test your knowledge

8.5 What are the developmental phases of theory of mind?

8.6 How are TOM and moral reasoning related?

Answers to these questions can be found on the companion website at:
www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

? Sample question — Problem-based learning

John is studying GCSE history. He reads the chapters and, at the very end of the chapter, there is a URL for the book's website. On the website there is a practice quiz. He takes one of these before a class test. The test was exactly the same as the practice quiz and he got an A in the test. He now realises the teacher must take the questions from the online quiz to make the test. The other students do not know this, as they got Cs and Ds.

Should John feel guilty? Is this cheating and what should he do? How might a 7-year-old and a 12-year-old answer these questions?

? Sample question — Essay

To what extent does the evidence support cognitive developmental theories of moral reasoning?

Further reading Theory of mind

Topic	Key reading
Development of TOM	Leslie, A. (1987). Pretense and representation: The origins of 'theory of mind'. *Psychological Review, 94*(4), 412–426.
Moral reasoning and TOM	Sokol, B. W., Chandler, M. J., & Jones, C. (2004). From mechanical to autonomous agency: The relationship between children's moral judgments and their developing theories of mind. *New directions for child and adolescent development. Special Issue: Connections between theories of mind and sociomoral development, 103,* 19–36.

Chapter summary – pulling it all together

→ Can you tick all the points from the revision checklist at the beginning of this chapter?

→ Attempt the sample question from the beginning of this chapter using the answer guidelines below.

→ Go to the companion website at **www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress** to access more revision support online, including interactive quizzes, flashcards, You be the marker exercises as well as answer guidance for the Test your knowledge and Sample questions from this chapter.

Answer guidelines

* Sample question — Essay

Critically evaluate the factors that influence the development of moral reasoning.

Approaching the question

Your answer should aim to provide an analysis of how different factors determine how children make decisions about what is right or wrong. You should aim to

consider as many different factors as possible and draw upon your knowledge from other areas such as play and cognitive development, as well as the information in this chapter.

Important points to include

- Begin by defining the main issue that governs the debate about moral reasoning and whether or not it develops in a stage-like manner.
- Critically evaluate the evidence for a range of different factors thought to influence moral reasoning, including:
  - social factors such as peer relationships and play
  - cognitive factors such as Piagetian stage and TOM
  - gender differences
  - contextual factors, such as the nature of the dilemma.

Make your answer stand out

It is really easy just to discuss Piaget and Kohlberg's theories. A good answer will take other theories into account and will debate the merits of differentiating between social convention and moral behaviour. It will also consider whether there are differences in reasoning and behaviour. Linking your evaluation to other areas of psychology (for example, social psychology), as well as to a range of topics within developmental psychology, will demonstrate your ability to synthesise the information you have learnt and make your answer stand out.

Explore the accompanying website at **www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress**

→ Prepare more effectively for exams and assignments using the answer guidelines for questions from this chapter.
→ Test your knowledge using multiple choice questions and flashcards.
→ Improve your essay skills by exploring the You be the marker exercises.

Notes