

# **Criticism on moral development theories of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Bandura and providing a new model for research in Iranian students' moral development**

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## **Abstract**

**It's been years in the psychology and assessment of moral development that theories of genetic epistemology and social behaviorism (which are based on Piaget, Kohlberg, and Bandura's approaches) have been in the center of attention for the psychologists and education experts and have been used by the educational counseling centers and other psychology centers in Iran. Therefore, there have not been a suitable theory and proper native assessing tools made in our country in the field of moral development.**

**The main issue is that the theoretical foundations and the structure and content of these viewpoints are provided without considering the innate and pure moral foundations, moral motive and feeling, moral belief and culture, and moral behavior and reactions. Such viewpoints are not in consistency with our school students' moral development. This article has shown that Piaget, Kohlberg, and Bandura's viewpoints have strictly positioned the moral judgment, learning social laws, and relations of the Western countries as the foundation for their theories without considering spiritual, rational, and motivational bases of moralities, which have roots in divine creation and the human nature.**

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By providing a new model for moral development formation, this article has shown that individual's social and moral development is a result of complicated, dynamic, and mutual interactions of the five following factors: innate nature of the individual, social contexts, events and experiences, moral judgment development, and manifestation and change of stimulations and sentiments of sympathy and helping other people.

The article tries, while criticizing the present psychological approaches on moral development, to prepare the way for a new scientific and authentic research in making theory for moral development and preparing theoretical basis for making national assessing scales for moral development.

**Key Words:** Moral development, school students, moral assessment, Psychology of morality, Piaget, Kohlberg, Bandura

## Introduction

During the past half a century the findings of the psychology of moral transformation and development and the moral development tests offered by Piaget and Kohlberg have been used in the counseling centers of the education system and other centers for psychology across our country. The teaching of the lessons related to this aspect of children's, adolescents', and youths' development has been most often offered based on the these two scientists' viewpoints in teacher training centers and undergrad, grad, and doctoral levels. It has been so in different majors in psychology and educational sciences across all universities and higher education centers in Iran.

In this article we will show that firstly the theoretical foundations of moral development psychology, which Piaget and Kohlberg offered have theoretical limits and weaknesses; secondly we will show that the moral development theories based on these viewpoints, which have been driven from how people live in the West, cannot correctly identify moral development status of culturally different people with such tests. It is also impossible to clearly identify the people's moral problems who struggle with low-development and moral disorders. Those tests are mainly based on biological and genetic cognitivism attitudes, individual and social behaviorism attitude, and the theory of analyzes of information, and with a limiting-view understanding of the human moral development. Due to the fact that such attitude is strictly considering the moral judgment for

the western social relationships and laws as the basis for its theory, it is not compatible with the moral development status of Eastern people and the Iranians who have a three thousand year different culture from the Western culture. The mentioned attitude pays no attention to the pure moral foundations, to the moral motives and emotion, to faith and cultural morality, to the moral behavior and objective reactions, and the mental structure of the people in the rest of the world.

Investigating the moral development theories among Western psychologists brings us to the conclusion that we can divide them into three groups. A group of the Western psychologists (such as Lorenz, 1983; Goodall, 1990; da Waal, 1991 & 1996; Raine, 1997; Hoffman 2000; Haidt, 2001) believe the roots of moralities and social behavior to be in the human biological evolution history. Another group (including the psycho-analysts such as Freud, 1925/1961, and social-learning theory-makers such as Bandura, 1977) believe moralities to be compatibility with social norms. The third group, is the one whose viewpoints have been considered more than any of the other two groups, who state that morality is fundamentally the amount of cognitive development. Jean Piaget and (1932/1965) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1976), more than any other psychologist, represent this group. The though foundations of some other psychologists (such as Gilligan, 1982; & Rest, 1986) who have conducted more recent studies about moral development as well can be considered in this same group.

### **Investigating the research background**

The most important scientific backgrounds in the field of moral development and education and moral development assessment which exist in our country are general divided into three groups: 1. The collection of writings which have discussed morality from the religious, philosophical, and educational points of view, 2. Works that carry and state the viewpoints of Piaget and Kohlberg (including the translations and the authorships), and 3. A collection of university researches which are in the form of thesis for graduate studies and have focused on the status of Iranian children and youth development of moral judgment by relying on Piaget's and Kohlberg's viewpoints.

Through investigating and reviewing the above writings and researches, we have realized that the issue of morality and moral development as well as moral assessment, as far as it relates to Iranian

religious, philosophical, and educational works, is of the general type in religious, wisdom, and education learnings. The university researches also, except for a few philosophical and literary thesis, which have considered the national culture in moral issues, are founded upon the understandings of moral developments by Piaget and Kohlberg. In these researches, which are all of the Master degree thesis type, there is no theory-making in moral development and scale-making for assessment of the moral development. Neither is there curriculum making for the Iranian children's, adolescents', and youths' moral education nor the education system needs.

### **The findings of the global knowledge of psychology in moral development**

Through the investigations they have conducted on the psychological works, development psychologists (such as Santrock, 2001) have come to the conclusion that the issue of moral development in most of these works is related to two subjects of social development (meaning how to relate with others), and cognitive development (meaning how one judges his and others' behavior). According to these two viewpoints, the two subjects of moral and social development are related to each other and psychologists usually put these two items in one single set to perform investigations on. From this viewpoint, through development of self identity and understanding, the person eventually finds a picture of himself among others and in relationship with others. This image is one of his shaping fundamentals for social and moral relations to others (Same, p. 440).

According to the definition common in psychology, moral development is a process of reaching the feeling of justice in relation to others, the correctness or incorrectness of this matter, and the way the person behaves in each of these matters. As psychologists such as Piaget and Kohlberg say, in this definition, moral development means change in how children reason regarding moral issues, their attitude toward law-breaking, and their behavior when facing moral issues (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997; Langford, 1995).

The group of psychologists who believe in stage developments of human-being have brought forward some approaches for moral development. Jean Piaget is among the first psychologists who put the issue of how morality develops into research (Shaffer, 1996, p. 572 &

573). He indicates that moral development, similar to cognitive development, takes place through-out stages (Piaget, 1932). The first stage consists of a form of very broad dissimilar and contradicting moral thought which is called Heteronomous morality. Here, the individual thinks that moral rules are constant and unchangeable. This stage spreads through the years 4 to 7 where children play in only one way and although they still don't have a clear concept of the game rules, assume that any other way to play is incorrect (Same, p. 575).

Later, the dissimilar morality or heteronomous morality surface in two consecutive moral stages: the incipient cooperation stage and the autonomous cooperation stage. In the moral stage based on incipient cooperation, which occurs from the age of 7 to 10, the children's game gains a social form and the children learn the rules of games and play based on their knowledge about them. They still think that these game rules are unalterable. In their opinion there is only one correct way for each game and each child should play based on this very official rule.

In the third stage, meaning the stage of morality driven from the inside or the autonomous stage, which begins around the age of 10, children fully understand that it is possible to change the official game rules with the agreement of the group members. It is this very stage where children realize that the rules and regulations common among people are changeable and they can change them if they want.

Although Piaget's theory about moral development has been considered by a large group and psychologists such as Lawrence Kohlberg have followed his path, but the same criticisms that are correct for the entirety of his theory are also correct for his attitude toward moral development. Piaget's theory, for example has under-evaluated children. Researches by psychologists (such as Bussey, 1992; and Yuill & Perner, 1988; narrated by Berk, 2003) show that children after the age of 3 are able to consider others' purpose and intention. They are able to consider guiltier a person who has intentionally made a mistake compared to an individual who has had no intention in his wrong action, even if his wrong is greater.

Besides the theory of moral development by Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory in moral development also has gained a lot of attention in educational psychology discussions. We will provide a summary of his theory (For further explanations see: Lotfabadi, 2003 & 2004). Lawrence Kohlberg (1958, 1976, & 1986), like Piaget, believes that moral development is resulted from moral reasoning, which shapes during

various stages (from childhood to adolescence). Through-out years of research, test, interview, and by designing 11 stories that included moral puzzles (and offering these stories to children and adolescents and stating some questions about each story) he concluded that the development of moral judgment takes effect in three stages (each of which consists of two stages).

Kohlberg concluded from this researches that the development of moral judgment is a gradual process and takes shape in respectively three stages (each of which consists of two stages). These three moral stages consist of:

- Pre-conventional reasoning. In this lowest stage of moral development, the individual has not yet internalized the moral values and his moral reasoning is in accordance to reward and punishment which controls his behavior from the outside.
  
- Conventional reasoning. In this middle stage of development of moral judgment, the individual depends on the internalized norms which are mainly forced to him by others (especially the parents) and the social environment (such as social laws).
  
- Post-conventional reasoning. This is the highest stage of development, in which moral reasoning has been fully internalized in the individual and is not based on others' norms. The individual can personally recognize different moral courses, discover various moral ways of facing issues, and based on this takes his own especial moral reaction in different circumstances.

Each of the mentioned three moral phases consists of two stages, which make it a total of six stages divided as described below:

- The first stage: Punishment and obedience. Moral thought is based on fear of punishment.
  
- The second stage: Individual instrumental purpose. The moral thought is based on reward and personal interest.
  
- The third stage: Mutual interpersonal expectations. The base for moral judgments is the person's accepted values, and caring for others and loyalty toward them.
  
- The fourth stage: Social-order maintaining. Understanding

organization, law, justice, and responsibility, which is the base for moral reasoning.

– The fifth stage: Prior rights and social contract. In this stage, understanding values and laws changes into a form exclusive to each person and the individual distinguishes that laws are important for the society and that values such as justice and freedom are even more important.

– The sixth stage: Universal ethical principles. World-wide moral norms, such as human rights are shaped in the individual's mind and he bases his reasonings based on these principles and norms.

It should be mentioned that based on the studies Kohlberg conducted, he fully omitted the sixth stage from his theory. He had realized that the majority of the adolescents, youths, and generally the people whom he had conducted the study on have developed and reached only to the second to fourth stage of moral judgment and it is not possible to find anyone who is in the third phase of moral development, especially the sixth stage.

Although Kohlberg believes that the individual's friends and parents are able to improve his thought in facing moral issues, Kohlberg's main assumption puts forward that the individual's type of reasoning when confronting a moral issue – which is caused by his stage of development of thought – plays the fundamental role in his performance. He believes that children's and youth's judging and moral behavior is rather due to their cognitive development stage in which they are in instead of depending on social and cultural life circumstances. This, in our opinion, is the most notable weakness in Kohlberg's theory. The other weakness of these researches is that the children's and adolescent's moral development is considered strictly based on the moral judgments and the learning of law and social relationships in the modern Western society and culture. The other big problem in his attitude is that he pays no attention to non-cognitive and motivational basis in morality.

**Theory of moral development based on foundations of pure wisdom, national culture, and knowledge of psychology**

In our opinion, the basis for moral development should not be limited to strictly judgment about social laws and the concepts that these laws provide of justice; but rather other basis such as eternality of goodness, the moral nature of human-being, human-being's interest in his inborn greatness, human love and affections, and the conscientious crave for moral virtue can be considered as moral development foundations. Unfortunately the attitudes of psychologists such as Piaget, Kohlberg, and Bandura are completely without any attention to these moral foundations.

The important point is that the individual's moral behavior could be completely opposite to what he/she says and his/her reasoning. Therefore, there is no guarantee about the certainty of compatibility between the individual's intelligence with his/her level of moral behavior.

The second important point is that in moral development study, instead of focusing on moral reasoning, conscience and moral behavior should be stressed. Although Kohlberg's and Piaget's theories are useful for understanding the moral reasoning development, they do not provide a real recognition of the person's moral function. The only practical benefit of these theories is that when we see that an immoral rationality is as an exception due to the incorrect rational reasoning, we can help him to change his way of thinking and in this way modify his moral behavior.

The third point is that in many cases, the individual's moral reasoning is a shield for his immoral behaviors. In other words, a certain type of reasoning can be a defense mechanism for justification of immoral behavior. For example, when we see that managers having the most intelligence, the most education, and the highest ranks in the society morally reason in the post-conventional moral stage but behave with the lowest level of morality in their daily lives, we can conclude that concentration on one part of the issue (meaning the relationship between moral reasoning and moral behavior) will not be able to explain the matter of moral development scientifically. Obviously all wrong-doers know what is correct and what is incorrect; but the psychological study about the stage of development of moral reasoning in these individuals will not help in understanding the psychology of moral development. In evaluating the relationship between moral thought and moral behavior full attention should be paid to the destructive power of rational justifications and other defense mechanisms which is in use by the the individuals who in order to run from self-reproach refer to the heart of

the realities and hide their own problems in stating them due to the social and other circumstances.

The fourth point is about the cultural favoritism available in Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories of moral development which the recent researches by Western psychologists clarify (Miller, 1995; Glassman, 1997; Haidt, 1997). Moral development has different content and meanings in different cultures and using Kohlberg's tests in cultures different than the Western society results in lack of access to higher levels of this development for people in those cultures. The reality is that different cultures in the world have fundamental differences. In our research, we have had exact attention to this issue.

In Snarey's research (1987) on individuals belonging to twenty seven countries, the cultural favoritism in Kohlberg's tests in studying moral development has been proven. Studies conducted by Huebner & Garrod (1993) about the Buddhist youths also showed the same cultural favoritism in Kohlberg's theory. Walker (1996) has also found through his researches that the fundamental moral foundations and concepts are different in different cultures. He realized that it is not possible to correctly assess the moral development level of adolescents, youths, and adults in different cultures by tests that are prepared for the Western culture.

The fifth point is that the priority and arrangement of importance of values in a society and culture deeply influence the children's and youth's moral development (Lotfabadi, Noroozi, 2004).

The sixth point is that people's moral judgment is not only due to moral reasoning, but also influenced by the society's common law and traditions. These social contracts which are normally for keeping the social system and controlling the moral disorders are different from the moral rules. The moral rules of course, are a type of internal obligation caused by the external forces and acting based on them is optional and is the cause of respect and a sign of social politeness.

The seventh point is that in Western researches about psychology of moral development two fundamental moral principles are counted for moral reasoning: justice in men and caring in women. Since according to researches more than 90 percent of Western adolescents, youths, and adults who have been put to moral tests are in the moral conventional level (Colby et. al. 1983; Snarey, 1987) it can be said with certainty that it is not justice but social rules that make the main base for their moral

judgments. Of course the rules and the law in a country are not necessarily just.

The final point that can be briefly touch-based upon is that Piaget, Kohlberg, and other cognitive psychologists (as opposed to the psycho-analysis and psycho-dynamism theories have not really considered parents' role and the child-nourishment method as priorities in how the children and adolescents morally develop. In those theories the emphasis has been on the number one importance of several things: how to respond to child's oral needs, the method of toilet-training, how the child identifies himself with the similar sex parent and the different shaping of the psycho-sexual identity in boys and girls, the discipline and amount of harsh treatment and aggression in the family, internalization of fear done by parents in the child due to his unacceptable behaviors and imposition of power and abandoning kindness. They have considered these the basis for shaping of the moral conscience and stressed their importance in moral and immoral behavior.

As well, unlike the cognitive and psycho-analysis (tahlil-e-ravani) approaches which consider the moral development basis related accordingly to mental and psycho-sexual fields, the behaviorism and social learning approaches consider the the moral behavior method and its method of learning in children and adolescents to be the basis for their studies. In order to explain the how and the why of specific moral behavior learning and the moral behavior differences in children and youths the known processes of strengthening, punishing and imitation are used. The general conclusion gathered on behaviorism and social learning approaches about other fields of social behavior are similar to the conclusion gatherings of these approaches about other fields of social behavior field. In other words, when the child's or adolescent's behavior are in balance with social rules and policies, they are strengthened and usually repeated and stabilized.

In addition to the role of social elements in children's and adolescents' moral behavior and apart from the distance between moral thinking and moral behavior, the supporters of the social learning approaches believe that moral behavior is dependent on the conditions in which it happens. Therefore, we cannot expect that children's and adolescent's moral behavior stays the same in different conditions. Everyone has to behave sometimes morally and sometimes immorally based on certain interests. The main rule is moral behavior proportionate to the conditions. Children's and adolescent's moral behavior is also this way. They are

neither completely following their cognitive abilities and their moral reasoning strength nor are in full accordance with their internal interests and true affections. In their moral behaviors, children, adolescents, and youths, similar to other people, are positioned in such way that the common point in their nature is the level of moral reasoning, moral feeling, objective experiences, and the position that a certain moral behavior occurs. This of course is also dependent on their intelligence.

From among the behaviorism viewpoints, the cognitive social learning theory of moral development emphasizes the distinction between the children's and adolescent's moral competencies (his capability in offering moral behaviors) and his real behaviors in specific conditions and circumstances (Mischel, 1975; Bandura, 1991). These competencies or acquisitions in the first place depend on sensational-cognitive processes and are sourced from these processes. These mentioned competencies include the child's or youth's practical abilities, his knowledge and skills, his awareness of moral laws and rules, and his cognitive abilities in creating moral behaviors.

What Bandura has offered in his latest four works (Bandura, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997), as the cognitive social learning theory, is not distinctively different from his previous viewpoints about social learning and modeling (Bandura, 1965, 1977, 1986) (Narrated by Berk, 2003). In all his old and new writings, Bandura has defended his theory that morality and moral behavior basis is in social learnings, imitation, and modeling after the others. These behaviors, such as the person's reasonings about social laws and contracts, happen mainly through strengthening, punishment, and imitation and in relation with specific conditions in which the moral behavior takes place.

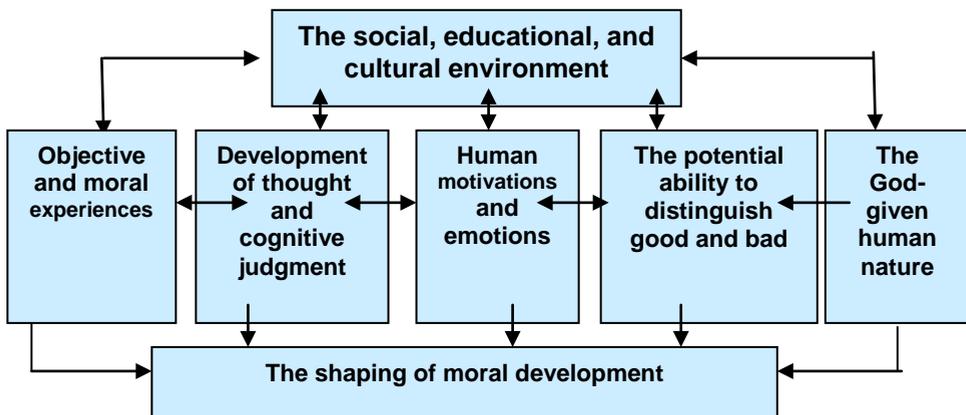
The main objection raised against Bandura's theory – what he has ignored to mention in explaining the shaping of morality – includes the primary and fundamental elements in directing morality, meaning, the human nature and the ability to distinguish between good and bad, people's history and culture, individual's motivations and emotions, person's way of thinking and his level of development of wisdom, and how moral conscience and feeling is shaped in the person. The moral social learning theory does not consider that the above-mentioned grounds are the ones children's, adolescent's, and youth's moral behavior develops on and surfaces in a specific manner in this or that special circumstances. Encouragement, punishment, imitation, modeling, and reasoning about social laws and contracts, which are the basis for

Bandura's viewpoint in making up moral development, are all secondary causes and should not be stated instead of the mentioned main elements.

The psychology researches, of Piaget's, Kohlberg's, and Bandura's type do not extend beyond the field of cognitive and social concepts and do not tell us what the roots are for self-recognition, other-recognition, sincerity, sympathy, loyalty, and distinguishing between good and bad. These psychology researches do not mention how these inborn and natural capabilities are impacted by the social, educational, and cultural environment and are reflected in different shapes or even contradictory in individual's behavior.

In our view, the individual's social and moral development is not only the result of cognitive development and social learning for understanding the status of self, others, and objective and moral experiences in social interactions. Rather, it is due to his God-given hidden human capabilities and the complex motivational and emotional structure as well. In other words, the social and moral behavior, apart from the human inborn and natural capabilities and the ability to distinguish between good and bad, which is a God-given gift, has at least four aspects which include: the motivational and emotional aspect, the thought and rational judgment development, the moral objective experiences and events, and the general status of social, educational, and cultural living. In order to better clarify the basis for the theory of moral development based on transcendent philosophy, wisdom, and knowledge, we provide the following theoretical model which shows the effective elements in the shaping and development of morality:

The theoretical model for moral development shaping



By relying on the above model, moral development and moral laws and values should be studied from four aspects, apart from considering the inborn and God-given foundations:

The first, is the moral motivation which includes giving priority to certain moral values compared to other values. People have different values which are related to their character, nature, and habit. This is the reason why some pay more attention to their inner affections and emotions, some pay more attention to their social and occupational relationships, and some others pay more attention to their cultural and artistic matters. People's degree of moral development depends on how much value and importance they give to moral matters.

Second, is how the person reasons or thinks about behaviors which are related to moral issues. For example, when we ask an adolescent high school student about cheating in exams, it becomes possible to study one of the moral or immoral aspects of his doing based on his reasoning in the questioned field.

Third, is how the individual behaves in specific circumstances, where the behavior gains a moral or immoral form. For example, investigation of the reasons, backgrounds, and process of cheating among some adolescents in school exams is another aspect of studies of morality.

Fourth, is how the individual's emotions and spiritual status is about moral matters. For example, for the subject of cheating in course exams it can be investigated to see whether spiritual status of the adolescent who does such thing comes with feeling of guilt or not. How this feeling in the person is during and after the behavior process helps us predict whether this person will get involved with the same work in future similar conditions or not.

Without doubt, these four aspects of morality, meaning moral motivation, way of thinking, behavior, and emotion are in inner relation with each other. In the above example, when we investigate the person's behavior in an exam, we cannot separate his behavior from his motivations, reasonings, and emotions in the mentioned immoral action. In either case, the individual's condition of moral development is a multi-dimensional matter and cannot be investigated from only one angle of say, the type of reasoning or moral judgment, which is the focus of most psychology theories in moral development.

In the moral development theory which is based on transcendent philosophy, wisdom, and knowledge, our assumption is that the child's

entity is full of seed of accomplishment, development, and perfection. The human nature which is structured with both moral and immoral characteristics through the process of social life, is both the ground-settler for children's and adolescent's development as well as their eventual moral decline. The study of how moral behavior is shaped is also possible by paying attention to several things which include, the most important findings of the knowledge of psychology of personal development, taking advantage of philosophy of realistic-view and wisdom and the national culture, and relying on the aspects that are common and the principal thinking and Iranian mysticism. It is with these foundations that it becomes possible to make theory and test the moral development stages from childhood to the period a person is wise and experienced in his adulthood.

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