

Gareth Crabtree

Compare and Contrast The Cognitive Developmental and Social Learning Theories Of Moral Development

Sources Taken From:

- *A Level Psychology – Letts Study Guide – Cara Flannagan*
- *A Level Psychology – Longman Revise Guides – Mike Cordwell*

Moral development according to Eleanor Maccoby (1980) is the acquiring of knowledge rules that govern their social world. Theories of cognitive development and social development disagree on core elements of the rigidity of our development and the belief that all cultures share the same moral code.

The idea of a clear progressive and easily chartable stage of development is a clear element of all cognitive theorists. In Kohlberg's theory progression through each of the different moral stages is easily identifiable each with its own boundaries Kohlberg's theory has three clear stages of moral development.

The first is the Pre – Conventional level where children's morals are simply a function to further their aims. The moral actions of the child are such to receive food or toys or stop itself being scolded for carrying out bad behaviour. The next stage the Conventional level sees that moral reasoning has moved to a much higher plain of reasoning. Now moral decisions are made due to the interpersonal relations that the children have built up by aiming to fulfil these roles.

The final stage of development proposed by Kohlberg is the Post Conventional level. Now the ethics and morals of the person are not just geared towards trying to please or fulfil a social level, but have become much more complex. A person is carrying out his or her own actions due to their own moral code and their representation of how closely they wish to stick to the rules that their society has imposed upon them.

Gareth Crabtree

Piaget's theory (1932) also has these clear boundaries of moral development as a child becomes older. His theory has the stage of premoral judgement for children under five years, a stage of moral realism for children between five and ten years and the stage of moral subjectivism for children over ten years.

One of the main differences between the social development theorists and the cognitive development theory of Bandura is the disagreement about such an easily identifiable set of stages. The social developmental theorists believe that moral development is not simply an easily quantifiable progression. Moral development is in fact a cumulative and continuous process that carries on through life, so it is never stage related.

One social development theory that does interestingly use stages is Eriksson's. This theory has eight stages of development that are rigidly structured to mirror the development in age of a person. Each of the respective stages of development are paired with an inner conflict within a person, that they must overcome to progress to the next level of development.

Much evidence for this section of Bandura's theory comes from imitation studies carried out by Bryan and Test (1967). They found that prosocial behaviour could be learnt through modelling. Bandura *et al* (1961) also found that antisocial can also be learned in a similar way through imitation. This influence that the media has on a persons moral development is also tied into the idea of society, as the media has an ever-increasing relevance on our everyday lives.

The two clearly disagree on the idea of societies having the same moral codes and believes. A key area of Kohlberg's theory is the idea of moral universalism. This is a belief that certain moral believes are present in all cultures of the world. This view is the most challenged of Kohlberg's theory and does the most to detract form its validity. Piaget's study also had this element of moral universalism (Linaza 1984) found the same development in Spanish children as in other western cultures, supporting the ideal of moral universalism.

Gareth Crabtree

Bandura believes that morals are only relative to a particular culture. Each culture has its own moral rules that only apply to their culture. The Vasquez and Hummel study (1987) carried out moral reasoning interviews on Indian subjects, in an effort to see how they would respond to moral dilemmas. It was found that as they were obviously much poorer than American's who had also completed the tests, their responses were very different. Another example of the obvious example of morals differing massively between cultures is the idea of cannibalism. What used to be seen as a perfectly normal habitat to certain Indian tribes is seen as a repulsive and alien act by many Western cultures.

The validity of the idea of moral universalism is further negated by the research methods of Kohlberg. The evidence for his theories was achieved by only interviewing fifty American males. This leaves the theory open to valid claims of not being able to transcend culture or even sexes. This fact was ceased upon by Gilligan (1982) who stated that woman have different orientations towards justice and responsibility, making the idea of moral universalism nonsensical.

Though like Kohlberg, Bandura also suffers from comments on the validity of his theories due his experimental techniques. His work has a much low ecological validity as his the research for his theory was gained in a laboratory. Taking his evidence from such an alien setting such as a laboratory effectively removes the valid social setting. This devalues the work on the basic level that any study that wishes to record moral development on a social setting must surely do so in that social setting.

Another point that the two theorists disagree on is there exact definition of conscience and the exact role it has on moral development. Kohlberg links his idea of Moral development as being closely linked to intellectual development, by classing conscience as a process of thought. Conscience is nothing but a reasoned judgement of what people believe is right based on their moral stage of development. Piaget's earlier cognitive developmental theory had this same link between conscience and intellect.

Gareth Crabtree

Bandura sees conscience as a much more complicated process, far away from the idea of a component of intellect. According to Bandura conscience is a tool for a person to seek to avoid punishment or gain approval from their social peers. Its role is further extenuated as it is cited as a way to seek external or internal reinforcement

The social learning theory of Kohlberg believes that the changes in moral thought of a person are a clear progression, as the child gets older. A person simply progresses along the stages of development, with only an approximate ten percent of the population reaching the highest levels of moral development. A further studying of the research data of Kohlberg devalues this idea of clear progression. Snarey (1985) found that only 15% of research subjects reached level five of development and none reached the highest level of development. This evidence further makes such a stage structure seem irrelevant and misguided.

Bandura's theory starkly disagrees with idea of such structured moral development. Instead Bandura sees this progression of moral development as a process that continues throughout life. Moral development cannot be simply placed at stage, but is in fact the gathering of new responses to moral problems as a person moves through life.

The social element of Bandura's theory again comes into the fore with the idea of the continuation of moral development, as person progresses through life. The child is seen to reach a level of maturity, once they have developed a wide range of possible reactions to a moral dilemma.

.

