

Discuss one or more theories of the development of moral understanding and evaluate its conclusions.

The term morality, according to Shaffer (1993) means “a set of principles or ideals that help the individual to distinguish right from wrong and to act on this distinction. Morality is important to society, as it would not function effectively unless there is some agreement of what is right and wrong. There are many underlying processes and environmental factors, which limit or promote social, cognitive and moral development in children. In modern society, television could be considered to be one of the major influences on a child’s moral development.

There are three approaches to moral development; the cognitive approach, the psychodynamic approach and the social learning theory. The Cognitive-Developmental approach of Piaget and Kohlberg studies how children become more able to reason morally and make moral judgements, whereas the Freud’s psychodynamic approach is more concerned with the development of the conscience and moral feelings such as guilt and anxiety. The social learning theory of Bandura and Mischel investigates the development of moral behaviour and how role models in the family, society and the media, influence it.

The theory I am going to discuss is Piaget’s Cognitive-Developmental Approach. His theory of moral development is concerned with how the child’s moral knowledge and understanding change with age. Piaget saw morality as any system of rules, which governs interaction between people. The methods of investigation he used to develop his theories were, he looked at the way children imposed rules in their games. He used games to study the development of children’s moral development as he thought that by studying rules in the context of a game, he could study the child’s spontaneous though directly. He also, assessed changes in the child’s moral judgements by telling hypothetical stories about children who lied, stole or broke something. When using hypothetical stories, Piaget was generally more interested in the reasons why the children give the answers they did and not particularly the answers.

Piaget identifies stages of moral development just as he identified stages with cognitive development. His theories of the way children think and their moral reasoning goes through a series of stages, as they are adapting to the world, these are

also known as the processes of accommodation and assimilation. He believed that as children's reasoning about the world changes when they grow older and gain more experience, so does their reasoning about morality. Their ability to think about the world in more complex ways is what causes them to move on from one stage to the next. This is known as cognitive development.

Piaget stated that infants don't understand much about morality until they are about three or four years of age. Their development divides into two main stages after infancy. His stages of moral development are:

Pre Moral Stage (up to three or four years)

Children don't understand about rules, and so they don't make moral judgements

Stage of Heteronomous Morality (aged three – six years)

Children at this stage think rules are absolute and unchangeable, and the goodness and badness of an action is judged largely on the basis of its consequences rather than by taking intent into account.

Stage of Autonomous Morality (from around six or seven)

Children at this stage now see rules as more changeable and intentions are taken into account. Children also start to believe that it is possible to break rules and get away with it, whereas earlier they tended to think they will always be found out and possibly punished.

Researchers from Europe and America have tested some of Piaget's theories and have concluded that distinct stages of development do seem to exist however, other research found that children do not see all rules as being equally important as Piaget thought they did.

Heteronomous Morality, also known as moral realism, means when the child is subject to another's laws or rules. Children think that rules must be obeyed no matter what the circumstances. A child at this stage will think that rules are only made by authority figures, such as, parents and teachers. Two other features that are displayed in moral reasoning at this stage are, first they expect bad behaviour to be punished in

some way, they believe that the punishment should be expiatory – the wrongdoer must make amends for the crime by paying with some kind of suffering. They have the view that the amount of punishment should match the badness of the behaviour. Secondly, if the bad behaviour goes undetected then the child believes in immanent justice – where any misfortune occurring after the bad behaviour can be seen as a punishment. For example, if a child tells a lie and gets away with it, then later trips and falls, the younger child could consider this as a punishment. In general, they believe punishment should be fair and that wrongdoing will always be punished in some way.

Autonomous Morality, which means when the child is subject to one's own laws and rules. It involves moral relativism whereby the child comes to realise that rules evolve from social relationships. Due to the child 'decentring' and their developed ability to think more flexibly about moral issues, they have begun to realise it is important to take other people's opinions into account. At this stage a child will have developed the understanding that sometimes rules of morality can be broken in certain reasonable circumstances. They believe in reciprocal punishment, whereby the punishment should fit the crime. For example, if a child takes another child's sweets, the first child should be deprived of their sweets or should make it up to the victim in some other way. This is known as the principle of reciprocity. Children will also have learnt at this stage that wrongdoers often avoid punishment, diminishing any belief in immanent justice. They see punishment as a method of making the offender understand the nature of the crime and that punishment is also a deterrent.

The move from heteronomous morality to autonomous morality is influenced by two factors. Children around the age of seven begin to move on from the pre operational stage of an illogical and an egocentric way of thinking to more logical and flexible way of thinking, in the operational stage. Their growing awareness that other people have different views allows them to develop more mature moral reasoning. However, moral development lags at least one to two years behind cognitive development because the whole process depends on the cognitive changes occurring first.

Kohlberg expanded Piaget's theory to form a theory that also explained the development of moral reasoning. While Piaget described a two-stage process of moral

development, Kohlberg's theory outlined six stages within three different levels. Kohlberg extended Piaget's theory, proposing that moral development is a continual process that occurs throughout the lifespan. A study by Colby et al (1983) criticised Piaget's assumption that children of ten and eleven years old had reached an adult level of moral reasoning.

Piaget was always focusing on what an average child was capable of achieving so he neglected the idea of great variations between the individual child's ways of thinking. In general, Piaget's cognitive theory has been criticised for the methods of investigation not being as precise as they could have been. Methods he used were seen as complicated, leading critics to think he underestimated younger children's capabilities of what they could and could not do. This was because later research went on to conclude that children could actually take other motives into consideration, when they understood what motives were involved.

Despite criticism, Piaget's work is still regarded as a revolutionary step forward in the way we understand how children think. It has led to a much more realistic way of understanding children's moral development. Many attempts to test Piaget's theories from researchers around the world have resulted in acceptance that some of his views and methods do appear to exist.