

TimeLine

Person of the Month: Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987)

Ankit Patel^{1*}

Born	October 25, 1927 Bronxville, New York
Died	January 19, 1987 (aged 59) Winthrop, Massachusetts
Citizenship	American
Known for	Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development
Education	University of Chicago



Lawrence Kohlberg was, for many years, a professor at Harvard University. He became famous for his work there beginning in the early 1970s. He started as a developmental psychologist and then moved to the field of moral education. He was particularly well-known for his theory of moral development which he popularized through research studies conducted at Harvard's Center for Moral Education.

Lawrence Kohlberg was born on *October 25, 1927, Bronxville, New York*. He was an American psychologist best known for his theory of stages of moral development. He served as a professor in the Psychology Department at the University of Chicago and at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. Even though it was considered unusual in his era, he decided to study the topic of moral judgment, extending Jean Piaget's account of children's moral development from twenty-five years earlier. Kohlberg's revolutionary Theory of Stages of Moral Development helped establish his reputation as a brilliant thinker in the field of psychology. Studying the topic of moral development was certainly not a new pursuit as philosophers had been doing it for centuries. The subject had, for lack of a better description, had become an afterthought when Kohlberg resurrected it. In doing so, he breathed new life into the study of a very critical area of psychology.

Kohlberg's early work on this theory was found in his 1958 dissertation. Of course, the theory was expanded upon in the many years following the completion of his dissertation. The theory built upon much of what Piaget had researched previously. The simplest way to

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explain the theory is that ethical behavior is born of moral reasoning and moral reasoning can be identified by six traits. Each of these stages helps respond to a moral dilemma with each growing stage being better able to offer a response. The six stages are broken down into three levels: Level 1 is Pre-Conventional, Level 2 is Conventional, and Level 3 is Post-Conventional. Each level has two unique components reflecting the ladder to the consecutive stages. Level 1 centers on obedience/punishment and self-interest. Level 2 deals with conformity and authority. Level 3 centers on social contracts and universal ethics. Experiments with these stages of moral theory were often conducted by presenting subjects with moral dilemmas and seeing how they responded to them. Later in his studies, Kohlberg felt that it might be possible to extend the stages to include moral regression.

Lawrence Kohlberg suffered depression throughout the later years of his life. It is believed this stemmed from treatment related to a parasitic infection suffered in 1971. On January 19, 1987, Kohlberg literally walked into the freezing Boston Harbor to commit suicide by drowning. His body was recovered not long after and colleagues were shocked at what had occurred.

TIMELINE

- 1927:** Lawrence Kohlberg was born in Bronxville, New York.
- 1938:** Rotating custody of the Kohlberg children was ended, allowing the children to choose the parent with whom they wanted to live. (From 1933 to 1938, Lawrence and his three other siblings rotated between their mother and father for six months at a time.)
- 1948:** He enrolled at the University of Chicago. At this time at Chicago it was possible to gain credit for courses by examination, and Kohlberg earned his bachelor's degree in one year, 1948.
- 1948:** Kohlberg was in Palestine during the fighting in 1948 to establish the state of Israel, but refused to participate and focused on nonviolent forms of activism. He also lived in an Israeli kibbutz during this time, until he was able to return to America in 1948.
- 1955:** He had married Lucille Stigberg (he couple had two sons, David and Steven.)
- 1958:** He completed doctoral degree in psychology at Chicago.
- 1958:** Kohlberg's first academic appointment was at Yale University, as an assistant professor of psychology.
- 1959:** He started read Piaget's work. (Kohlberg found a scholarly approach that gave a central place to the individual's reasoning in moral decision making. At the time this contrasted with the current psychological approaches of behaviorism and psychoanalysis that explained morality as simple internalization of external cultural or parental rules, through teaching using reinforcement and punishment or identification with a parental authority.)
- 1961:** Joined the Psychology Department of the University of Chicago as assistant, then associate professor of psychology and human development, 1962–1967.
- 1971:** Kohlberg contracted a parasitic infection. Due to this, he suffered from extreme abdominal pain. The long-term effects of the infection and the medications took their toll, and Kohlberg's health declined as he also engaged in increasingly demanding professional work, including "Just Community" prison and school moral education programs.
- 1974:** Kohlberg worked with schools to set up democracy-based programs, where both students and teachers were given one vote to decide on school policies. (The purpose

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of these programs were to build a sense of community in schools in order to promote democratic values and increase moral reasoning.)

- 1979:** He had categorize and classify the reasoning used in the responses, into one of six distinct stages, grouped into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional.
- 1981:** *Essays on Moral Development, Vols. I and II, The Philosophy of Moral Development* published. (published by Harper & Row.)
- 1984:** *The Psychology of Moral Development* published. (published by Harper & Row.)
- 1987:** On January 19, Kohlberg parked at the end of a dead end street in Winthrop, Massachusetts, across from Boston's Logan Airport. He left his wallet with identification on the front seat of his unlocked car and walked into the icy Boston Harbor. His car and wallet were found within a couple of weeks, and his body was recovered some time later, with the late winter thaw, in a tidal marsh across the harbor near the end of a Logan Airport runway. (After Kohlberg's body was recovered and his death confirmed, former students and colleagues published special issues of scholarly journals to commemorate his contribution to developmental psychology.)

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