



New Trends  
in Psychology

## Moral Development in Adolescents

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**Abstract:** Adolescence is considered a period of extended behavioral opportunity. Adolescents begin to make choices within a behavioral ecology that were not available to them during childhood. Study volume, decisions to smoke, drink alcohol, choosing friends, managing health-related behaviors are emerging issues in the decision-making process of many teenagers. Transitional behaviors are defined as behaviors that adolescents overtly or implicitly use to signal upcoming adulthood. These behaviors may have other purposes, but at least part of their status is to socially represent the transitional characteristics of adolescence.

**Keywords:** adolescent; moral; social; behavior; judgments; Transition

### Introduction

The main paradigm of adolescent moral judgment research, peaking in popularity in the 1970s and early 1980s, was the moral judgment theory developed by Kohlberg, 1984, Colby and Kohlberg 1987.

Kohlberg Lawrence, stated that moral judgments develop within six universal, sequential and hierarchical stages of increasingly differentiated and integrated concepts. His theory was concerned with the basic structure of an individual's moral judgments rather than the content or particular decisions that children or adolescents make.

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According to what Kohlberg stated, moral judgments in middle and older childhood are structured according to concerns for obedience, avoiding punishments, and instrumental needs (called preconventional judgments), and being divided into two stages.

The idea that more advanced thought structures appear in adolescence is based, in part, on the claim that changes in adolescent moral structures are related to the emergence of skills in other areas, including the development of formal operational thinking and more advanced observational capacities. Operational logic has been described as a “necessary but not sufficient” condition for the development of core moral judgment, adolescence was marked by the emergence of primary moral judgments (Kohlberg & Gilligan, 1971).

## **2. Gender Differences in Adolescent Morality**

Gilligan Carol (1982), an American psychologist criticized Kohlberg’s theory of moral judgment as it discriminated against young women and would underestimate the developmental maturity of their moral judgment. She asserted that girls’ moral judgment, which usually falls within stage three interpersonal morality (as opposed to boys, whose judgment falls within stage four law and order morality), represents a different moral orientation, no less mature.

C. Gilligan stated that the morality of boys is oriented towards rules, rights and the self as an autonomous factor, while the morality of girls is structured through the prism of care, entailing responsibility towards others, the need to avoid harm and the self seen as part integral part of relationships.

The results of numerous studies that tested C. Gilligan’s claims demonstrated that regardless of age, patterns vary according to the situational contexts in which justice and caring are evaluated. Gender differences emerged only in adults’ judgments of self-generated moral dilemmas, and they were solely due to differences in the content of the dilemmas.

### **3. Morality as an Instinctive Field of Social Knowledge**

Studies show that adolescents make more relativistic and self-oriented judgments than would be anticipated if the transition from childhood to adolescence were one of premoral or pre-conventional judgments and an understanding of moral rules and authority

The social world of adolescents is complex and attracts different types of interactions, starting from those related to justice, well-being and rights (morality), continuing with the social organization of hierarchical structures, society and social conventions reaching the psychological reality of individuals and to their attempts to psychologically understand themselves and others.

A series of exhaustive research has demonstrated that the understanding of justice, well-being and rights develops early in ontogenesis (Smetana 1995; Tisak, 1995; Turiel 1983), research that supports the statements in question. Moral concepts differ both analytically and empirically from the understanding of the social organization of social systems and conventions.

Morality, social conventions and psychological knowledge develop from the differentiated social experiences and social interactions of children and adolescents (Smetana 1995; Turiel, 1998).

At the beginning and end of adolescence, conventions are rejected, being considered “nothing, other than” arbitrary orders of the authority (at the beginning of adolescence) or the demands of society (at the end of adolescence)

### **4. Adolescents’ Views of the Legitimate Authority of Adults**

In a series of studies, adolescents’ perceptions of the legitimacy of various adult courts to issue rules on hypothetical moral, socially conventional and personal matters have been analyzed. The findings indicate that, during the second decade of life, adolescents of different ethnicities and cultural origins believe that moral matters are legitimately regulated by adults, and that they are bound to follow the moral, parental rules once they have been established by parents. However, adolescents’ judgments about adults as legitimate moral authorities are contextually limited. For example, research has shown that teenagers are almost unanimous in agreeing that parents have the moral authority to regulate moral acts at home, but not at school.

The findings that adolescents generally believe that adults have the legitimate authority to regulate moral issues (contextually appropriate) is supported by research indicating that moral issues are sometimes a source of conflict in the adolescent-parent relationship.

In many studies, multicultural adolescents and parents rarely consider real conflicts in moral terms.

### **5. Moral Judgment of the Adolescent in Risky Situations**

Adolescence has been described as a period of increased risk-taking (Baumrind, 1987), and risk-taking behaviors such as alcohol and drug use have major consequences for society.

In several studies (Berkowitz, Guerra & Nucci 1991) adolescents of different ages were asked to classify behaviors related to alcohol and substance use as moral or non-moral (belonging to conventions, personal choice or prudential attitudes) and to estimate the harms that they inflict on themselves and others.

Separating the moral, conventional, and personal components of acts also helps to understand how certain features of situations affect judgments, including the morality or non-morality of the matters in question.

Moral decisions become more problematic in situations where the moral status of the situation is ambiguous or contested or when moral concerns conflict with other types of considerations.

### **6. Conclusions**

Research suggests that there is great contextual variation and heterogeneity in adolescent moral and social thinking. Adolescents do not have a consistent core moral thinking, as some researchers have claimed, nor are they morally confused or individualistic as other researchers have argued. They make autonomous moral judgments in some situations and focus on personal goals. The development of adolescents' moral thinking determines their ability to apply some more abstract and complex moral concepts in complex or polyvalent situations involving certain conflicts between moral concerns and social concerns.

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