

An Analytical Overview of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development in College Moral Education in Mainland China

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Abstract

Kohlberg's theory of moral cognitive development is temporarily the most influential theory in moral development psychology in the west and is still applied into practice and proved effective by moral theorists and educators all over the world. This paper takes this theory as the basis to analyze some problems existing in college moral education in China. It also suggests effective strategies to improve college moral education in China, *i.e.* Chinese colleges should reform the mode of moral education to increase students' moral judgment competence, respect the developmental rules of moral cognition, make full use of the "Zone of proximal development" theory for moral education to develop students' moral autonomy, attach great importance to "moral regression" period, and guide the Chinese moral education to transit from "teach how to obey" to "teach how to choose."

Keywords

Kohlberg, Moral Cognitive Development, Chinese College Students, Moral Education

1. Reflections on Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Cognitive Development

1.1. Stages of Moral Cognitive Development

Kohlberg's theory of moral cognitive development, absorbing some thoughts in Dewey's Progressive Theory of Ethics and Piaget's theory of Child Development, is one of the most influential theories in modern Western moral development psychology. Its emergence posed a big challenge for the Western traditional moral education, promoted the reformation of school moral education, and ex-

erted great influence on the moral education practice in the whole world [1] [2]. The methods of moral education he put forward 50 years ago have been extensively employed in Chinese moral education practices.

Stages of moral cognitive development are the core part of Kohlberg's theoretical system of moral development, whose main points are as follows: 1) moral development is closely related to cognitive development which is the basis of moral development. Therefore, moral development cannot exceed cognitive development level; 2) one's morality develops in stages and children's moral judgment develops in stages as well; 3) the stages of moral development are irreversible; 4) the essential motivation of moral development lies in pursuit of social acceptance and self-realization, which relies on individuals' active participation into social culture.

Meanwhile, one's moral development is closely related to and largely controlled by the social environment. Therefore, Kohlberg asserted that human morality developed in stages. As a result, the society and education can help develop it by all means.

To prove this assertion, Kohlberg spent more than ten years tracking qualitatively children and adolescents of different ages in various cultures by putting forward moral dilemma questions. He was interested in how individuals would justify their actions if placed in similar moral dilemmas. Based on the participants' answers, Kohlberg found out that human moral judgment and moral reasoning, in general, develop at six stages which can be more generally grouped into three levels of two stages each, namely, pre-conventional level, conventional level and post-conventional level.

1) Pre-conventional level. Children on this level are very sensitive to the concepts of goodness and badness in all kinds of rules and signals, but they interpret those by focusing on the direct consequences of their actions on themselves.

The pre-conventional level consists of the first and second Kohlberg's stages of moral development. In stage one (obedience and punishment orientation), children take the avoidance of punishment due to the disobedience of the existing rules as the criteria of their moral judgment. They believe what is regulated by authorities is right while it is absolutely wrong to disobey those rules. Children in this stage lack the ability to consider the moral criteria behind the authorities.

Stage two is characteristics of self-interest orientation. Children in this stage believe that right behavior is defined by whatever is in the individual's best interest. They show a limited interest in the needs of others, but only in where it might further their own interests. They regard the rules which benefit themselves as good, while those which do not benefit them are bad. Kohlberg (1984) pointed out that most of the children under 9, some adolescents, most of juveniles and adult criminals are in this stage [3].

2) Conventional level. People at this level have the social rules internalized, that is to say, they believe that rules and regulations are absolutely correct. They

judge the morality of actions by comparing them to the society's views and expectations. The conventional level consists of the third and fourth Kohlberg's stages of moral development.

Stage 3 is focusing on interpersonal accord and conformity. People in this stage judge the morality of an action by evaluating its consequences in terms of a person's relationships, which now begin to include things like respect, gratitude and the "golden rule". They believe that the criterion to judge a person's behavior is whether it is accepted and liked by others, or whether it is helpful for others. This stage is also called "good boy-nice girl orientation".

Stage 4 is taking authority and social-order as maintaining orientation. People in this stage realize the importance to obey laws, dictums and social conventions because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society.

3) Post-conventional level, also known as the principled level, is marked by a growing realization that individuals' moral tactics are decided by the rights, values and principles universally accepted by all the members in an equal society. And those moral values and principles should be justified by individuals themselves rather than the authorities. This level includes the fifth stage and sixth stage.

Stage 5 is taking social contract as its orientation. People in this stage view the world as holding different opinions, rights and values. Such perspectives should be mutually respected as unique to each person or community. Laws are regarded as social contracts rather than rigid edicts. Those that do not promote the general welfare should be changed when necessary to meet "the greatest good for the greatest number of people". This is achieved through majority decision, and inevitable compromise.

Stage 6 is the highest stage and takes universal ethical principles as the criteria to guide their actions. People in this stage abide by the ethical rules or principles they have chosen, believing that they are the basis of all the laws and social contracts. Laws are valid only insofar as they are grounded in justice, and a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws.

Kohlberg's theory of the stages of moral development reveals that the individual's moral ability develops from the lower (stage 1) stage to the higher stage (stage 6). Stages cannot be skipped, nor be reversed; each provides a new and necessary perspective, more comprehensive and differentiated than its predecessors but integrated with them.

1.2. Are Morally Cognitive Developmental Stages Irreversible?

Abundant researches on Kohlberg's theory of moral development reveal inconsistency in individuals' moral cognition development, both in the west and in China. In Kohlberg's empirical studies of individuals throughout their life, Kohlberg also observed that some, after getting into colleges, had apparently undergone moral stage regression. Their moral reasoning level would temporarily (around 2 or 3 years) decrease to stage 2 (instrumentally self-centered) and then go back to the conventional level (stage 4) or the principled level (stage 5).

The regression problem puts Kohlberg's theory under severe critiques. Kohlberg argued that stage 5 and stage 6 are not the new stages developed in adulthood. As a matter of fact, they are already formed before the end of the senior high school. Adulthood is a time of moral stability rather than moral development. That is to say, adults' task is to maintain their level of morality by giving up immature thinking pattern rather than developing into a new or higher level. Kohlberg also found out that although those "regressed" chose the relativism views which emphasized self-centeredness; they were still able to think as they had been on stage 4 or stage 5. Kohlberg believed, therefore, that this "regression" was only "structural regression". That is to say, individuals' moral cognition ability seems to regress, but it develops functionally due to their questioning of the obligations and standards in the preceding stages.

On the other hand, the "regression" phenomenon reflects a new understanding of values and choices, which is, actually, an improvement. That is because before the college, adolescents usually live in a world which is not created by themselves. Therefore, their choices are limited. But when they become undergraduates or postgraduates, they will develop their thinking into principal thinking pattern, which is related to their expected promise. Nevertheless, individuals are not endowed with the following two characteristics until now.

1) Maintaining their responsibility to others' welfare. That is to say, individuals are, in a real sense, able to undertake their social roles. Xiaofei (2009) revealed that changes in moral stages are the cognition and recombination for the standard social values and other related standard norms [4]. The changing factors include: firstly, "pure" cognition developing into a higher logic stage; secondly, developing individuals' social cognition by increasing their chance to take social roles; thirdly, the morally cognitive conflicts experiences between the individual's own moral reasoning and the reasoning of others (or between the individual's own reasoning structure and the moral dilemmas he fails to solve).

2) Irreversible experience in making moral choices. In this period, individuals make their moral choices out of their will. All in all, to gain experiences in making moral choices seems necessary for individuals to develop their thoughts from conventional thoughts to principal thoughts and those experiences include questioning and promises, merging with cognition-moral reflection to some extent.

These "vicarious experiences" seem to prove that individuals' moral development in pre-conventional and conventional stages is the moral cognition to the present society. However, that cognition seems inefficient to demonstrate that the individuals' moral cognition is developing towards self-choice level, but it does demonstrate that this process reflects the universal principle in moral development. Therefore, the so-called "regression" happens to explain the development of self-choice level.

2. Enlightenment of Kohlberg's Theory to Moral Education in Chinese Colleges

Despite critiques from some researchers, there is no doubt that Kohlberg's

theory of moral cognitive development has shed light on moral education among college students [1]. The reason why we emphasize college education is that the college experience is a very critical period for the development of moral reasoning because the student either will continue to hold to a conventional level of reasoning or be sufficiently jarred that he begins to question previously unquestioned beliefs [5].

2.1. Reforming the Mode of Moral Education, Increasing Students' Moral Judgment Competence

Kohlberg (1971) pointed out that moral education is everything but reciting precepts or forcing students to follow moral rules [6]. Moral education focuses on facilitating the students to develop their moral-cognitive ability, with moral judgment competence as its core.

Georg Lind, the famous German psychologist, expanded Kohlberg's theory by bettering its measurement instrument. He used Moral Judgment Test to replace Moral Judgment Interview which is more objective than MJI [7]. Children's moral judgment develops from their moral cognition level instead of the outside force. Children learn to understand wrong from right with their own judgment standards. Therefore, inappropriate force may bring unhealthy result to children's moral value judgment.

Kohlberg's cross-cultural moral experiments on different ages and different educational levels prove that moral education should not aim to instill the given moral norms into the students, but to develop their competence for morally judging various problems and putting forward different opinions. As Kohlberg said, "what we agree with is to develop children's moral cognition competence by means of stimulating children to improve within their potentials rather than instilling a certain moral thoughts" [8].

What he suggested, doubtlessly, aims at improving children's moral judgment competence. However, the key question is how can we effectively improve it? Kohlberg takes "arousing genuinely moral conflicts and discords among students" as one of the three principles in moral education [9]. He suggested classroom dilemma discussions which apply moral conflicts in contextual situations so as to let the subjects' internal notions "reflected", which proves plausible to reflect individuals' moral development level.

Kohlberg's views help us to reflect on moral education in Chinese colleges. For a long time, moral education in Chinese colleges is under critiques because it favors in the instillation of the knowledge in an enforced way, rather than cultivating students' moral reasoning through moral conflicts.

College students have higher moral cognition level. Therefore, moral preaching and enforced instillation can never arouse empathy or develop their moral judgment competence. As a result, we suggest that Kohlberg's moral dilemma discussions be used in classes to reform the classroom teaching method in moral education. Educators encourage discussions in classes of moral dilemma problems that are closely related to the students' real life to arouse morally cognitive

conflicts and increase the students' reasoning competence to help students seek the correct answers to those problems.

In April 2012, the Chinese psychologist, professor Yang Shaogang invited German psychologist professor Georg Lind to start five-day workshop in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. The 37 participants were composed of 7 teachers and 30 undergraduate students. Participants took two Moral Judgment Competence tests before and after the workshop. In the workshop, participants discussed over two dilemma stories and did the reflection after the workshop. The comparison of the two tests prove that the discussions of moral dilemma stories does help participants' moral judgment competence (C score) increasing from 21.5 in the pretest to 27.3 in the posttest.

2.2. Respect Developmental Laws of Moral Cognition, Use the "Zone of Proximal Development" Theory for Moral Education

The "Zone of proximal development" is a concept developed by Soviet psychologist and social constructivist Lev Vygotsky whose researches revealed that education could facilitate and promote children's moral development. But two levels need to be confirmed: the level of actual development as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers. The "Zone of proximal development" is the difference between these two levels [10].

Based on Lev Vygotsky's "Zone of proximal development" theory, Kohlberg put forward "zone of proximal moral development" theory. He stated that moral developmental stages have priorities, that is, children can understand all the moral judgments within their moral developmental stages, and at most can understand the moral problems only one level higher than their own developmental stage, which indicates that there exists a quasi-moral level 2 on the basis of children's present moral level 1. And this quasi-moral level 2 is the transition media and bridge. Therefore, in moral education, educators should advocate a moral level higher than children's present level, that is, quasi-moral level 2. The existence of quasi-moral level 2 suggests to us that children's moralities can only be developed to the higher level only when the proximal zone is found.

The Chinese traditional moral education ignores the "zone of proximal moral development" and applies the same moral education to students at different ages and on different moral stages, which gives rise to a ridiculous consequence that "primary students learn what should be learned by college students while college students learn what should have been learned in their childhood."

Kohlberg insisted that the traditional moral education fail to exert influential impact on people's moral judgment and moral behaviors because it turns a deaf ear to people's moral developmental stages and teaches the students at the normally lower level in a doctrinaire way that adults at higher moral level are learning. This cross-stage moral education method makes it transcending the learners' ability of comprehension and acceptance, which, as a result, is meaningless.

Since the establishment and development of one particular moral notion is usually related, to some extent, to the development of one's cognitive psychology and logic thinking, the limitation of social environment and experiences accumulated in moral conflicts, it is obviously inappropriate to expect people at normally low levels to choose supernormal moral behaviors.

Kohlberg proved the above point empirically. He talked with the subjects to confirm their moral developmental stage and then asked them to listen to the moral judgments on the sixth stage (a higher stage). After that, the subjects were asked to retell the judgments in their own words and the result showed that all the subjects could only express based on the understanding which was only one stage, instead of two or three stages higher than their present one. This experiment proved the futility of trans-stage moral education among students.

2.3. Advocate for Students-Centered Moral Education, Develop Students' Moral Autonomy

Through confirming students-centeredness in moral education, it helps to internalize the extrinsic requirements into their own need to learn, making them accept the educational target, giving full play to their initiative, internalizing the education in a creative way so as to form correct ethics and influence the educators in a counterproductive way to achieve their overall development.

In traditional moral education, the relationship between the educators and the educated is a very pure "teaching and learning" relationship, and the educated are always playing the role of "being educated", "being transformed", which is unbeneficial for the development of their moral autonomy.

In Kohlberg's view, in moral education the educators' major task is to help the educated to understand the goodness and badness of his moral behaviors according to his confirmed moral notions, to focus on their reasoning method when they are making moral judgments rather than on the moral contents the educated choose or some particular moral behaviors. The true value of moral education is to cultivate and develop the autonomy of the educated to decide their behaviors with the judgment of their own (instead of the judgment of the educators).

Therefore, schools and teachers should treat students in a democratic way, discussing moral problems in the society instead of instilling a certain moral ideology into the students.

Schools and teachers should also treat students equally, respecting personal differences, allowing them to pose their own ideas, to make the choice of their own instead of forcing the students to accept the unanimous moral precepts and moral stands.

Students should be allowed and encouraged to participate in the reforming and reflection of moral notions rather than be treated as passive "receivers." Schools and teachers should make instructive moral assessments instead of dictatorial moral judgment for the students. For example, the teachers should discuss with the students about the current issues, objectively presenting to them

the social conflicts and contradictions, encourage the students to make their moral judgment independently by equal talks. Teachers are no longer the judges but the guide. Guiding doesn't necessarily mean going back to traditional notions. Teachers and students can work together to explore the new moral notions and moral orientations through equal and free discussions.

Only in democratic atmosphere and with democratic discussions can students be initiated to genuinely accept moral education rather than resisting in an open or secret way, and also, only in that way can it be possible to improve the moral level of the whole society.

2.4. Attach Importance to “Moral Regression”, Transforming Moral Education from “Teach How to Obey” to “How to Choose”

Until now, the moral education in Chinese colleges is still one that “teaches how to obey.” It requires adolescents to conform to the given moral notions and moral stands unconditionally, which include both the institutionalized moral notions and the uninstitutionalized moral orders such as the particular moral requirements for college students in universities. In addition, adolescents have to accept unconditionally the given process of moral education, in which, students, as “the educated”, have never been treated as “entities” with identity, nor be given the right to make independent choice for all moral stands.

Kohlberg's theory of “moral regression” reveals that college is a very important transitional period in the adolescents' moral development when they get rid of adults' control to think independently. Their life is no longer only bound by books, but more closely related with the changing society. When they find it difficult to solve the moral problems newly emerging in the real life with the moral notions and moral stands conveyed by the school education, they will, very naturally, begin to throw doubts on the validity of those moral notions and stands, to question them and to explicitly declare their wish to choose alternatively. Their life circle is not limited to their parents and teachers, but expand to, both in and out of the school, the peers, mass media and other adults separated to the colleges.

These changes enable the students to get in touch with more moral information that is heterogeneous to the goal of school education but more reasonable in the students' eyes. This information may go against the moral notions advocated by the school so that it needs the students to take a careful thought of the given moral notions and to make a choice. In that process, they may turn to some behaviors that are against the traditional notions. In traditional “teach to obey” viewpoint, their moral ability seems regressed, but in fact, it is exactly the turning point for college students to start their independent thinking to make an active choice. The educators should adopt a correct attitude towards the background mechanics of this seeming “regression” and, therefore, take effective measures as follows to make the school moral education changing from “teach to obey” to “teach to choose.”

1) To strengthen theoretical teaching in classes, classroom teaching is the first and foremost place to start moral education and foster students' ability to make choices. For students, classroom is their first resource to receive knowledge and information. Therefore, we should make full use of the classroom education to guide them "how to choose" and help improve their ability so that they will learn how to make correct choices to further promote their competence to "choose."

2) To create the environment which is beneficial for cultivating students' ability to "choose" and organizing related teaching activities. In "teach how to choose" activities, educators should cultivate a good school environment to increase students' confidence in and awareness of making choices as well as their ability in practice.

3) To combine teaching and the student community. Teachers and educators may help students widen their circle of communication and broaden their knowledge through the student community. Community spirit may influence and even change the notion of the members. To learn how to choose in practice is very important, therefore, we should make full use of all the possible conditions and combine all the beneficial factors to cultivate the students' ability to "choose."

3. Conclusion

From what is stated above, we can clearly see that Kohlberg's theory of moral development is instructive for college students' moral education in China. Today we take a reflection of Kohlberg's theory to memorize his significant achievement in the field of moral education, and more importantly, to creatively develop his theory. Since the highest stage of moral development is the universally accepted moral principles, we have enough reason to believe that the Chinese moral education will at last break parochial nationalism to gradually merge into the international trend of moral development to contribute to the realization of the universally accepted moral values.

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