Kohlberg’s Six Stages of Moral Development: Speaker Notes

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INTRO

This presentation explores the plight of Alison, a young woman torn between her artistic aspirations and familial duties. Employing Kohlberg's stages of moral development, alongside theories of individual and family life cycle, we analyze her ethical considerations and decision-making processes. This integrated approach sheds light on the tensions between personal ambitions and responsibilities, illustrating the complex interplay of moral development and familial influences on Alison's journey toward self-actualization and ethical maturity.

SCENARIO

A young adolescent woman, Alison, is caught between doing what her family wants and following her own dreams of becoming a psychology-informed artist. She believes in the power of learning and creativity, but her parents would rather have her stay at home to help rather than go to school. The young adolescent woman is strong-willed, loyal, passionate, and caring, with a strong personal code of ethics that is intersectional and non-gender biased.

STAGE 1: OBEDIENCE AND PUNISHMENT ORIENTATION

Stage one of Kohlberg's theory is Obedience and Punishment Orientation, a stage characterized by egocentric perspectives where Alison's moral reasoning focuses primarily on punishment avoidance and self-interest (Ahmeti & Ramadani, 2021). Alison, who is caught between familial responsibility and personal aspirations, may find her moral reasoning conforming to her parents' expectations of her to avoid disapproval and conflict (Ahmeti & Ramadani, 2021). Alison may be basing her decision on intense cultural and familial pressures, which prioritize family obligations over her individual desires. Alison's developmental age and search for personal identity further characterize Alison's decision making abilities. Family pressure likely forces Alison to prioritize her family's needs over her own, reflecting a survivalist approach to her moral reasoning.

STAGE 2: INDIVIDUALISM AND EXCHANGE

In stage two of Kohlberg's theory, individualism and exchange establish a more nuanced outlook on moral reasoning (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). Centered on individual

needs and reciprocal understandings of fairness, we see our main character Alison, working to negotiate her autonomy (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). She does this against the backdrop of her familial demands, simultaneously recognizing her dream is worthy of pursuing. As Alison susses out her new found autonomous reasoning, she may position supporting her dreams, education, and ambition would benefit the family. This line of reasoning fulfills both her personal and familial obligations. It is important to note traditional gender roles are likely influencing her commitment to meeting her parent's expectations, inhibiting her ability to independently navigate stage two. Alison will probably battle with societal norms and female expectations based on her female presenting nature. When Alison works to negotiate her desires, she is taking an individualistic approach by attempting to balance her internal moral values alongside external socio-cultural pressures.

STAGE 3: GOOD INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

At the third stage, good interpersonal relationships, the value of trust, empathy, and loyalty within relationships, are highlighted (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). As Alison embraces this stage, they seek to maintain and manage family harmony and approval through their choices. They choose to prioritize mutual respect and understanding as it pertains to family relationships. It is at this stage where Alison shifts their individualistic justifications to recognizing the important social bonds and wellbeing of others (Bogaerts et al., 2021). Alison contends more with societal and familial expectations of their forward presenting gender and its required role within a family system. The internal struggle they face is to choose to either conform to gender norms or pursue her personal aspirations and identity (Weber & Siniora, 2021). It is here where queer kids and adults learn to sacrifice self-actualization for the sake of positive relationships with others.

STAGE 4: LAW AND ORDER MORALITY

Law and order morality prioritizes social order, law, responsibility, and authority for the sake of maintaining homeostasis with societal structures for the common good (Ahmeti & Ramadani, 2021). It is within stage four of Kohlberg's theory where Alison leans harder into upholding familial and societal expectations instead of their own desires, knowingly sacrificing her aspirations (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2022). Likely influenced by cultural background and governing gender norms, Alison decides based on their internalization of society norms positioning her compliance to such as necessary for everyone's wellbeing. The continued dilemma they encounter highlights the impact of systemic and societal discriminatory mindsets continuously prohibiting

self-actualization. These issues further highlight the necessity of incorporating intersectional feminist theory into our understanding of moral reasoning.

STAGE 5: SOCIAL CONTRACT AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

Stage five signifies advanced moral reasoning that now incorporates a broader perspective on societal rules and Alison's individual rights (McLeod, 2024). It is within this stage where Alison understands laws are constructs positioned as supporting collective welfare, but should be scrutinized, as there is a negative and positive impact on an individual's freedom (McLeod, 2024). With this understanding, Alison likely re-establishes self-advocacy for their right to self-express and seek an education. This challenges familial and societal expectations that, until now, have restricted her autonomy and gender identity. By this stage, Alison is in late adolescence or early adulthood, learning how to balance this new information by respecting their family's heritage and acknowledging how it may limit her personal growth or help support it. Alison's personal growth incorporates nuanced considerations regarding society and the social contracts within it to progress as a community with whom respect individual autonomy and the differing social contracts within it.

STAGE 6: UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES

Universal ethical principles represent the pinnacle of moral development, a stage defined by adherence to global values of justice, dignity, and equality, and often not achieved by many (McLeod, 2024). Through their navigation, Alison transcends early familial norms and embraces an expansive moral approach (McLeod, 2024). Their decisions are profoundly shaped by an unwavering dedication to social justice, equity, and systemic change. Embodying Stage Six of Kohlberg's theory, Alison and peers comprehend and confront societal disparities, aiming to advocate for policies that ensure true individual and communal autonomy. This stage is the epitome of altruistic commitment to rectifying structural injustices, illuminating a path toward a more equitable society.

THEORIES OF INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

As a child's thought processes advance, like Erikson and Piaget suggest, Kohlberg states, as do children's moral development and construction (Limone & Toto, 2022). Piaget's model of cognitive theory lays the groundwork for moral reasoning, a natural cognitive maturation Kohlberg suggests flourishes through socially mediated experiences (Limone & Toto, 2022). Erikson's psychosocial framework leans developmental understanding of social interactions over the lifespan, informing the

various ways one's moral compass may be shaped (Limone & Toto, 2022). Kohlberg's theory intersects with Piaget and Erikson, affording a holistic understanding of the whole person's social, cognitive, and moral development. The culmination of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg's work rests upon recognizing that human development is internally and externally driven and evolving over the lifespan, culminating in an altruistic perspective and position within society.

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Recognizing the integral role of spiritual development within an intersectional feminist and ethical framework within the context of Alison's ultra-conservative Christian home, requires the recognition of their parent's Christian values, leaning harshly into traditional gender roles, further marginalizing Alison's identity and role in the home (Bornstein et al., 2017). Alison, however, held onto the concept of "love thy neighbor as yourself," which propelled their empathy, compassion, and deep desire for interconnectedness with others. This principle stands out as a guiding moral light regarding the importance of caring for and respecting others and oneself. Despite Alison's ultra-conservative upbringing, their resilience helped shape their moral compass, advocating not just for others, but for themself and what is just for all (Bornstein et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

This presentation examined Alison's moral journey through Kohlberg's stages, revealing conflicts between her dreams and family expectations amidst societal pressures. Alison's progression from self-interest to global ethical principles mirrors her intersectional identity's struggle with pervasive gender norms (Limone & Toto, 2022). Despite conservative influences, their spiritual growth embodies a tenacious commitment to empathy and justice (Bornstein et al., 2017). Ultimately, her narrative underscores a quest for autonomy within a framework that respects familial bonds and societal advancement toward egalitarian values. The collective contributions of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg underscore the nuanced interplay between internal motivations and external influences in shaping Alison's development, ultimately synthesizing Alison's arrival at altruism and societal contribution.

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