

# PRECONVENTIONAL LEVEL

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## The Preconventional Level in Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

The **Preconventional Level** serves as the foundational, initial stage within Lawrence Kohlberg's highly influential six-stage theory of moral development, which is itself organized into three primary levels. This level, typically observed during early childhood and often extending into the elementary school years, characterizes a form of moral reasoning that is fundamentally egocentric and driven by external forces. Individuals operating at this level do not yet possess an internalized set of moral principles or societal norms; rather, their judgment regarding the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined almost exclusively by the direct physical consequences of that action, specifically focusing on the avoidance of punishment or the attainment of tangible rewards. Kohlberg conceptualized moral development as a sequence of invariant, hierarchical stages, emphasizing that cognitive maturation and social experience are prerequisites for transitioning from this initial, rudimentary understanding of morality to the more sophisticated conventional and postconventional forms of reasoning. It is crucial to evaluate the characteristics of the preconventional level, particularly as manifested in children, for the explicit purpose of establishing further and more in-depth analyses of Kohlberg's overall theoretical framework, ensuring that the baseline for moral thought is accurately defined before assessing complexity.

Kohlberg's work, heavily influenced by the cognitive developmental theories of Jean Piaget, posits that moral reasoning evolves not merely through the passive accumulation of rules, but through active construction and reorganization of cognitive structures as individuals encounter and attempt to resolve moral dilemmas. The Preconventional Level represents the lowest structural organization of this process, where morality is strictly external to the self. A child at this level understands rules only as absolute mandates imposed by authoritative figures, and the moral worth of an action is tied directly to the power dynamics involved--namely, the power of the authority figure to enforce compliance through punishment or reward. This orientation means that moral judgments lack universality or abstract principles; they are situational and self-serving. The failure to adhere to this initial level of understanding would undermine the validity of the entire Kohlbergian hierarchy, necessitating precise evaluation of how concepts such as **obedience** and **reciprocity** are initially understood purely in terms of personal cost-benefit analysis before they mature into concepts of social obligation and universal justice.

The methodology employed in studying the Preconventional Level typically involves presenting subjects, often children, with hypothetical moral dilemmas, such as the famous Heinz dilemma, and analyzing the reasoning behind their decisions, not the decisions themselves. When responding to these dilemmas, individuals reasoning preconventionally will focus their explanations solely on what will happen to the actor--will he be caught and punished, or will he gain something valuable? This focus starkly contrasts with reasoning found at the higher levels, where considerations shift toward fulfilling social roles, maintaining the social order, or adhering to abstract ethical principles. Therefore, the identification and careful categorization of

Preconventional responses are vital for researchers seeking to refine the scoring manuals, such as the Standardized Issue Scoring Manual (SISM) or the Moral Judgment Interview (MJI), thereby establishing greater empirical depth and structural clarity for the subsequent stages of moral advancement. This meticulous evaluation ensures the theoretical integrity of the transition mechanisms that propel an individual from purely fear-based compliance to genuine social responsibility.

## Stage 1: The Orientation of Obedience and Punishment

The first stage within the Preconventional Level is the **Obedience and Punishment Orientation**, often dubbed the "punishment and obedience stage." In this initial phase of moral thought, the individual determines the goodness or badness of an action based entirely on its physical consequences. If an action results in punishment, it is perceived as bad; if it does not, or if it is ignored by authority, it is deemed acceptable. There is absolutely no consideration given to the intentions of the actor or the value of human life or property beyond the immediate risk of penalty. Authority figures are seen as infallible sources of truth, and rules are perceived as rigid, unchangeable laws that must be obeyed to avoid pain or discomfort. This moral perspective is characterized by heteronomy, meaning that moral rules are viewed as external constraints imposed by others, lacking any internal motivation or justification. This stage is highly reflective of the child's limited cognitive capacity to engage in perspective-taking, resulting in a worldview where the most important consideration is the sheer physical power wielded by the enforcer of the rules.

Moral reasoning at Stage 1 is inherently simplistic and focused on survival and immediate safety. For instance, when presented with the Heinz dilemma (should Heinz steal the drug to save his wife?), a child reasoning at Stage 1 will argue against the theft not because stealing is inherently wrong or violates social trust, but because Heinz might get caught and go to jail. The size of the expected punishment dictates the degree of perceived wrongness. Conversely, they might argue for the theft only if the punishment for letting the wife die (perhaps a scolding from a parent or loss of affection) is perceived as worse than the punishment for stealing. This demonstrates a complete disregard for the overarching ethical principles of justice or compassion, prioritizing instead a raw calculation of personal risk. This fundamental reliance on external deterrence highlights why detailed evaluation of Stage 1 responses is necessary: it establishes the essential cognitive baseline from which all subsequent, more complex forms of moral thought must emerge through cognitive conflict and social interaction.

The transition away from the rigidity of Stage 1 is spurred by the child's growing awareness that different authorities hold different viewpoints and that rules are not always enforced consistently or fairly. However, while operating firmly within Stage 1, the child demonstrates a profound deference to power. They are unable to distinguish between moral value and fear of retribution. This

orientation is highly dependent on the consistency of the external environment; if punishment is inconsistent, the moral rule itself loses meaning, leading to behavioral variability, not moral development. Therefore, educators and parents dealing with individuals at this stage must provide **clear, immediate, and consistent consequences** to establish the link between behavior and outcome, creating the necessary structure for the child to begin recognizing predictable patterns in the moral universe. This early, externalized structure is the precursor to the development of internalized moral standards that define the Conventional Level.

## Stage 2: Individualism, Instrumentalism, and Exchange

The second stage within the Preconventional Level is the **Individualism and Exchange Orientation**, also frequently referred to as the instrumental-relativist or "marketplace exchange" stage. This stage marks a subtle but significant cognitive advancement from Stage 1, moving away from blind obedience toward a pragmatic recognition of self-interest. While still profoundly egocentric, the individual now understands that rules can be followed not just to avoid punishment, but specifically to gain rewards or satisfy personal needs. Morality is defined by what is fair in a reciprocal, although not genuinely loyal, sense--it operates on a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" mentality. Actions are deemed right if they serve one's own instrumental purposes, and the needs of others are considered only insofar as they align with or facilitate the satisfaction of one's own desires.

In Stage 2, the concept of reciprocity emerges, but it is applied in a purely pragmatic, transactional manner, devoid of genuine empathy or commitment to social obligation. It is not about loyalty or justice in the conventional sense; it is a calculation of benefit. If an individual helps another, it is done with the explicit or implicit expectation of receiving a favor in return. For example, regarding the Heinz dilemma, a Stage 2 individual might argue that Heinz should steal the drug only because his wife might do something nice for him later, or because he needs her to perform household chores for him. Conversely, they might argue against the theft if they believe that the potential jail time would prevent Heinz from fulfilling his own immediate needs or goals. The key distinction from Stage 1 is the recognition that rules are relative and can be negotiated or applied differently based on the situation, provided the outcome benefits the self. This marks the beginning of the realization that different people have different interests, although the self's interests remain paramount.

The advancement from Stage 1 to Stage 2 is predicated on the child's increasing ability to recognize the multiplicity of perspectives, even if those perspectives are only used for self-serving manipulation or negotiation. The child begins to understand that authority figures are not the only ones capable of imposing sanctions or offering rewards; peers and other individuals can also be instrumental in fulfilling needs. This shift is crucial because it introduces the first elements of moral relativism, setting the stage for the complexity of the Conventional Level. Researchers focus heavily on discerning the nuances between Stage 2 reasoning and the early stages of the

Conventional Level (Stage 3), as both involve consideration of others. However, in Stage 2, this consideration is strictly conditional and instrumental, whereas Stage 3 introduces genuine concern for interpersonal harmony and social approval, moving beyond mere exchange to emotional loyalty and relational concern. This careful parsing of responses is central to the ongoing efforts to establish more rigorous and in-depth forms of Kohlberg's scoring methodology.

## The Egocentric Nature and Cognitive Limitations

The defining feature of the entire Preconventional Level is its profound **egocentrism**. Moral reasoning is confined entirely to the individual's immediate needs and the direct, physical impact of external forces. The individual lacks the requisite cognitive ability to adopt a generalized societal perspective or to understand the abstract concept of societal norms, collective welfare, or the rule of law. This limitation is tied directly to the developmental milestones of childhood, particularly the limitations in cognitive structures described by Piaget, such as centration and the difficulty with decentration--the ability to simultaneously consider multiple aspects of a situation or multiple viewpoints. Consequently, the child at the Preconventional Level cannot grasp the idea of a social contract or the necessity of universal rules that benefit an entire community, as their focus remains narrowed to "what affects me right now."

The cognitive prerequisite for transitioning out of the Preconventional Level involves the acquisition of advanced role-taking skills. Kohlberg emphasized that moral development is intrinsically linked to the ability to take on the perspective of others and understand how one's actions affect them. At Stages 1 and 2, this skill is either non-existent or utilized only instrumentally. In Stage 1, the child views the world only through their own fear of punishment, treating others as mere extensions of authority. In Stage 2, the child sees others as potential resources or obstacles, evaluating their perspectives only to better manipulate the exchange process. True moral progression requires moving beyond this limited, self-centered utility calculation toward genuine empathy and recognition of shared humanity, which necessitates the cognitive leap required to enter the Conventional Level and its focus on interpersonal relationships and societal expectations.

The persistence of Preconventional reasoning beyond the typical childhood age range often signifies developmental delays or, in some adult contexts, moral regression driven by extreme stress or institutional environments. While it is expected that the vast majority of adolescents and adults operate at or above the Conventional Level, understanding the basic structure of Preconventional thought is vital for clinical and educational psychology. It provides the necessary metric for assessing whether an individual is capable of understanding rules as normative social constructs rather than simply externally enforced prohibitions. The detailed analysis of these egocentric responses, therefore, serves a critical diagnostic function, aiding researchers in establishing a clearer picture of the trajectory of moral growth and identifying points where intervention might be necessary to foster cognitive decentration and moral maturation.

## Developmental Manifestations and Transitional Dynamics

The Preconventional Level is most commonly manifested during the preschool years and early elementary schooling, typically spanning ages four through ten. However, it is essential to recognize that Kohlberg's stages are defined by the underlying reasoning structure, not by chronological age alone, meaning that the boundaries are fluid and some individuals may exhibit Preconventional reasoning structures in specific domains well into adolescence or adulthood. The transition from Stage 1 to Stage 2 is generally facilitated by increased peer interaction and the subsequent recognition that authority figures are not the sole source of punishment or reward, leading to the instrumental bargaining characteristic of Stage 2. The critical transition, however, occurs when the individual begins to question the sufficiency of purely self-serving logic and starts valuing relationships and social approval.

The impetus for moving from the Preconventional Level to the Conventional Level (Stage 3: Good Boy/Good Girl Orientation) is often rooted in the child's increasing capacity for empathy and their desire for social acceptance. Once a child recognizes that maintaining positive relationships and earning the approval of significant others--such as family, teachers, and peers--is more valuable and consistently rewarding than merely avoiding punishment or striking simple deals, their moral reasoning structures begin to reorganize. This transition requires the cognitive capacity to engage in sophisticated role-taking, allowing the individual to view actions through the lens of group expectations and shared emotional bonds. The child must move from asking, "Will I get punished?" or "What's in it for me?" to asking, "What does my group expect of a good person?" or "How will this affect our relationship?" This shift is fundamentally a change from external control to nascent internal motivation based on social connectivity.

Researchers evaluating the efficacy and universality of Kohlberg's theory frequently examine these transitional responses to ensure the structural integrity of the model. When a subject provides a response that contains elements of both Stage 2 (instrumental exchange) and Stage 3 (interpersonal accord), it necessitates careful scrutiny to determine the predominant mode of reasoning, which is pivotal for accurately placing the individual within the developmental sequence. This focus on the transitional dynamics is precisely what is meant by the continuous effort to establish "further, and more in-depth forms" of the theory, ensuring that the scoring criteria accurately reflect the subtle cognitive shifts that define moral growth. The stability of the Preconventional baseline is crucial because it provides the essential contrast against which all higher forms of moral sophistication are measured.

## Critiques and Limitations of Preconventional Analysis

While the Preconventional Level provides a robust framework for understanding early moral thought, it has been subjected to significant critique, particularly regarding its foundational

assumptions and its applicability across diverse populations. One primary critique centers on the claim of **cognitive structuralism**: whether the responses of very young children truly represent moral reasoning or are merely behavioral reactions based on conditioning and association. Critics argue that attributing a structured "stage" to a young child who simply avoids touching a hot stove because of prior pain may over-intellectualize what is essentially a stimulus-response mechanism, blurring the line between moral judgment and simple prudence or self-preservation behavior. This debate challenges the depth of the "moral" reasoning inherent in Stages 1 and 2.

Furthermore, the general criticism leveled against Kohlberg's theory regarding its cultural specificity and gender bias also touches upon the Preconventional Level. While the structure of self-interest (Stage 2) may appear universal, the specific content of what constitutes a reward or punishment is highly culturally dependent. For instance, in highly communal cultures, the concept of "punishment" may involve group exclusion or shame rather than individual physical penalty, potentially altering the interpretation of Stage 1 responses. More famously, Carol Gilligan critiqued Kohlberg for focusing exclusively on a "justice orientation," arguing that a "care orientation" might manifest differently, even at the earliest stages. While the justice focus on rules and consequences is most salient at the Preconventional Level, a care-based approach might prioritize the avoidance of harm to others, even if the actor risks personal punishment, a nuance that Kohlberg's initial scoring system may overlook.

These critiques underscore the necessity for continuous evaluation and refinement of the Preconventional framework. The original content's emphasis on establishing "more in-depth forms of Kohlberg's theory" directly addresses the need to clarify whether the Preconventional stages are universally applicable in the same way, or if they require cultural adaptation in the scoring of specific moral responses. Contemporary research continues to explore the neurocognitive underpinnings of early moral judgment, seeking to validate whether the shift from purely reward/punishment calculation to social consideration is supported by corresponding changes in brain function related to empathy and risk assessment. Ensuring the scoring criteria accurately reflect the boundary between simple fear (Stage 1) and instrumental bargaining (Stage 2) is crucial for maintaining the theoretical integrity of the entire developmental progression.

## Educational and Social Implications

Understanding the Preconventional Level holds significant implications for educational practices, particularly in primary schooling and behavioral management. Since children operating at Stage 1 and Stage 2 respond primarily to extrinsic motivation, effective discipline and instruction must be structured around clear, predictable consequences. Educators must avoid relying on abstract moralizing or appeals to societal duty, which are conceptually inaccessible to children reasoning preconventionally. Instead, rules should be presented as definite, immutable requirements tied directly to immediate and understandable outcomes--rewards for compliance and swift, logical

punishments for transgression. The language used should emphasize the specific action and consequence, rather than the generalized moral character of the child.

The primary goal of educational intervention, once the Preconventional Level is identified, is to facilitate the transition to the Conventional Level. This is achieved through deliberate strategies designed to foster cognitive decentration and role-taking abilities. Activities that encourage children to consider situations from another person's viewpoint, such as complex cooperative play, group problem-solving, and structured discussions of hypothetical dilemmas, are essential. By exposing children to differing perspectives and encouraging them to articulate how their actions affect the feelings and needs of others, educators create the necessary cognitive dissonance that challenges the sufficiency of purely self-interested reasoning. This process helps the child shift their focus from external consequences to internal relationship maintenance and social approval, which are the hallmarks of Stage 3.

In social policy and legal contexts, particularly regarding juvenile justice, the recognition of Preconventional reasoning is also highly relevant. When juvenile offenders exhibit reasoning patterns dominated by Stage 1 or Stage 2 logic, their responses often center on avoiding immediate physical sanctions rather than expressing genuine remorse or understanding the societal harm caused by their actions. This recognition informs the design of rehabilitation programs, which must first aim to elevate the moral reasoning structure before expecting internalized adherence to complex laws or ethical standards. The ongoing, in-depth evaluation of Preconventional responses therefore remains a critical component of applied psychology, enabling the development of targeted interventions that successfully guide individuals toward mature forms of moral deliberation based on internalized principles rather than external threats.