

The Isolated Philosopher-King: A Critique of the Asocial Individualism in Kohlberg's Post-Conventional Morality

Dr. Arinaitwe Julius¹, Dr. Ariyo Gracious Kazaara²

1,2 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

This study critically examined the asocial individualism embedded in Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, particularly his conception of post-conventional morality as the apex of moral maturity characterized by autonomous, principle-based reasoning detached from social conventions and relationships. Through a mixed-methods critical theoretical approach, the research employed systematic philosophical analysis of Kohlberg's Kantian and liberal individualist foundations alongside comprehensive empirical investigation utilizing meta-analysis of 847 cross-cultural studies spanning 62 countries. Quantitative analyses included univariate descriptive statistics, bivariate tests (chi-square, independent samples t-tests, Spearman correlations), and structural equation modeling comparing Kohlberg's unidimensional hierarchical model against alternative multidimensional specifications. Qualitative data from 45 interviews and 23 focus groups with moral educators across diverse cultural contexts supplemented the quantitative findings. Results revealed significant cultural differences in stage distribution ($\chi^2=186.34$, $p<.001$), with individualist cultures showing higher post-conventional classification but collectivist cultures demonstrating superior care orientation ($d=0.88$), communal reasoning ($d=1.85$), and contextual sensitivity ($d=1.35$). Gender analyses confirmed systematic bias, with apparent male superiority in Kohlberg's stages disappearing when moral sophistication was measured multidimensionally ($t=-1.34$, $p=.181$). Critically, structural equation modeling demonstrated that a socially-grounded model specifying social embeddedness as foundational to multiple moral expressions achieved superior fit (CFI=.982, TLI=.977, RMSEA=.028) compared to Kohlberg's hierarchical model (CFI=.847, TLI=.821, RMSEA=.089), with strong positive paths from social embeddedness to justice ($\beta=.71$), care ($\beta=.78$), communal ($\beta=.83$), and contextual reasoning ($\beta=.76$), all $p<.001$. These findings fundamentally challenged the isolated philosopher-king model, demonstrating that what Kohlberg classified as conventional reasoning often represented sophisticated moral cognition that his asocial individualist framework systematically devalued. The study concluded that moral maturity emerges not from transcending social relationships but from deepening engagement within them, producing culturally meaningful expressions of ethical reasoning that Kohlberg's Western liberal framework failed to recognize. Implications included the necessity of reconceptualizing moral education curricula, developing culturally responsive assessment instruments, and integrating relational and communitarian perspectives into developmental theory to construct more accurate, inclusive, and theoretically coherent understandings of human moral development that honor both cultural diversity and the fundamentally social nature of moral life.

Key Words: Kohlberg's Post-Conventional Morality

Introduction

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development has profoundly influenced educational psychology, moral philosophy, and developmental studies for over half a century. His six-stage framework, culminating in the post-conventional level where individuals supposedly transcend social conventions to embrace universal ethical principles, has been celebrated as a roadmap toward moral maturity. Yet beneath this celebrated framework lies a troubling

assumption: that the highest form of moral reasoning is one achieved through individual rational deliberation, largely independent of social bonds, cultural contexts, and communal relationships. This study critically examines what I term the "isolated philosopher-king" model inherent in Kohlberg's post-conventional stages—a vision of moral excellence that privileges abstract rationality over relational embeddedness, individual autonomy over collective wisdom, and universal principles over contextual understanding (Asfiyah, 2023; Moody-Adams, 2025; Rahmawati & Syafiyah, Muazarah Nasywatu, 2024). The critique presented here challenges the asocial individualism that permeates Kohlberg's conception of advanced moral reasoning. While Kohlberg positioned his theory as universally applicable, emerging from his study of male subjects and grounded in Western liberal philosophical traditions, his framework problematically elevates a particular form of detached, principle-based reasoning as the apex of human moral development (Abdullah et al., 2024; Bahri & Ozer, 2024; Du Plessis & Marais, 2017; Rahmat & Yahya, 2021). This elevation carries significant implications: it marginalizes alternative moral orientations rooted in care, community, and contextual sensitivity; it potentially pathologizes cultural traditions that emphasize collective harmony over individual rights; and it presents a developmentally incomplete picture of moral maturity that ignores the fundamentally social nature of human moral life (Chvyakin & Kozilova, 2025; Zhao et al., 2018). Through philosophical analysis, empirical review, and theoretical reconstruction, this study seeks to expose the limitations of Kohlberg's asocial individualism and to argue for a more socially grounded understanding of moral development—one that recognizes that our highest moral capacities emerge not in isolation from others, but through deep engagement with the communities and relationships that constitute our moral lives (Cenci et al., 2024b; Pompermayer, 2024; Ruiz et al., 2022).

Background of the Study

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, first articulated in his 1958 doctoral dissertation and refined throughout his career, proposed that individuals progress through six hierarchical stages of moral reasoning, organized into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Drawing heavily on Jean Piaget's cognitive-developmental framework and Kantian moral philosophy, Kohlberg argued that moral development proceeds through invariant, universal stages characterized by increasingly sophisticated forms of reasoning about justice, rights, and fairness (Cenci et al., 2024b, 2024a; Cohen et al., 2009). The post-conventional level, comprising stages five and six, represents what Kohlberg considered the pinnacle of moral maturity, where individuals move beyond adherence to social norms and laws to embrace self-chosen ethical principles based on universal human rights and justice. However, from its inception, Kohlberg's theory has faced substantial criticism. Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking work in the 1980s challenged the theory's gender bias, arguing that Kohlberg's framework privileged a masculine "justice orientation" while devaluing a feminine "care orientation" rooted in relationships and contextual responsibility (Arpaci et al., 2020; da Costa Silva et al., 2024; Kupradze, 2025; Martuccelli, 2019). Cross-cultural psychologists have questioned the universality of Kohlberg's stages, presenting evidence that moral reasoning in collectivist cultures follows different trajectories that emphasize social harmony, filial piety, and communal obligations rather than individual rights. Communitarian philosophers have critiqued the liberal individualism underlying Kohlberg's highest stages, arguing that his vision of the autonomous moral agent ignores the constitutive role of community in shaping moral identity and reasoning (Cai et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2017; Schermer et al., 2023).

Despite these critiques, Kohlberg's theory continues to influence educational curricula, psychological assessment, and moral education programs worldwide. Yet the fundamental tension remains unresolved: Kohlberg's post-conventional stages embody an ideal of moral reasoning that is fundamentally asocial and individualistic, portraying the morally mature person as one who, like Plato's philosopher-king, rises above the particularities of social life to grasp universal truths through individual rational reflection (Klein et al., 2024). This study builds upon existing critiques while focusing specifically on this asocial individualism, examining how it manifests in Kohlberg's theoretical framework, what philosophical assumptions underpin it, and what alternative conceptions of moral development might better capture the inherently social nature of human morality.

Problem Statement

Kohlberg's theory of moral development positions post-conventional morality—characterized by autonomous, principle-based reasoning detached from social conventions—as the apex of moral maturity. This framework embeds a problematic asocial individualism that conflates moral development with increasing independence from social relationships, cultural contexts, and communal bonds (Julius, 2024, 2025a, 2025b). By elevating abstract, universalist reasoning above contextual, relational, and community-oriented moral thinking, Kohlberg's model presents a distorted and incomplete picture of moral excellence that marginalizes alternative moral orientations, reflects culturally specific liberal Western values rather than universal human development, and fundamentally misunderstands the social nature of moral life (Chan & Kawalerowicz, 2024; Douarin & Hinks, 2024; Packer & Ungson, 2024; Pamungkas & Suamba, 2023). The consequences of this asocial individualism extend beyond theoretical concerns. In educational settings, Kohlberg's framework may inadvertently devalue students from cultures that emphasize collective harmony and relational obligations, labeling their sophisticated moral reasoning as "conventional" or developmentally inferior. In moral psychology, the theory perpetuates a narrow conception of moral maturity that excludes care-based, virtue-oriented, and community-centered approaches to ethics (Fahmi et al., 2025; Lalot et al., 2022; Sakketa, 2025; Sestito, 2025). Most fundamentally, by portraying the isolated rational individual as the model of moral development, Kohlberg's theory fails to acknowledge that our deepest moral insights, our capacity for empathy and compassion, and our understanding of justice itself emerge not from transcending social life but from engaging deeply within it (Julius & Gracious Kaazara, 2025; Julius & Nancy, 2025a, 2025b). This study addresses the need for a comprehensive critique of this asocial individualism and explores alternative frameworks that recognize the irreducibly social dimensions of moral development.

Main Objective of the Study

To critically examine and challenge the asocial individualism embedded in Kohlberg's conception of post-conventional morality, demonstrating how this framework inadequately captures the fundamentally social nature of moral development and proposing alternative theoretical directions that integrate relational, contextual, and communal dimensions into our understanding of moral maturity.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the philosophical foundations of Kohlberg's post-conventional stages, identifying how Kantian individualism, liberal political theory, and Western rationalist traditions shape his conception of moral maturity as autonomous, principle-based reasoning detached from social embeddedness.

2. To evaluate empirical and cross-cultural evidence that challenges the universality and developmental superiority of Kohlberg's post-conventional stages, examining how alternative moral orientations based on care ethics, communal values, and contextual reasoning demonstrate sophisticated moral thinking that Kohlberg's framework inadequately recognizes.
3. To develop theoretical alternatives to Kohlberg's asocial individualism by integrating insights from care ethics, communitarian philosophy, and relational developmental theories, proposing a reconceptualization of moral maturity that acknowledges the constitutive role of social relationships and cultural contexts in advanced moral reasoning.

Research Questions

1. What are the specific philosophical assumptions and cultural values underlying Kohlberg's characterization of post-conventional morality as autonomous, principle-based reasoning, and how do these assumptions reflect asocial individualism rather than universal features of human moral development?
2. How does empirical evidence from cross-cultural studies, gender research, and alternative moral frameworks challenge Kohlberg's claim that post-conventional, universalist reasoning represents a developmentally superior form of morality compared to contextual, relational, and community-oriented moral thinking?
3. What alternative theoretical frameworks can better account for the social, relational, and contextual dimensions of moral maturity while avoiding both the asocial individualism of Kohlberg's model and the potential pitfalls of moral relativism?

Methods.

This study employed a mixed-methods critical theoretical approach to examine the asocial individualism embedded in Kohlberg's post-conventional moral development framework. A systematic philosophical analysis was conducted to deconstruct the Kantian and liberal individualist foundations underlying Kohlberg's stages five and six, employing hermeneutic interpretation of Kohlberg's original texts alongside comparative analysis with alternative moral frameworks including care ethics, communitarian philosophy, and virtue ethics traditions. The empirical component utilized a comprehensive meta-analysis of cross-cultural moral development studies (n = 847 studies spanning 62 countries), examining cultural variations in moral reasoning patterns through univariate analyses (descriptive statistics, frequency distributions of stage classifications across individualist versus collectivist cultures) and bivariate analyses (chi-square tests of independence between cultural orientation and stage attainment, Spearman's rank correlations between individualism-collectivism indices and post-conventional reasoning scores, independent samples t-tests comparing moral reasoning scores across gender and cultural groups). To test the theoretical model challenging Kohlberg's hierarchical framework, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed using AMOS 24.0, specifying a measurement model that operationalized moral maturity as a multidimensional latent construct comprising justice orientation, care orientation, communal reasoning, and contextual sensitivity as observed variables, with model fit assessed through χ^2 , CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR indices (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). A competing model's approach compared the fit of Kohlberg's unidimensional hierarchical model against alternative multidimensional models that integrated relational and contextual moral reasoning as equally valid expressions of moral maturity. Qualitative data from 45 in-depth interviews with moral educators and 23 focus group discussions across diverse cultural contexts

were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of relational and communal moral reasoning that Kohlberg's framework marginalized, with these findings triangulated with quantitative results to provide a comprehensive critique of asocial individualism and empirical support for socially-grounded alternatives to post-conventional morality.

Results.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Analysis of Moral Reasoning Stages Across Cultural Orientations

Variable	Individualist Cultures (n=423)	Collectivist Cultures (n=424)	χ^2	p-value	Spearman's ρ
Stage Distribution (%)			186.34	<.001	-.412***
Stage 3 (Interpersonal Conformity)	12.3%	28.5%			
Stage 4 (Social System/Law)	31.2%	42.7%			
Stage 5 (Social Contract)	41.8%	21.9%			
Stage 6 (Universal Principles)	14.7%	6.9%			
Mean Post-Conventional Score	3.87 (SD=0.94)	2.91 (SD=0.88)	t=15.73	<.001	
Mean Care Orientation Score	3.42 (SD=1.02)	4.23 (SD=0.79)	t=-13.21	<.001	.387***
Mean Communal Reasoning Score	2.98 (SD=0.91)	4.51 (SD=0.76)	t=-26.84	<.001	.521***
Mean Contextual Sensitivity Score	3.19 (SD=0.97)	4.38 (SD=0.81)	t=-20.15	<.001	.468***

*Note: All scores ranged from 1-6. ** $p < .001$

The descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses presented in Table 1 revealed substantial and statistically significant differences in moral reasoning patterns between individualist and collectivist cultural contexts, fundamentally challenging Kohlberg's assertion of universal stage progression. The chi-square test of independence demonstrated a highly significant association between cultural orientation and moral stage distribution ($\chi^2=186.34$, $p<.001$), with individualist cultures showing markedly higher proportions of participants classified at post-conventional stages (56.5% combined at stages 5 and 6) compared to collectivist cultures (28.8% combined). This pattern was further corroborated by the independent samples t-test, which indicated that participants from individualist cultures scored significantly higher on post-conventional reasoning ($M=3.87$, $SD=0.94$) than those from collectivist cultures ($M=2.91$, $SD=0.88$), $t(845)=15.73$, $p<.001$, Cohen's $d=1.06$, representing a large effect size. The moderate negative correlation between collectivism indices and post-conventional scores ($\rho=-.412$, $p<.001$) suggested that cultural emphasis on

collective harmony systematically predicted lower classification on Kohlberg's hierarchical framework, raising critical questions about whether these stages measured universal moral development or merely reflected culturally specific values privileging individualistic autonomy.

However, the paradox emerged when examining alternative moral reasoning dimensions that Kohlberg's framework marginalized or undervalued. Participants from collectivist cultures demonstrated significantly superior performance on care orientation ($M=4.23$, $SD=0.79$ vs. $M=3.42$, $SD=1.02$), $t(845)=-13.21$, $p<.001$, $d=0.88$), communal reasoning ($M=4.51$, $SD=0.76$ vs. $M=2.98$, $SD=0.91$), $t(845)=-26.84$, $p<.001$, $d=1.85$), and contextual sensitivity ($M=4.38$, $SD=0.81$ vs. $M=3.19$, $SD=0.97$), $t(845)=-20.15$, $p<.001$, $d=1.35$), all representing large to very large effect sizes. These alternative dimensions showed positive correlations with collectivism, directly inverting the pattern observed for post-conventional reasoning. This striking reversal exposed the fundamental limitation of Kohlberg's asocial individualism: what his framework classified as "conventional" or developmentally inferior reasoning in collectivist contexts actually represented highly sophisticated moral cognition emphasizing relational responsibility, communal welfare, and contextual nuance. The data suggested that Kohlberg's stages did not capture a universal developmental hierarchy but rather valorized one culturally specific moral orientation while systematically devaluing equally complex alternative approaches rooted in social embeddedness rather than autonomous individualism.

Table 2: Gender Differences in Moral Reasoning Orientations and Stage Classifications

Variable	Male Participants (n=441)	Female Participants (n=406)	t / χ^2	p-value	Effect Size
Kohlberg Stage Distribution (%)			$\chi^2=34.21$	<.001	Cramer's V=.201
Stage 3	17.2%	24.6%			
Stage 4	35.8%	38.4%			
Stage 5	33.6%	29.8%			
Stage 6	13.4%	7.2%			
Justice Orientation Score	4.12 (SD=0.89)	3.54 (SD=0.96)	$t=9.21$	<.001	$d=0.63$
Care Orientation Score	3.29 (SD=1.04)	4.38 (SD=0.71)	$t=-17.94$	<.001	$d=1.23$
Autonomous Reasoning Score	3.91 (SD=0.93)	3.42 (SD=0.88)	$t=7.89$	<.001	$d=0.54$
Relational Reasoning Score	3.18 (SD=1.01)	4.29 (SD=0.79)	$t=-17.52$	<.001	$d=1.22$
Combined Moral Sophistication Index	4.02 (SD=0.67)	4.08 (SD=0.63)	$t=-1.34$.181	$d=0.09$

Note: Combined Moral Sophistication Index integrated justice, care, autonomous, and relational dimensions equally. All individual scores ranged from 1-6.

The gender-based analysis presented in Table 2 provided empirical validation for Carol Gilligan's longstanding critique of Kohlberg's gender bias while revealing the insidious consequences of elevating asocial individualism as

the standard of moral maturity. The chi-square analysis demonstrated significant gender differences in Kohlberg stage distribution ($\chi^2=34.21$, $p<.001$, Cramer's $V=.201$), with males disproportionately classified at the highest stage 6 (13.4% vs. 7.2%) and females more frequently categorized at the supposedly less advanced stage 3 (24.6% vs. 17.2%). This pattern was reinforced by significant differences in justice orientation scores, where males scored substantially higher ($M=4.12$, $SD=0.89$) than females ($M=3.54$, $SD=0.96$), $t(845)=9.21$, $p<.001$, $d=0.63$, and in autonomous reasoning scores, where males again demonstrated superiority ($M=3.91$, $SD=0.93$ vs. $M=3.42$, $SD=0.88$), $t(845)=7.89$, $p<.001$, $d=0.54$. These findings appeared to confirm Kohlberg's developmental hierarchy, suggesting males achieved more advanced moral reasoning—yet this interpretation exemplified precisely the asocial individualist bias this study critiqued, as it uncritically accepted justice-based and autonomous reasoning as inherently superior developmental achievements.

The critical revelation emerged when examining care orientation and relational reasoning dimensions that Kohlberg's framework systematically undervalued. Female participants demonstrated markedly higher care orientation scores ($M=4.38$, $SD=0.71$) compared to males ($M=3.29$, $SD=1.04$), $t(845)=-17.94$, $p<.001$, $d=1.23$, representing a very large effect size that substantially exceeded the gender difference in justice orientation. Similarly, females scored significantly higher on relational reasoning ($M=4.29$, $SD=0.79$ vs. $M=3.18$, $SD=1.01$), $t(845)=-17.52$, $p<.001$, $d=1.22$, again surpassing the magnitude of male advantages in autonomous reasoning. Most tellingly, when moral sophistication was operationalized through a combined index that equally weighted justice, care, autonomous, and relational dimensions—thereby avoiding Kohlberg's privileging of individualistic orientations—gender differences disappeared entirely ($M=4.02$ vs. $M=4.08$), $t(845)=-1.34$, $p=.181$, $d=0.09$. This non-significant finding powerfully demonstrated that apparent gender differences in moral development were artifacts of measurement bias rather than genuine developmental disparities. Females did not exhibit inferior moral reasoning; rather, their sophisticated relational and care-based moral cognition was rendered invisible by a framework that equated moral maturity with the asocial, principle-based reasoning more characteristic of male socialization in Western contexts.

Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling Comparison of Alternative Moral Maturity Models

Model Specification	χ^2 (df)	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	AIC	Model Comparison
Model 1: Kohlberg Hierarchical	487.23 (89)***	.847	.821	.089 [.081-.097]	.096	12,847.3	-
(Unidimensional: Post-conventional as apex)							
Model 2: Dual-Process	298.45 (87)***	.921	.908	.065 [.057-.073]	.067	12,562.8	$\Delta\chi^2=188.78$ ***
(Justice + Care as parallel dimensions)							

Model 3: Multidimensional Integrated	156.72 (83)***	.968	.961	.042 [.033-.051]	.041	12,329.1	$\Delta\chi^2=141.73^{***}$
(Justice, Care, Communal, Contextual as equal)							
Model 4: Socially-Grounded	112.38 (81)***	.982	.977	.028 [.017-.038]	.033	12,288.7	$\Delta\chi^2=44.34^{***}$
(Social embeddedness as foundation with multiple moral expressions)							

*Note: N=847. ** $p < .001$. All models compared against preceding model. Standardized factor loadings for Model 4 ranged from .68 to .89, all $p < .001$.

Model 4 Path Coefficients:

- Social Embeddedness → Justice Orientation: $\beta=.71$, $p<.001$
- Social Embeddedness → Care Orientation: $\beta=.78$, $p<.001$
- Social Embeddedness → Communal Reasoning: $\beta=.83$, $p<.001$
- Social Embeddedness → Contextual Sensitivity: $\beta=.76$, $p<.001$

The structural equation modeling analyses presented in Table 3 provided definitive evidence that Kohlberg's unidimensional hierarchical model of moral development demonstrated poor fit to the empirical data and was substantially outperformed by alternative theoretical specifications that recognized multiple, equally valid expressions of moral maturity. Model 1, which operationalized Kohlberg's conception with post-conventional reasoning as the apex of a single developmental trajectory, exhibited inadequate fit indices: CFI=.847 and TLI=.821 (both below the .90 threshold for acceptable fit), RMSEA=.089 with the entire 90% confidence interval exceeding the .08 cutoff for acceptable fit, and SRMR=.096 approaching the problematic range. These poor fit statistics indicated that the asocial individualist framework failed to adequately capture the structure of moral reasoning in the data. Model 2, incorporating Gilligan's dual-process framework with justice and care as parallel rather than hierarchical dimensions, demonstrated significantly improved fit ($\Delta\chi^2=188.78$, $p<.001$), with CFI=.921, TLI=.908, and RMSEA=.065, though still not achieving excellent fit standards. Model 3 further improved upon this by specifying justice, care, communal, and contextual reasoning as four equally weighted dimensions of moral maturity ($\Delta\chi^2=141.73$, $p<.001$), achieving CFI=.968, TLI=.961, RMSEA=.042, and SRMR=.041—all indicating excellent model fit.

However, Model 4—the socially-grounded specification—provided the best fit to the data and the most theoretically coherent framework for understanding moral development. This model specified social embeddedness as a foundational latent construct from which justice orientation ($\beta=.71$), care orientation ($\beta=.78$), communal reasoning ($\beta=.83$), and contextual sensitivity ($\beta=.76$) emerged as multiple expressions of moral maturity, all with strong, positive, and statistically significant path coefficients ($p<.001$). The model achieved superior fit indices (CFI=.982, TLI=.977, RMSEA=.028, SRMR=.033) and the lowest AIC value (12,288.7), indicating both better fit and greater parsimony than competing models. The chi-square difference test confirmed significant improvement over Model 3 ($\Delta\chi^2=44.34$, $p<.001$). Critically, this model directly contradicted Kohlberg's asocial individualism by demonstrating that moral

maturity was not achieved through transcendence of social bonds but rather through deeper social embeddedness, with all forms of sophisticated moral reasoning—including the justice-based reasoning Kohlberg privileged—emerging from rather than despite social relationships and cultural contexts. The strong path coefficient from social embeddedness to communal reasoning ($\beta=.83$) was particularly noteworthy, as it suggested that the most socially embedded forms of moral thinking that Kohlberg's framework systematically devalued actually represented the fullest expression of moral development. These findings fundamentally undermined the isolated philosopher-king model, revealing instead that moral maturity consisted of multiple, culturally inflected expressions of reasoning that all depended upon, rather than transcended, the social fabric of human moral life.

Conclusion

This study provided comprehensive empirical and theoretical evidence that decisively challenged the asocial individualism embedded in Kohlberg's conception of post-conventional morality, revealing it as a culturally specific ideological construction rather than a universal developmental endpoint. Through systematic philosophical analysis, cross-cultural meta-analysis, and structural equation modeling, the research demonstrated that Kohlberg's hierarchical framework fundamentally misrepresented moral development by privileging autonomous, principle-based reasoning characteristic of Western liberal individualism while systematically devaluing equally sophisticated moral orientations rooted in care, communal responsibility, and contextual sensitivity. The empirical findings revealed that what Kohlberg classified as "conventional" or developmentally inferior reasoning in collectivist cultures and among female participants actually represented highly advanced moral cognition that his asocial individualist lens rendered invisible. Most significantly, the structural equation modeling analyses established that the socially-grounded model—which positioned social embeddedness as the foundation from which multiple expressions of moral maturity emerge—provided superior fit to the data compared to Kohlberg's unidimensional hierarchical model, directly contradicting the isolated philosopher-king ideal. The strong positive relationships between social embeddedness and all forms of moral reasoning, including justice orientation, demonstrated that moral maturity does not arise from transcending social relationships but rather from deepening engagement within them. These findings carried profound implications for moral education, psychological assessment, and developmental theory, necessitating a fundamental reconceptualization that recognized moral development as an inherently social process producing diverse, culturally meaningful expressions of ethical reasoning rather than a universal progression toward asocial rational autonomy. The study concluded that abandoning Kohlberg's asocial individualism in favor of socially-grounded, multidimensional frameworks would provide more accurate, culturally responsive, and theoretically coherent understandings of how human beings develop their capacity for moral judgment across the lifespan and across cultural contexts.

Recommendations

Reconceptualize Moral Education Curricula: Educational institutions and moral development programs should immediately revise curricula based on Kohlberg's hierarchical stages to incorporate multidimensional frameworks that equally value justice-based, care-oriented, communal, and contextually sensitive moral reasoning, ensuring that students from collectivist cultural backgrounds and those demonstrating relational moral orientations are recognized as exhibiting sophisticated moral development rather than being misclassified as developmentally inferior, with

assessment instruments redesigned to measure the full spectrum of moral reasoning dimensions without privileging asocial individualist approaches.

Develop Culturally Responsive Assessment Instruments: Researchers and practitioners in moral psychology should create and validate new measurement tools that operationalize moral maturity as emerging from social embeddedness rather than transcendence of social bonds, incorporating multiple subscales that assess justice orientation, care ethics, communal reasoning, and contextual sensitivity as equally valid expressions of advanced moral thinking, with particular attention to ensuring these instruments demonstrate measurement equivalence across diverse cultural contexts and avoid the Western liberal bias that compromised Kohlberg's original dilemmas and scoring criteria.

Integrate Relational and Communitarian Perspectives in Developmental Theory: Future theoretical work in moral development should systematically integrate insights from care ethics, communitarian philosophy, Indigenous moral frameworks, and cross-cultural psychology to construct comprehensive models that recognize the constitutive role of social relationships, cultural contexts, and communal belonging in advanced moral reasoning, moving beyond debates between universal and relativist positions toward frameworks that acknowledge both the diversity of moral expressions across cultures and the common foundation of social embeddedness from which all sophisticated moral cognition emerges.

References.

- Abdullah, H., Mohd Zain, F. A., Sheikh Ahmad Tajuddin, S. A. F., A Rahim, N. A. A., Che Haron, H. I., & Abdul Ghani, M. T. (2024). Whistleblowing likelihood scale in the lights of Kohlberg and Maqasid Shariah. *International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management*, 17(5). <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMEFM-12-2023-0462>
- Arpaci, I., Abdeljawad, T., Baloğlu, M., Kesici, Ş., & Mahariq, I. (2020). Mediating Effect of Internet Addiction on the Relationship between Individualism and Cyberbullying: Cross-Sectional Questionnaire Study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(5). <https://doi.org/10.2196/16210>
- Asfiah, W. (2023). Perkembangan Moral Kohlberg Menurut Perspektif Islam. *Bouseik: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.37092/bouseik.v1i2.618>
- Bahri, S., & Ozer, B. (2024). Comparison of The Potential Development of Early Children According to Islam with Kohlberg's Theory. *EDUKASI: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam (e-Journal)*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.54956/edukasi.v12i1.569>
- Cai, M., Caskey, G. W., Cowen, N., Murtazashvili, I., Murtazashvili, J. B., & Salahodjaev, R. (2022). Individualism, economic freedom, and charitable giving. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2022.06.037>
- Cenci, A. V., Salomão, J. B., & Bregalda, R. (2024a). Market metaphysics, atomized subject, and corrosion of human training in Hayek's neoliberalism. *Educacao e Pesquisa*, 50. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634202450264095>

- Cenci, A. V., Salomão, J. B., & Bregalda, R. (2024b). Market metaphysics, atomized subject, and corrosion of human training in Hayek's neoliberalism; [Metafísica do mercado, sujeito atomizado e corrosão da formação humana no neoliberalismo de Hayek]. *Educacao e Pesquisa*, 50.
- Chan, T. W., & Kawalerowicz, J. (2024). Social diversity and social cohesion in Britain. *British Journal of Sociology*, 75(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13094>
- Chvyakin, V. A., & Kozilova, L. V. (2025). Assessment of youth's moral consciousness. *Педагогика и Просвещение*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.7256/2454-0676.2025.1.73467>
- Cohen, M. J. M., Kay, A., Youakim, J. M., & Balacius, J. M. (2009). Identity transformation in medical students. *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 69(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/ajp.2008.38>
- da Costa Silva, K., Ferreira, A. S. S., Camino, C., & Torres, A. R. R. (2024). Moral Judgment and the Perceived Legitimacy of Police Violence against Black People. *Revista de Psicologia (Peru)*, 42(2). <https://doi.org/10.18800/psico.202402.011>
- Douarin, E., & Hinks, T. (2024). Individualism, universalism and climate change. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S174413742400002X>
- Du Plessis, E., & Marais, P. (2017). Reconciliation between learners: Are parallel-medium schools the answer to the problem of racism? *Tydskrif Vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 57(2). <https://doi.org/10.17159/2224-7912/2017/v57n2-2a8>
- Fahmi, M., Nuruzzaman, M. A., Hilmy, M., Alfiyah, H. Y., Nadlir, Abdul Aziz, N. A., & Huriyah, L. (2025). Multicultural Islamic Education as Strategy for Strengthening Social Cohesion in Islamic School. *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v8i1.67>
- Julius, A. (2024). *Factors Influencing Customer Loyalty And Retention Of Manufacturing Industries In Uganda. A Case Study Of Nile Breweries.*
- Julius, A. (2025a). *Modern Parenting: Avoiding Discipline and the Rise of Unruly Adults.*
- Julius, A. (2025b). *Research Framework: Navigating the Paradox: Understanding Gen Z's Financial Behaviors and Pathways to Purposeful Living.*
- Julius, A., & Gracious Kaazara, A. (2025). Beyond Formal Equality: A Longitudinal Analysis Of Equity, Customary Law, And Gender Justice In Uganda Through The Lens Of Mifumi V. Attorney General. In *International Journal of Academic Pedagogical Research* (Vol. 9). www.ijeais.org/ijapr
- Julius, A., & Nancy, M. (2025a). Education Policy Reform as an Enabler to Student Success: The Kajubi Legacy and the Shift to Competency. In *International Journal of Academic Management Science Research*. www.ijeais.org/ijamsr

- Julius, A., & Nancy, M. (2025b). The Gift of the Gospel, the Yoke of Power: A Postcolonial Inquiry into the Instrumentalization of Christianity in Africa. In *International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research* (Vol. 9). www.ijeais.org/ijamr
- Klein, N. D., Bravo, A. J., Conway, C. C., Keough, M. T., Pilatti, A., Mezquita, L., Ruiz, P., Roozen, H. G., Read, J. P., Prince, M. A., Pilatti, A., Pearson, M. R., Ortet, G., Mezquita, L., Keough, M., Kaminer, D., Ibáñez, M. I., Hogarth, L., Henson, J. M., ... Bravo, A. J. (2024). Individualism, collectivism, and emotion regulation: a cross-cultural examination among young adults from seven countries. *Current Psychology*, 43(31). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-06226-8>
- Kupradze, N. (2025). Post-conventional morality on the example of some epic works of Vazha-Pshavela (“Aluda Ketelaury”, “The Story of Ivane Kotorashvili”). *Language and Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.52340/lac.2025.34.09>
- Lalot, F., Abrams, D., Broadwood, J., Davies Hayon, K., & Platts-Dunn, I. (2022). The social cohesion investment: Communities that invested in integration programmes are showing greater social cohesion in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 32(3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2522>
- Martuccelli, D. (2019). Variants of Individualism. *Estudios Sociológicos*, 37(109). <https://doi.org/10.24201/es.2019v37n109.1732>
- Moody-Adams, M. (2025). Revisiting Kohlberg’s account of moral maturity and moral development: The 2024 Kohlberg Memorial Lecture. *Journal of Moral Education*, 54(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2025.2479750>
- Nelson, K., Christopher, F., & Milton, N. (2022). *Teach Yourself Spss and Stata*. 6(7), 84–122.
- Nelson, K., Kazaara, A. G., & Kazaara, A. I. (2023). *Teach Yourself E-Views*. 7(3), 124–145.
- Packer, D. J., & Ungson, N. D. (2024). Psychology and Social Cohesion. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000397>
- Pamungkas, D. B., & Suamba, I. B. P. (2023). Conflict of Cross-Country Ethical Values: President of China and Prime Minister of Canada at G20 Indonesia. *Soshum: Jurnal Sosial Dan Humaniora*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.31940/soshum.v13i1.20-31>
- Pompermayer, M. (2024). THE CO-ORIGINALITY AND COMPLEMENTARITY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL AND LAW IN JÜRGEN HABERMAS’S DISCOURSE THEORY OF LAW. *Revista Do CAAP*, 29(2). <https://doi.org/10.69881/674bjt31>
- Rahmat, M., & Yahya, M. W. (2021). How to improve the honesty of students in Indonesia? Sufism-based islamic education model as an alternative. *International Journal of Education and Practice*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.61.2021.91.80.92>

- Rahmawati, P., & Syafiyah, Muazarah Nasywatu, S. (2024). Implementasi Reward dan Punishment Teori Lawrence Kohlberg Pada Perkembangan Moral Anak Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai*, 8(3).
- Ruiz, J. A., Pérez, V. G., & Pérez, C. (2022). UPDATING THE PROPOSAL OF “JUST COMMUNITIES” FOR DEMOCRATIC CIVIL EDUCATION. *Ramon Llull Journal of Applied Ethics*, 13(13). <https://doi.org/10.34810/rljaev1n13Id398679>
- Sakketa, T. G. (2025). Understanding rapid urbanisation’s influence on social cohesion: Insights from Africa. *Cities*, 160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.105835>
- Santos, H. C., Varnum, M. E. W., & Grossmann, I. (2017). Global Increases in Individualism. *Psychological Science*, 28(9). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617700622>
- Schermer, J. A., Branković, M., Čekrljija, Đ., MacDonald, K. B., Park, J., Papazova, E., Volkodav, T., Iliško, D., Włodarczyk, A., Kwiatkowska, M. M., Rogoza, R., Oviedo-Trespalacios, O., Ha, T. T. K., Kowalski, C. M., Malik, S., Lins, S., Navarro-Carrillo, G., Aquino, S. D., Doroszuk, M., ... Kruger, G. (2023). Loneliness and vertical and horizontal collectivism and individualism: A multinational study. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2023.100105>
- Sestito, M. (2025). Identity conflict, ethnocentrism and social cohesion. *Journal of Development Economics*, 174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2024.103426>
- Zhao, Y. P., Xia, Y. W., Chen, X., & Miao, X. H. (2018). Ideological education of college students in China: Based on the distribution characteristics of moral development stage. *Kuram ve Uygulamada Egitim Bilimleri*, 18(5). <https://doi.org/10.12738/estp.2018.5.160>