

Teaching Kohlberg's Levels of Moral Development: Using *Jojo Rabbit* to Highlight the Journey

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Abstract. This classroom exercise uses the movie *Jojo Rabbit* to teach students Kohlberg's three levels and six stages of moral development. This is a helpful way to teach the concept of moral development because it helps students to visualize the nature of each of the stages and how one might move through them. It is appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate classes in management principles, ethics, organizational behavior, and leadership. The exercise can be completed in a 60 or 90 minute class. Student feedback is very positive.

Keywords: ethics, moral development, virtue ethics, *Jojo Rabbit* film.

1. Introduction

Both employers and accrediting bodies have demanded increased emphasis on ethics in business curriculum (McAlister 2004) and business schools have responded accordingly. However, there remains considerable debate about the most effective methods and the most pertinent content to utilize. Along this vein, ethics programs are encouraged to help students become more aware of their own cognitive processes, biases, values and moral identity (Swanson and Dahler-Larsen 2008). One of the most influential theories regarding moral reasoning, Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (Kohlberg 1981), speaks to each of these issues.

2. Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Understanding the underlying drivers of ethical and unethical decision-making is an important component of corporate ethics (Treviño *et al.* 2014). A better understanding of one such driver, moral reasoning, and the maturity of a decision-maker's degree of moral reasoning are generally believed to help us understand why particular ethical or unethical business decisions are made (Cavanagh and

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Mitnick 2019). Albeit, not without its critics (e.g., Gilligan 1977; DeTienne *et al.* 2021; Weber 1991), most scholars would attest that Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development is one of the most predominant frameworks used to understand an individual's moral reasoning (Weber and McGivern 2010).

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development involves how an individual's moral reasoning evolves over one's life. Moral reasoning is an individual's rationale for determining whether an action is right or wrong. Through his research Kohlberg concluded that there are three levels of moral development with two stages at each level. As a person progresses levels/stages, their moral reasoning schema becomes more mature, complex, and reliable. Each of the six stages involves a specific and distinctive underlying logic. A further discussion about these three levels and six stages may be found in Appendix A, which provides an excellent class handout for the lecture and exercise.

3. Teaching Moral Development Using *Jojo Rabbit*

The class exercise we have developed uses scenes from the movie *Jojo Rabbit* (2019) to teach Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Film has long been recognized as a powerful teaching tool because of its motivational and illustrative properties. Management and related concepts such as ethics have been taught using movies as disparate as *Dead Poets Society* (Holbrook and Stoner 2021) and *Band of Brothers* (Stratton, Clayton, and Schaffer 2021). Champoux (2001) asserts that the strong caricatures in animated films can powerfully show concepts. Similarly, satirical exaggerations, such as in the film *Jojo Rabbit*, also make the concept of interest more apparent (Champoux, 1999).

Film engages students by providing an opportunity to break from routine classroom activities, use their imaginations, and vicariously experience a unique situation (Golden-Biddle 1993). Students respond well to classroom activities that employ entertainment and technology (Cox 2021). Proponents of the technique contend that rich story lines and character development heighten intellectual curiosity and emotions. In turn, students are more likely to remember concepts and recognize links between example and concepts (Champoux 1999; Huczynski and Buchanan 2004). The strong images and emotional content of film captures student attention and improves understanding and retention (Mallinger and Rossy 2003). Today's students have been described as a virtual generation by Prosperio and Gioia (2007) with the observation that teaching and learning styles should be aligned to facilitate effective instruction.

Through film, students' understanding of a concept advances from an abstract, simplified textbook model to a concrete scenario that more fully represents the complexity and ambiguity of real life (Roth 2001). Using film to teach ethics is particularly fertile ground as it provides an opportunity to assume the role of a character and understand the character's basis for making ethical

decisions. Teaching Kohlberg's levels of moral development can be brought to life through the use of film.

Jojo Rabbit is political satire that takes place in Nazi Germany in the days leading up to war's end. The central character, Jojo, is a 10-year old, German boy navigating Nazi Germany. The film begins with Jojo dressed in uniform, eagerly preparing for Hitler's youth training camp, and pledging allegiance to his imaginary friend, Adolf Hitler. Jojo later learns a Jewish girl, Elsa, is hiding in his attic with the assistance of Jojo's mother. Throughout the film, Jojo attempts to reconcile his commitment to the Nazi regime with his experiences with Elsa. When faced with a challenge, Jojo turns to his imaginary friend, Adolf Hitler, for advice. Jojo's mother serves as a counter force to Hitler as she attempts to dampen Jojo's enthusiasm for Nazi ideals.

Jojo Rabbit is ideal for teaching Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development because it traces Jojo's journey through each of Kohlberg's three levels and six stages of moral development. Jojo's back and forth dialogue with imaginary Hitler provides insight into the child's cognitive conflicts. Further, the sequence of events and involvement of other characters shape Jojo's experiences allowing students to analyze the factors and processes involved when progressing between levels/stages of moral development.

3.1. Exercise Learning Objectives

After completing this exercise, students should be able to:

LO 1: Define Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development and its significance.

LO 2: Contrast each of Kohlberg's three levels of moral development.

LO 3: Deduct an individual's level of moral development given his or her rationale for the following a course of action.

LO 4: Evaluate the various factors that lead an individual to move up Kohlberg's various stages of moral development.

3.2. Preparation

Prior to the exercise, we assign a reading about Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development explaining both the three levels and six stages of moral development. We assign the appropriate section of the textbook and provide the handout shown in Appendix A as the precursor reading. We also inform students in advance that during the next class we will be watching clips from a satirical film involving Nazi Germany. We inform students we believe the film appropriately uses of humor to ridicule and shame the Nazi regime and not the people subjected to their tyranny. We explain that the purpose of good political satire is to bring more widespread awareness and reflection on society's

deficiencies. However, we also understand that some individuals may find the use of humor with regards to something as tragic as the Holocaust offensive, and if students believe they fall into this group, please let us know in advance so we can find an alternative assignment.¹

For the exercise below, you will need to purchase or rent a copy of the movie. We use small groups to discuss answers before sharing with the class. We provide each group with a handout such as the table in Appendix A explaining each of Kohlberg's levels and stages and we prepare PowerPoint slides with one slide for the exercise learning outcomes and one slide for each exercise question.

3.3. Implementing the Exercise

This exercise can be conducted in a live classroom. It is also very easy to do live on Zoom. The exercise fits in a 60 - 90 minute class.

Students answer 6 discussion questions. We open the exercise with a general discussion question about Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Then, we show a specific clip from the movie followed by a discussion question, then proceed to the next clip and the next discussion question. This allows for a debrief immediately after each question. The clips selected in this exercise run approximately 25 minutes.

3.4. Exercise

To begin, we ask students to get into their groups and we disperse Appendix A: Kohlberg's stages of moral development. We find that having that document available greatly enhances student ability to apply the concepts to the film clips. We open with a brief conversation about our overall framework for studying ethics. We reflect on their homework assignment about Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Then, we provide the introductory question.

Question 1: When teaching ethics, there are so many theories and concepts we could cover. Why is Kohlberg's Theory worth studying? (LO 1)

The purpose of this question is for students to recognize the practical application of Kohlberg's Theory. The professor should probe the class for the relationship between Kohlberg's Theory and the various steps in the ethical decision-making process: recognition, moral reasoning, moral judgment, moral intent and moral behavior. The professor may also wish to point out that a study by Arfaoui *et al.*

1. As discussed later in the paper, we have tested this exercise in several classes and have never had a student object to the film. We have also specifically asked students whether they found the movie offensive and students have uniformly rejected that notion.