

# Kohlberg's moral stages in news about Facebook.

Russell Waldron, 7/03/2011

I had stage-theories of moral development in mind when I read the furore over the punishment of a few students for defaming a teacher in Georgia. The [My Fox Atlanta article](#) seemed to illustrate [Kohlberg's stages 2-6](#) quite clearly.

This is personally relevant: my middle-school daughter complains about her teachers on Facebook.

## The news

vs

## Kohlberg stages

Two Douglas County students were suspended and one student was expelled after a negative Facebook posting about a teacher.

The article carefully avoids the substance of what was said, and how it was disclosed. [Other sources](#) reveal that, while the students did not imagine that they would be any serious impact on the teacher, they created a serious danger for the teacher.

Twelve-year-old Alejandra Sosa said she regretted posting a Facebook status calling one of her teachers at Chapel Hill Middle School a pedophile. The comment got the honor roll student suspended for 10 days and she is now facing expulsion. **"I was just expressing myself on Facebook, because like I said I was mad that day because of what he [did]. So, I mean I had no intentions of ruining his reputation,"** said Sosa.

3\*

Alejandra mentions her intentions and social consequences. This is Kohler's stage 3, interpersonal accord and conformity, a "Conventional" moral level.

"I shouldn't have done it," said student William Lambert, III. **"Because I could have still been at school, like right now, if I never had commented on the post."**

2\*

William mentions his own loss. This is Kohler's stage 2, self-interest, a "Pre-

Conventional” level.

The honor student's father said he didn't condone the comment but believes that what's done in the privacy of one's home should not be the subject of disciplinary action at school. "Because it is a privacy issue. When you're at home on your computer, a lot of people say a lot of things on Facebook, about a lot of people, including our president, including senators, governors. **[I think] the school should write the rules of Facebook into their policy before they try to take rules out of context,**" said Lambert's father, William Lambert, Jr.

**5** \*

William's father criticises the school's unilateral reaction, from Kohler's stage 5, social contract orientation,

a "Post-Conventional" level.

A third child was expelled for posting that the same teacher is bipolar. The student's mother asked not to be identified but said she believed the school's punishment did not fit the crime. "She made a disrespectful comment, however she is 12-years-old and **she didn't even get a chance to apologize for it before its done and over, you're out of school,**" said the parent.

**4** \*

This mother used language of rules, enforcement, and apology, which characterise Kohler's stage 4, authority and social-order maintaining, a "Conventional" level.

At least two of the families said they plan to hire attorneys and fight the disciplinary charges in a school tribunal.

A social networking expert said the case should serve as a lesson for students and parents alike. "**When you go home, yes it is your private environment but the school can actually say we would expect you to have nice behavior, be kind to others, not be a cyber bully, not be a bully in general. But it doesn't mean they can enforce it because we're coming into free speech territory here,**" said social networking expert Ben Halpert.

**6** \*

A consultant interviewed by an adult journalist speaks from Kohler's stage 6, universal ethical principles, a "Post Conventional" level. While this is a reasonable basis for discussion between adults, middle school teachers would not expect it to inhibit misbehaviour by their less mature students.

Douglas County School officials said the three students violated the disciplinary code and they could not comment on the case due to an impending tribunal.



Institutional policies and official lines are naturally situated in Kohlberg's stage 4, law and order morality, a "Conventional" stage.

The kids' quotes fit Kohlberg's stages 2-4 (expected at age 9-20), and adults' quotes fit stages 4-6. In the light of that difference, we should not be surprised if parents are frustrated by a resolution that satisfies the kids, or if the kids feel that the agreement reached by adults is needlessly complicated.

Calling in lawyers sounds like bad strategy, possibly just bluster. It raises the stakes beyond anything the kids seem to want, and no one in this story has a solid legal position. [Facebook users implicitly agree](#) to "not use Facebook if you are under 13." So who lied in order to set up Facebook accounts? Are parents responsible for the defamation by minors? Did the school fail its duty of care, by letting students on Facebook, knowing that they were under-age?

	View of Persons	Social Perspective Lvl
<b>6</b>	Sees how human fallibility and frailty are impacted by communication	Mutual respect as a universal principle
<b>5</b>	Recognize that contracts will allow persons to increase welfare of both	Contractual perspective
<b>4</b>	Able to see abstract normative systems	Social systems perspective
<b>3</b>	Recognize good and bad intentions	Social relationships perspective
<b>2</b>	Sees that a) others have goals and preferences, b) either conform to or deviate from norms	Instrumental egoism
<b>1</b>	No VOP: only self & norm are recognized	Blind egoism

Acceptance of a stage-theory of moral development can unfortunately lead to sequestering of moral authority and codification of rules which are inexplicable to students, such as bans on Web 2.0 sites or explicit lyrics. On the other hand, it can inform a greater engagement with character development. We can expect middle-school students to work hard on questioning rules they have previously accepted and reconstructing their moral responsibility and the social order in their minds. We can expect students to differ in their readiness for different forms of rules. We can model acceptance and consideration for the less sophisticated, because that will be a necessary skill and discipline throughout life.

And like the kids, we need to keep constantly revisiting this.

## References

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