Development of my Moral Code

My moral development can best be described as consistent with the theory of Lawrence Kohlberg. This theory suggests that there are three levels of moral development, with each level consisting of two separate but progressive stages. The development of each stage is fostered by the opportunity to “take the perspective of others and to experience conflict between one’s current stage of moral thinking and the reasoning of someone at a higher stage” (Santrock, J. W., 2012, p. 409).

In early childhood, my major moral influences were my parents and other adult relatives. My parents explained their rules and my boundaries, and I largely accepted that what they told me was correct. Their influence and the importance of their rules were reinforced, for example, when I failed to heed my mother’s classic warning about not touching a hot surface. My failure to behave in accordance with her cautionary instruction resulted in a small but painful and serious burn, an immediate, negative, and memorable consequence. Misbehaving in public also resulted in appropriate punishment. As a child, on the rare events when I did misbehave, I was never surprised I was punished because I expected the consequences. At this point, my moral development was constructed as described in Kohlberg’s theory. In the first level of his theory, pre-conventional reasoning, concepts of “good and bad are interpreted in terms of external rewards and punishments” (Santrock, 20012, p. 410).

Later in childhood, my moral development progressed into Kohlberg’s second level, that of conventional reasoning. Santrock (2012) notes that in this level “individuals apply certain standards but they are the standards set by others.” (p. 410) Those setting the standards in my life included parents, teachers, older peers and friends, clergy and religious instructors. This level is governed by mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and interpersonal
conformity. In this stage, “children and adolescents often adopt their parent’s moral standards” (Santrock, 2012, p. 410). As I progressed into the second stage in this level, social systems and expectations begin to govern my morality, and my judgments began to be based on “understanding the social order, laws, justice, and duty” (Santrock, 2012, p. 411), and my knowledge of what was right and what was wrong. My father reinforced and encouraged my moral development at this level by frequently reminding me to “remember who you are.”

In adolescence as I progressed into Kohlberg’s highest level, the postconventional reasoning stage, I developed the ability to “recognize alternative moral courses, explore the options, and decide on a personal moral code” (Santrock, 2012, p. 411). The principles and expectations of society, government authorities, and personal morality began to compel and direct my decisions and judgments. At this level I continued to be influenced by parents, peers and friends, teachers, and clergy in addition to societal influences. I also acquired an intense interest in worldwide current events history, which also influenced the development of my personal moral code. My deep exploration of the events leading to World War II, and the consequences changing the world as a result, convinced me that morality, or the absence thereof, could be either tremendously beneficial or destructive to societies. This helped to further develop my personal moral code, which I would describe as based on my parents exhortations to leave people, places, and things better than I found them, and to never forget the power of small actions.

Santrock (2012) describes moral development as involving “changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding standards of right and wrong” (p. 408). My moral development was consistent with this statement and with Kohlberg’s theory that there are six progress stages of moral development. Kohlberg argued, however, that “advanced in children’s
cognitive development did not ensure development of moral reasoning. Instead, moral reasoning also reflects children’s experiences in dealing with moral questions and moral conflict.” I was influenced by my experiences with parents, teachers, clergy, and peers in developing the code that continues to guide my decisions, actions, and behavior into my middle adult years. I believe that, although my moral inclinations, behaviors, and propensities are firmly embedded in my personality, further learning and experiences will continue to refine and strengthen my moral reasoning and my moral code.

Reference: