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Moral Development

Morality is fundamental to the human condition. From early on, children make distinctions between matters of right and wrong, and the people and institutions around them convey myriad moral messages in direct and indirect ways. From early on, too, developmental scientists have addressed morality. Sigmund Freud, for example, argued that every child by the age of five has developed a moral conscience that is both a comfort and curse. The conscience—an internal representative of societal norms in Freud's view—allows the child to become a contributing member of society. But a person's conscience is also a lifelong obstacle to satisfaction of the everpressing instinctual desires for sex and aggression—desires which if heedlessly expressed would make coexistence impossible. To Freud, then, moral development was a Catch 22. We cannot live happily without a conscience but nor can we live happily with it.

Also writing in the early 1930s, the child psychologist Jean Piaget held a more sanguine view. Based on his interviews with Swiss children and observations of their games, Piaget argued that the younger child's internalization of the moral rules conveyed by parents and other authorities is followed by increasing autonomy from those rules in late childhood or early adolescence. In Piaget's view, this constitutes a window of opportunity rather than a moment before mayhem—as Freud might have predicted. Piaget's argument was that through egalitarian peer interactions, older children negotiate and remake some of the moral rules of society. In so doing, they not only voluntarily take ownership of the new rules but society also evolves in an increasingly democratic

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direction. To Piaget, then, the entry into adolescence was a time for moral renewal at both the individual and collective levels. Not in all societies, however. According to Piaget, it could not occur in what he described as "primitive" cultures where adolescents conform to their elders without question.

Freud and Piaget asked the kinds of questions that more recent research on moral development has continued to address: Is morality the equivalent of societal norms or is morality a set of concepts that go beyond society? How do moral conceptions develop in the course of childhood and adolescence? Who has notable influence on moral development—parents, peers, or other contexts? To what extent does moral development differ between cultures? And to the extent that such differences exist, are some cultural practices better for children than others? In the following, the focus will first be on the key questions and findings of four contemporary lines of research: the Cognitive-Developmental, Domain, Two Orientations, and Three Ethics approaches. This will include attention to findings for diverse cultural groups. Subsequently, there will be an integrative discussion of recurrent and emerging issues in children's moral development across cultures.

The Cognitive-Developmental Approach

Starting in the late 1950s, Lawrence Kohlberg formulated a cognitive-developmental approach to moral reasoning that has influenced much of the subsequent research on morality. Inspired by Piaget, Kohlberg wanted to find out if moral reasoning develops in a predictable sequence. To help answer this question, he presented children

and adolescents with "hypothetical dilemmas" that often pit the value of life against the value of property, or the value of one person's life again the value of several people's lives. In the most famous dilemma, Heinz who lives in a German village has a dying wife who might be cured by a particular medicine. Heinz, however, cannot afford it and the town pharmacist will not lower his high price or extend credit. As a research participant, one has to decide whether Heinz should steal the drug, and even more importantly, why or why not.

Drawing on participants' responses to the dilemmas as well as his readings of Western rationalist moral philosophy, Kohlberg concluded that moral reasoning occurs in a sequence of three levels. Each level includes two stages, for a total of six. According to Kohlberg, every child starts out at the Pre-Conventional Level, reasoning strictly in terms of ego-centered considerations—reminiscent of an uncivilized Freudian child. The child initially focuses on avoidance of punishment (Stage 1), and then on satisfaction of self-interests (Stage 2). Next follows the Conventional Level and a shift to group-centered considerations. Here the focus is on pleasing one's family and other groups to which one belongs (Stage 3), and maintaining social order (Stage 4). The third Post-Conventional Level goes beyond both the self and one's society—reminiscent of the Piagetian adolescent's perspective. Kohlberg did not think that everyone reaches this level. Those who do emphasize democratic procedure and social utility (Stage 5) or formulate universal principles pertaining to justice and individual rights (Stage 6).

To Kohlberg, it was not only that his six stages describe what moral development is like. He made the far more audacious claim that his stages describe what moral development ought to be like. If more people can be educated to reach Stage 6, according

to Kohlberg, we will be more moral and we can join together to create communities that are more just. Like Piaget, Kohlberg thought that interactions and discussions with peers are particularly conducive to such moral development.

Extensive research has found that the first three of the cognitive-developmental stages are common across diverse cultures, whereas the other stages are not. Across cultures, younger children often use the concepts from Stages 1 and 2, and in the course of adolescence the concepts from Stage 3 become common. Stages 4 and 5, however, are less common, and Stage 6 is so rare that it was removed from the Cognitive-Developmental scoring manual by the early 1980s. In one comprehensive review of 44 cross-cultural studies using the cognitive-developmental approach, none of the research participants reasoned at Stages 4 or 5 in 66% of the studies. Even in the studies where these two stages did occur, the majority of participants reasoned below Stage 4 in 67% of the studies. Reasoning in terms of Stages 4 and 5 is limited mostly to Western or Westernized middle and upper-middle class adolescents and adults residing in urban areas.

Extensive research across cultures has also found that children and adolescents think in terms of numerous moral concepts that the cognitive-developmental approach does not take into consideration. This is the case for concepts pertaining to religion or spirituality. The cognitive-developmental manual includes 708 "criterion judgments" for scoring moral reasoning but only a single one of these addresses religiosity or spirituality. Many concepts pertaining to community, collectivity, and interdependence also are not well-accounted for by the cognitive-developmental approach. Yet members of many cultures place a premium upon such concepts. For example, research with Chinese

children in Taiwan has shown that by age 4, they are well aware of notions pertaining to shame, loss of face, social discretion, and role-based duties. The development of a conscience is well under way at an early age in these children (as Freud would have predicted). This conscience, however, seems in step with Confucian ideals of social hierarchy and harmony, rather than the ideals of individual justice and rights at the end of the cognitive-developmental sequence. In sum, children across many cultures develop along the path of the first half of the cognitive-developmental stage sequence. From early on, however, they also take other paths with other end goals.

The Domain Approach

In the latter half of the 1970s, Elliot Turiel proposed taking a step back from Kohlberg's question of how moral reasoning develops to the question of what is moral in the first place. Turiel wanted to find out whether children differentiate moral from non-moral issues. Based on the same tradition of Western rationalist philosophy that Kohlberg drew on, Turiel argued that in order for a rule to be moral, key criteria are that it applies to everyone and that it cannot be altered. If children were to be asked whether these criteria of universality and inalterability apply to different kinds of issues, would they make distinctions between moral and non-moral issues? Also, would their reasoning in response to the issues vary? To address these research questions, Turiel and his colleagues have presented children and adolescents with vignettes. For example, in one vignette a child pushes a peer off a swing, and in another a child calls a grandfather by his first name.

Turiel and his colleagues have concluded that three domains of knowledge can be differentiated. One of these is moral, but the other two which they have termed "conventional" and "personal" are not. According to Turiel and his colleagues, the three domains differ on criteria, reasoning, and issues. With respect to criteria, conventional and personal rules—unlike moral ones—apply only to one's group or oneself, respectively. Also, conventional and personal rules—unlike moral ones—are alterable. With respect to reasoning, moral rules are justified in terms of references to justice, fairness, and the welfare of others. Conventional reasoning, in contrast, focuses on communal and religious norms, interests, and authorities. Personal reasoning focuses on the welfare of the self. Based on these criteria and modes of reasoning, according to Turiel and his colleagues, examples of moral issues include stealing and aggressive acts (such as pushing someone off a swing). Conventional issues involve a wide variety of acts such as those pertaining to forms of address (such as calling a grandfather by first name), attire (such as wearing a head scarf), sexual customs (such as premarital sex), and familial arrangements (such as divorce). Personal issues include one's choice of friends and recreational activities. The implication of Turiel's conclusion is a notable narrowing of the moral domain. Morality, from this perspective, is solely that which goes beyond both self and society, akin only to the highest levels of development in Piaget and Kohlberg's approaches.

Research findings across cultures have shown that children make a distinction between the moral and non-moral in accordance with the domain approach for a particular set of issues. For a variety of other issues, however, they do not. In many parts of the world, children—even as young as three years of age—differentiate moral

vignettes where an innocent child is pushed, hit or robbed from conventional vignettes where children eat food with their fingers or fail to follow the rules of a game. By and large, children speak of these vignettes in terms of the criteria and reasoning that the domain approach predicts. In many other instances, however, the predicted correspondence between issues, criteria, and reasoning does not hold. This has been found, for example, for matters pertaining to showing respect (such as honoring a deathbed promise), helping others in need (such as taking an ailing elderly parent into one's household), sexuality (such as coed bathing), and avoiding disgusting behaviors (such as eating one's dead pet dog). In many parts of the world, children and adolescents apply "moral" criteria of universality and inalterability to these matters, but they reason in terms of what the domain approach deems non-moral concepts such as role-based duty, social order, and spirituality. Taken together, these findings suggest that children in many parts of the world recognize that not all issues are of the same hue. Children from diverse cultures, however, appear to regard a wide variety of issues and reasons as moral that are not included within the moral palette of the domain approach.

The Two Orientations Approach

While domain approach researchers in the course of the late 1970s and 1980s proposed a narrowing of the moral domain, Carol Gilligan during the same time period called for a broadening. She argued that a considerable part of psychological work—including work on moral development—was premised on the development of boys and men, and that the time had come to address the development of girls and women. She

noted, for example, that Piaget had suggested that boys show more advanced negotiation of moral rules than girls. She also noted that Kohlberg's initial research included only boys, and she claimed that girls score lower than boys on his sequence of stages. To Gilligan, this led to the question as to whether girls indeed are less developed or if they speak a different moral language—one that has been misinterpreted or gone unheard.

On the basis of interviews with American children and adults, Gilligan came to the conclusion that there are two kinds of moral orientations. One is a "justice" orientation, focused on how to negotiate among competing rights in an impartial manner. This orientation, according to Gilligan, is characteristic of male development—and of Piaget's and Kohlberg's approaches. The other orientation, however, pertains to "care" and is more characteristic of female development. Here the concern is with tending to the needs of self and those with whom one has relationships. Revisiting the Heinz dilemma, Gilligan noted how some girls in her research did not regard it as a conflict between the value of property and the value of life—as intended by Kohlberg. Instead, they interpreted the dilemma as a matter of how to maintain good relationships between the persons involved. To Gilligan, this care orientation is different from the justice orientation, but it deserves to be heard and valued.

Contrary to Gilligan's claims, research reviews have found that girls and boys mostly score alike on Kohlberg's stage sequence. Furthermore, research across cultures has found that children and adolescents—whether girls or boys—speak of care and relationships as well as justice and fairness. In some cultures, however, care considerations have a different inflection from Gilligan's. Research in India and Japan, for example, has found that when children and adolescents speak of care, their focus is

not so much on interpersonal feelings as role-based duties. Also, the care is directed not only at other individuals but also communities as a whole, such as family, school, or society. The motive to care, then, seems to be universal. Why we care and in regards to whom, however, vary across cultures.

The Three Ethics Approach

While the Two Orientations approach added new breadth to the kinds of moral concepts that developmental scientists address, Richard Shweder in the course of the 1980s and 1990s suggested casting a still wider moral net—one that would catch the moral considerations of highly diverse cultures. Based on his research with children and adults in India and the United States as well as a broad reading of Western and non-Western work in philosophy and the social sciences, Shweder proposed a tripartite distinction between Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity.

The three Ethics involve different notions of what is at the heart of personhood, and different moral reasons. The Ethic of Autonomy—to which developmental science has long paid the most attention according to Shweder—involves a focus on people as individuals who have needs and preferences. Moral reasoning within this ethic addresses the interests, well-being, and rights of the self and other individuals. The Ethic of Community spotlights how people are members of social groups, such as family, school and nation. Here moral reasoning pertains to role-related duties and concern for the interests, customs, and welfare of groups. The Ethic of Divinity focuses on people as spiritual or religious entities. Reasoning within this ethic addresses divine and natural

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law, lessons from sacred texts, and concerns with purity and pollution. Unlike the cognitive-developmental approach, the three ethics are not stages. A child or adult may draw on one or more of the ethics when faced with a moral issue.

Research has shown the presence of all three Ethics in diverse cultures. However, research has also indicated differences between countries, social classes, and religious groups in their prevalence. Findings suggest that American children and adolescents use Ethic of Autonomy concepts more than children and adolescents in countries such as Brazil and India. With respect to class, research suggests that middle and upper-middle class children and adolescent reason more in terms of Autonomy and less in terms of Community, as compared to children and adolescents of lower classes. Research has also indicated a difference between religious groups, with religiously liberal adolescents reasoning more in terms of Autonomy and less in terms of Divinity than religiously conservative adolescents. Moral motives pertaining to Autonomy, Community and Divinity, then, are widespread across cultures. What is less well-known is when they emerge in development, and how their course of development is similar or different across cultures.

Recurrent and Emerging Issues in Moral Development

One important issue in current moral development research is precisely the one of how to chart the development of multiple moral motives across diverse cultures. Whereas approaches such as the cognitive-developmental and domain ones represent "one-size-fits-all" models, recent "cultural-developmental" work aims to find a middle ground

between these models and the unwieldy alternative of "one-theory-for-every-culture." The aim, in other words, is to give consideration to both developmental commonality and cultural diversity. For example, research has shown that children and adolescents in both Taiwan and the United States reason in terms of community concepts. Older children in these two cultures (and elsewhere) also appear to invoke these concepts more often than younger children. At the same time, however, Taiwanese and American children may differ on how early they develop notable awareness of community concepts, such as shame. They may differ on the specific kinds of community concepts they use, such as loss of face or national pride. They may also differ on how much they emphasize community in comparison to autonomy or divinity concepts. An emerging research direction in today's global world, then, is to see children's moral lives through the lens of development as well as the lens of culture.

Another salient research issue pertains to cultural variation in who has notable influence on moral development. Around the turn of the 20th century, Freud emphasized parents and family. In the course of the early part of the 20th century—as mass education in Europe and the United States became common and compulsory—Piaget emphasized peers. Today's children and adolescents growing up in urban areas all over the world typically are exposed to moral messages from many other sources too: after-school counselors, extra-curricular activity coaches, television, magazines, websites, and so forth. What moral messages do these sources convey? To what extent do the messages reinforce or work against one another? These are questions of keen interest to parents and researchers, among others. Meanwhile, in a number of areas of the world (especially rural and poor ones), the moral contexts surrounding children and adolescents are different.

Children's daily access to mass media, such as television, is much less pronounced. Adolescents (especially girls) are far less likely to attend secondary educational institutions. Both children and adolescents spend more time in the contexts of family and small communities. What are the implications for the moral development of these children and adolescents?

Conclusion

The research questions that Freud and Piaget raised about morality—its definition, development, and context—remain highly relevant. Contemporary research findings have demonstrated some pervasive patterns for how children and adolescents define morality, how they develop morally, and common contexts of moral relevance. Current and emerging research, however, is also reframing Freud's and Piaget's questions. This reframing is taking place in light of the fact that children and adolescents in different parts of the world grow up and live in different circumstances. The new focus then is on the plural definitions, developmental pathways, and contexts that children and adolescents experience with respect to morality.

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