



## Handbook of moral development

Lene Arnett Jensen

To cite this article: Lene Arnett Jensen (2015) Handbook of moral development, Journal of Moral Education, 44:3, 382-387, DOI: [10.1080/03057240.2015.1053738](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2015.1053738)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2015.1053738>



Published online: 07 Jul 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 96



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Handbook of moral development:** (1st edn), edited by Melanie Killen and Judith G. Smetana, 2006, New York, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 790 pp., ISBN 9780805861723

**Handbook of moral development:** (2nd edn), edited by Melanie Killen and Judith G. Smetana, 2014, New York, Psychology Press, 571 pp., \$123.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-415-81844-5

One of the aims of this review was to provide a sense of the current direction of the field of moral development through a comparison of the first and second editions of the *Handbook of Moral Development*, edited by Killen and Smetana. Editing not one but two handbooks constitutes a commendable investment of time and effort on behalf of the field. The two handbooks allow for reflection on what has remained the same and what has changed in the span of almost a decade. Reflecting on the past and present also invariably opens up an opportunity to look to the future. Thus I will also lay out a series of topics that I would hope to see in a handbook 10 or so years from now.

Given space constraints, it is not possible to discuss the contents of individual handbook chapters. I do, however, recommend reading all the chapters in the latest edition. I came away from every one with new insights and ideas. The table below will serve as a springboard for a discussion of similarities and differences between the two handbooks.

---

<u>First edition: Section titles (# of chapters)</u>	<u>Second edition: Section titles (# of chapters)</u>
1. Structuralism and moral development stages (4)	1. Concepts of justice, fairness, and rights (3)
2. Social domain theory and social justice (4)	2. Socialization, conscience, and the family (4)
3. Conscience and internalization (3)	3. Emotions, prosocial behavior, and aggression (4)
4. Social interactional, sociocultural, and comparative approaches (6)	4. Culture, cooperation, and development (3)
5. Empathy, emotions, and aggression (5)	5. Prejudice, social cognition, and intergroup attitudes (4)
6. Moral education, character development, and community service (4)	6. Precursors to morality: cognitive, neurobiological, and comparative approaches (4)
	7. Moral identity, community, and the personal domain (3)

---

Topics that continue to be covered by the second handbook to about the same extent as in the first pertain to the development of conscience and socialization within the family; moral emotions, especially empathy, and their role in prosocial and aggressive behaviour; and the contributions of culture and evolution to morality.

There are also topics whose coverage has changed. There is a notable decline, to the point of near absence, of chapters on cognitive-developmental and neo-Kohlbergian approaches. Similarly, chapters on character development and moral education are largely gone. This latter change is even more notable if we glance further back to the three-volume *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development* edited by Kurtines and Gewirtz (1991) when the entire third volume, 'application', was devoted to interventions, education, and public policy.

Meanwhile, there is increased emphasis on the domain approach (the theoretical persuasion of the editors). Approximately 10 of 25 chapters (40%) in the second edition are authored by researchers working with the domain approach, as compared to approximately 7 of 26 chapters (27%) in the first edition. This increased attention to the domain approach is also reflected in the titles of the sections of the second edition (1, 5, and 7 in the above table). Moreover, the first section of the second edition now consists exclusively of chapters authored by domain theorists.

The second edition also contains some topics that are largely or altogether new. Specifically, there is a new focus on the neuroscience of moral development, morality in babies, and moral identity. Undoubtedly, the expansions, contractions, and balance of topics from the first to the second edition can be interpreted in multiple ways. My sense is that they reflect both the direction of the field of moral development over the last 10 years, and editorial choices. For example, the cognitive-developmental approach indeed no longer dominates the field of moral development, as it once did. The domain approach, however, is not as predominant in the field as in this handbook. In fact, as I will discuss below, the field of moral development today—just like psychology in general—has moved from reliance on a small set of theories to the use and mixing of multiple approaches. That brings me then to what I would hope to see in a handbook of moral development a decade from now. I will succinctly touch on four topics.

### ***Personal moral experiences***

Reading across the chapters in the second edition, it is clear that measurements of moral development are varied. Research with infants and toddlers, for example, tends to rely on behavioral observations. Nonetheless, it is also clear that the field is dominated by studies in which individuals respond to hypothetical dilemmas or vignettes where moral judgments are applied to people in general. Predictions about individual behaviors from such hypothetical and generalized moral reasoning have been hard to establish. Perhaps ironically, the recent moral psychology focus on moral intuitions aimed at better understanding individual moral behavior has

pushed the field even more toward the use of highly unlikely hypothetical scenarios, such as eating one's pet dog or pushing a heavy man onto trolley tracks. But hypothetical scenarios, removed as they are from most people's everyday lives and experiences, seem unlikely venues for in-depth knowledge or predictions about individual moral behavior. If we want to know about individuals' moral behavior, we will probably do better to focus on their own moral experiences. Furthermore, personal moral experiences are illuminating because they provide emic rather than etic information about morality, that is, how ordinary individuals rather than theorists define and delineate morality.

### ***The full life course***

As some authors in the second edition note (e.g., Wynn & Bloom), research on moral development has overwhelmingly homed in on children and adolescents. As mentioned above, that focus is somewhat expanded in the latest handbook through research on infants. However, adults remain remarkably underrepresented, except for research with parents (especially mothers) in their role of socializing children. Life expectancy at birth for both sexes globally was 70 years as of 2012, ranging from 62 years in low-income countries to 79 years in high-income countries (World Health Organization, 2015). In my view, we need to turn our attention to the many decades of people's moral lives that come after age 20 or so. One reason is that it is the only way to know the extent to which early moral emotions, cognitions, identifications, and behaviors remain, change, disappear, or are replaced later in life. Another reason is that adulthood, perhaps more than ever, is full of changes in such areas as love and work that are highly likely to be tied to moral development. Adulthood is also when individuals are most likely to step into diverse leadership positions that come with new moral demands and opportunities. Some 2500 years ago, the Greek philosopher Solon wrote that from 35 to 42 years of age is a period of maturity of mind and morals when a person's 'mind, ever open to virtue, broadens, and never inspires him to profitless deeds' (Levinson, 1978, p. 326). Certainly, indigenous conceptions of the life course from many different cultures, both before and after Solon's time, have addressed developmental changes into old age, including with regard to morality. It seems time that the contemporary scientific field of moral development does so, too.

### ***Diverse social contexts***

The field of moral psychology has seen a steady expansion of the social contexts of moral development that scholars take into account and, in my view, there is ample room for timely new research as well. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Freud emphasized parents and family. It is a focus that continues today and is well represented in both handbook editions (see Section 3 for the first edition and Section 2 for the second edition in the table above). In the course of the early part of the twentieth century, as mass education in Europe and the United States (US)

became common and compulsory, Piaget emphasized peers. This focus not only continues but is also burgeoning. Undoubtedly, this is because mass education now has a worldwide reach. Also, with modernity and globalization, adolescents and emerging adults have become increasingly agentic and autonomous vis-à-vis adults, and as such they have more scope for individual moral identity formation and promoting civic change. In many ways, this is reflected in recent research on the values of youth cultures, peer and friendship groups, and youth civic organizations. To a limited extent, this kind of research is also represented in the latest handbook (Carlo; Killen & Cooley; Matsuba, Murzyn, & Hart).

However, there is room for research on other social contexts. From a developmental perspective, it is noteworthy that generally there is a rise with age in the number of social contexts that a person is part of—although perhaps in old age there is a tapering off. From a cultural perspective, it is noteworthy that with modernity and globalization there likewise is a rise in the number of contexts to which a person is exposed. Family is undoubtedly salient everywhere, although family composition and who is considered a family member varies widely. But media, for example, is a context that has grown in significance in daily life at a remarkable speed during the last decades, worldwide. Also, more people than ever pursue education for longer than ever. Tertiary education may become normative worldwide in the twenty-first century as secondary education did in the twentieth century, even as nations differ (Worldbank, 2015). As the number of contexts that a person is involved with increases with age and modernity, there will be exposure to more divergent moral messages as well as selection on the part of the individual to interact with contexts and messages that resonate the most.

### ***Cultural–developmental comodulation***

Recent theory on moral development has been characterized by a search for cognitions and emotions that constitute foundations of moral behavior. This search has often focused on biological foundations through evolutionary and neuroscience research, and on early developmental foundations through research with infants. As described above, each of these topics is largely or altogether new to the second edition of the *Handbook of Moral Development*. In the handbook, including the preface, these elements are described as ‘building blocks’ of morality. In light of considerable recent work on the plasticity of the human brain, epigenetics, and culture–gene co-evolution, one might reasonably argue that the cultural environment also needs to be included as foundational in the building of the moral psyche.

One way to capture the way in which ontogenetic development and culture co-modulate, including with regard to morality, is through a ‘cultural–developmental approach’ (Jensen, 2015a). From this perspective, ontogenetic development is not determinative but nor is there a limitless cultural range. The cultural–developmental approach to morality, for example, lays out developmental ‘templates’ across the life course for each of the three Ethics of Autonomy (e.g. individual needs and rights),

Community (e.g. care and responsibility for others), and Divinity (e.g. injunctions from sacred texts and concerns with spiritual purity). The Ethic of Autonomy, for example, is predicted to emerge early in development and to stay relatively stable across adolescence and into adulthood, even if the specific types of autonomy concepts that persons use are likely to some extent to change (e.g. increased focus on individual rights with age). Substantial amounts of research have supported this pattern, including research from diverse research traditions described in the two handbooks. The developmental templates, however, are not fixed once and for all. Instead they incorporate flexibility in that their emergence and slopes of development depend on the prevalence of the three ethics within cultures. For example, the theory highlights that while concerns with autonomy emerge early in development across cultures, reasoning in terms of this ethic quickly reaches high levels in some cultures but not others depending on the extent to which a culture encourages or suppresses a focus on individuals. The theory also predicts that in cultures where an emerging adulthood phase exists, one might expect an upsurge in autonomy due to the self-focused nature of this period. Recent findings have supported this and other predictions (for a collection of cultural–developmental research projects with diverse age and cultural groups, see Jensen, 2015b).

To conclude, Killen and Smetana have by now contributed two handbooks to the field of moral development. All the handbook chapters are informative. The handbooks can also serve as an inspiration for future research based on the information they contain, and additionally based on what they do not contain. As mentioned above, my sense is that the field of moral development today, like psychology as a whole, has moved toward the use and bridging of multiple theoretical approaches. This theoretical reframing is taking place in light of the fact that children in different parts of the world grow up and live in different cultural and economic circumstances. It also is taking place in light of the fact that children and adults live in a rapidly globalizing world of cultural change. Finally, the reframing occurs with the increasing scientific contributions of scholars from all over the world. This increase is not reflected in the *Handbook of Moral Development*. In both editions, about 90% of the authors are based in North America, and neither edition includes authors based in developing or newly industrialized nations. In contrast, the last decade or so has seen the worldwide inclusion of scholars in a variety of publication outlets, including this journal, even though scholars from the majority world remain vastly underrepresented (see for example Lee & Taylor, 2013).

As we move forward, then, my view is that our focus should encompass plural definitions, developmental pathways, and contexts that children, adolescents, and adults experience with respect to morality. It is a timely focus, and it is likely to result in better descriptions, explanations, and predictions of people's moral lives. Of course, detailed descriptive, explanatory, and predictive accounts of emic and diverse features of people's moral lives do not in and of themselves lead to unambiguous policy. Moving from description to prescription, in fact, requires

what I—with a nod to my Danish compatriot Søren Kierkegaard—would call a ‘leap of philosophy’. As we conduct research into moral development in a global world, we will need to give increasingly careful consideration to the extent to which we are making such a leap—implicitly or explicitly. We would probably also do well—and this is a leap—to appreciate that even as theories of moral development differ, they may still contribute to the collective scientific enterprise.

## References

- Jensen, L. A. (2015a). *The Oxford handbook of human development and culture: An interdisciplinary perspective*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Jensen, L. A. (2015b). *Moral development in a global world: Research from a cultural-developmental perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Kurtines, W. M., & Gewirtz, J. L. (1991). *Handbook of moral behavior and development: Volume 3: Application*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Lee, C. H. (.A.), & Taylor, M. J. (2013). Moral education trends over 40 years: A content analysis of the *Journal of Moral Education* (1971–2011). *Journal of Moral Education*, 42, 399–429.
- Levinson, D. J. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2015, February 24). Global Health Observatory (GHO). Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/gho/mortality\\_burden\\_disease/life\\_tables/situation\\_trends\\_text/en/](http://www.who.int/gho/mortality_burden_disease/life_tables/situation_trends_text/en/)
- Worldbank. (2015, February 26). School enrollment, secondary (% gross). Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR/countries>

Lene Arnett Jensen

*Department of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA*

*Email: ljensen@clarku.edu*

© 2015, Lene Arnett Jensen

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2015.1053738>

**Moral development: Theory and applications**, by Elizabeth C. Vozzola, New York, Routledge, 2014, 182 pp., \$38.90 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-415-82190-2

In this work, Elizabeth Vozzola tackles an important challenge: to provide a balanced, comprehensive review of moral development theory and applications for a broad audience. She is up to the task, building on her decades of experience in the field to offer, in under 200 pages, an integrated and thoughtful outline that will be especially relevant for advanced undergraduate and graduate students preparing for work in education and the helping professions.

The opening seven chapters of the book take the reader through classic and current theories. Vozzola covers Freud without castrating him, noting how Freudian concepts still influence popular notions of moral functioning. She provides a thorough and nuanced view of Jean Piaget, going beyond the trite description of stages that some summary texts devolve to, and noting key