The Oxford Handbook of Moral Development: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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Moral Development: From Paradigms to Plurality

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Abstract

This chapter introduces *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Development: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. The handbook provides a comprehensive, international, and up-to-date review of research on moral development, including moral motives and behaviors, ontogeny and developmental pathways, and contexts that children, adolescents, and adults experience with respect to morality. Across more than 40 chapters, experts from disciplines such as anthropology, education, human development, psychology, and sociology address moral development through the entire life course among diverse groups within and across countries. This chapter addresses how the chapters provide literature reviews that are inclusive of highly diverse theoretical and research foci, as well as of diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and gender groups. The aim of the handbook is to contribute to the revitalization and flourishing of the field of moral development.

Keywords: moral development, moral motives, moral behaviors, contexts of moral development, ontogeny, lifespan, culture, application

Questions pertaining to the nature of people's moral lives, similarities and differences in the moral concepts of individuals and groups, and how these concepts develop are of perennial interest. In recent years, the field of moral development has moved from a focus on a limited set of theoretical paradigms to a plethora of research questions and methods. The chapters in this handbook reflect this refreshing change and flourishing field. They provide reviews of research on moral development that are broad, culturally inclusive, and timely.

Breadth

This handbook envisions the field of moral development in an encompassing way. I invited authors who hail from different disciplines and who approach morality in highly varied ways. Consequently, chapters describe a broad array of theories and research foci. For example, the handbook comprises chapters on the development of critical consciousness, moral values, care, and forgiveness, as well as moral self-presentation and disengagement (Banerjee, Heyman, and Lee in Chapter 6; Bussey in Chapter 17; Enright

and Song in Chapter 22; Gaskins in Chapter 11; Mayseless in Chapter 2; Seider, El-Amin, and Kelly in Chapter 12; Trommsdorff in Chapter 9). It also includes chapters that delve into the roles of everyday conversations and narratives in moral development, as well as civic institutions and media as contexts for moral development (DiBianca Fasoli in Chapter 26; Hart in Chapter 31; Krcmar and Cingel in Chapter 35; Syed, Pasupathi, and McLean in Chapter 27). In other words, highly diverse moral motives, behaviors, processes, and contexts are included.

A second way that the handbook takes a broad approach is by addressing moral development across the entire life course, rather than primarily focusing on childhood. There are chapters, for example, focusing on prenatal and genetic antecedents of moral values and the emergence of moral sensitivities and behaviors in infants, as well as the development of moral purpose, generativity, and volunteerism from adolescence through older adulthood (Colby, Bundick, Remington, and Morton in Chapter 24; Dahl in Chapter 16; Damon and Malin in Chapter 7; Hamlin and Tan in Chapter 15; Knafo-Noam, Barni, and Schwartz in Chapter 10; Pancer in Chapter 19; Pratt, Matsuba, Lawford, and Villar in Chapter 20). There are also chapters focusing on moral contexts that are prominent at different points in people's lives, such as early childhood education and care settings, children's play groups, and youth programs (Bergen and Davis in Chapter 29; Ferrer-Wreder et al. in Chapter 28; Larson, Walker, and McGovern in Chapter 30). Across all chapters, authors have included findings from the full life course, when possible.

Cultural Inclusiveness
Whereas a predominance of research on moral development continues to sample members of majority cultures from North America and Europe, an aim here was to be mindful of the limitations of this research and to include research with diverse groups within and across nations when available. The chapters reflect this aim in several ways.

First, I asked all authors explicitly to address the generalizability of findings and ways in which more cultural research may be needed. Second, there are chapters on topics that research with cultural groups from outside North America and Europe has highlighted as important and in need of attention. This includes topics such as filial piety, diverse moralities of community, and spiritual dutifulness (Bhangaokar in Chapter 18; Miller and Källberg-Shroff in Chapter 4; Yeh and Bedford in Chapter 21). Third, this handbook also calls attention to cultural change, including a chapter that addresses the implications of globalization for moral development (McKenzie in Chapter 36). In short, in today's world where people of diverse backgrounds come into increasing contact with one another, a goal of this handbook is to encourage consideration of the intersection of moral development with culture.

Timeliness
With this handbook, I also wished to call attention to burgeoning and novel research. This includes attention to ways that differences in status and power between groups impact moral development, including with regard to gender, ethnicity and race, and sexual and gender minorities (Bigler and Liben in Chapter 39; Rivas-Drake and Medina in Chapter 34; Toomey, Shramko, Horn, and Poteat in Chapter 40). The handbook also includes chapters on topics that have gained recent or renewed attention, such as pro-environmentalism and the development of moral emotions (Flanagan et al. in Chapter 41; Malti, Peplak, and Acland in Chapter 14; Matsuba, Krettenauer, and Pratt in Chapter 23).

And it includes chapters that take new and multipronged approaches to the long-standing topics of moral reasoning, moral identity, and character development (Hardy, Krettenauer, and Hunt in Chapter 8; Jensen in Chapter 13; Lapsley, Reilly, and Narvaez in Chapter 37).

Another way that this handbook takes an up-to-date approach is by addressing a wide range of social contexts that impact moral development. The field has seen a steady expansion of research on contexts of moral development. This handbook includes contexts that have received well-deserved attention for a long time, such as families and peers, but it also opens up to research on contexts that have received less attention, such as religious institutions, secular society, and media (Graver and Blumberg in Chapter 38; King, Schnitker, and Houltberg in Chapter 32; Padilla-Walker and Memmott-Elison in Chapter 25; Zuckerman and Thompson in Chapter 33). In sum, the aim was for the handbook to describe fully our accumulated knowledge of moral development while also engaging with today's exciting and challenging research issues.

Organization and Features

The handbook is organized into four sections: Moral Motives, Moral Behaviors, Contexts of Moral Development, and Applications and Policies. These sections are not mutually exclusive. Chapters in one section often address one or more of the foci of the other sections. Each chapter is simply sorted based on the best fit for the research described.

Apart from the overall organization of the handbook, there are a couple of common features across the chapters that I would like to note. All chapters conclude with a succinct set of recommendations for future research. Typically, these are a mix of "big picture" directions pertaining to theoretical and methodological needs, along with thoughtful explications of specific next steps in the staircase of knowledge built by previous research.

Turning to the beginning of chapters, each starts with an example from the authors' scholarly or personal experiences that illustrates why the topic is important and fascinating. Some example are funny, some are poignant, and some are eye-opening. The first time I asked authors to include this kind of example was when I edited *The Oxford Handbook of Human Development and Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Jensen, 2016). I have repeated it here because readers often find that the examples convey the central messages of chapters in a captivating and memorable way. Here, for instance, the chapter on moral self-awareness starts with a description of an 18-month-old research participant, nicknamed "the dancer" by the author, who alternated between dancing and being helpful in response to various laboratory tests—engaging in both behaviors with equal and evident joy (Thompson in Chapter 5). To the author, the vivacious toddler personifies the positive new direction in moral development that explores the amazing social-cognitive skills of young children. To give one other example, the first author of the chapter on prosocial motives recounts how his Puerto Rican mother impressed upon him the value of *bien educado* from the time he was a small child. She had in mind not the literal meaning of a good education, but rather the cultural meaning of developing good character—of becoming kind, humble, cultured, and well-mannered. The example sparks a reflection on the universal and culturally specific processes involved in the development of prosocial behaviors (Carlo and Pierotti in Chapter 3).

Let me conclude with a story behind this handbook. Authors were uniformly gracious in response to the invitation to write

a chapter. Yet some replied with initial surprise having not quite thought of their area of scholarship as fitting within the field of moral development. For example, one author responded, "Your invitation is actually an intriguing one because I agree that there are many value- and ethics-laden issues with respect to [this area of research]." Another author wrote, "Let me give this some thought. It seems very interesting. . . . I have developed an interest in the intentional . . . [and] ethical decision making [among my research participants]." These replies exemplify the profound importance of and interest in morality.

Accordingly, the overarching goal of this handbook is to open the door to multifaceted examinations of moral motives and behaviors, ontogeny and developmental pathways, and contexts that children, adolescents, and adults experience with respect to morality. The hope is that the handbook will contribute to the revitalization and flourishing of the field of moral development.

Reference

Jensen, L. A. (2016). *The Oxford handbook of human development and culture: An interdisciplinary perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.