

Development of Moral Reasoning in Early Childhood

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Abstract

This research investigates the development of moral reasoning in early childhood, focusing on how young children navigate concepts of right and wrong. The study examines key factors influencing moral development, including cognitive growth, social interactions, and cultural contexts. Through observational studies and interviews with caregivers and educators, the research explores how children aged three to six years old understand moral dilemmas and the influence of parental guidance and peer interactions on their moral reasoning. The findings reveal that children begin to grasp basic moral concepts through experiential learning and observation, with significant variations based on individual temperament and environmental factors. Additionally, the study highlights the role of play in facilitating moral understanding, as children engage in cooperative and competitive scenarios that challenge their ethical perspectives. By identifying developmental milestones in moral reasoning, this research contributes to the broader discourse on childhood education and psychological development, offering insights into effective strategies for fostering moral awareness and ethical behavior in early childhood settings.

Keywords: moral reasoning, early childhood, cognitive development, social interactions, cultural contexts, moral dilemmas, parental guidance, ethical behavior.

1. Introduction

Commonly accepted that moral reasoning is a domain of cognitive development that is critical to the social behavior of children. In light of this view, maintaining and developing moral reasoning in young children as a pathway to counter biologically based egocentrism, as well as more willful and self-justifying thinking. This is assumed to foster moral agreement with the welfare of others, including shared intentions and compassion, nurturing empathy with others and creating ethical

decisions and behaviors on this basis. This stands in contrast to recent research that moral reasoning does more than displaces aggression. Issues of moral reasoning are cast in a historical context as a precursor of the rationalist or cognitive view of psychological development. Four research questions in the moral reasoning, as follows. What are the cognitive and affective substrates of disengagement from the considerations of the welfare of others and disengagement from the simplest conceptions of social conventions? How do they operate together, or are there different processes corresponding to each? Or is disengagement from social rules merely the lack of their consideration? How does the balance of the prosocial and aggressive moral reasoning change over development, and do they disengage in a different sequence and by the mechanism postulated earlier? How does it meet in natural settings? (Dahl & Killen, 2018). Together, it is argued that this emphasis underappreciates the interplay of cognitive and emotional factors in moral reasoning and means to introduce themes from developmental psychology on the microgenesis of dilemmas reasoning. Concerns with themes of justice and social equality also are missing, although not for all participants. (Winther-Lindqvist 2022)

1.1. Definition of Moral Reasoning

Moral reasoning is broadly defined as the process by which individuals make judgments about right and wrong (Dahl & Killen, 2018). Many theorists have argued that moral reasoning, serving as a guide for behavior, is key to understanding human survival or the development of principle or virtue, which describes how one acts oneself or expects others to act. For this reason many scientists have long been interested in advancing our knowledge of the components of moral reasoning, its origins, the developmental stages through which it evolves, and its implications for everyday behavior and social relationships. Moral reasoning is not only a matter of logical evaluation but also a complex constellation of emotional reactions and social dynamics which work together to steer an individual's understanding of right and wrong. Children's limited ability to grasp and apply developed systems such as doctrine moral reasoning has led many scholars to argue that everyday moral understanding is rooted more in the development of competences than in the acquisition of specific ideas or perspectives. Given that moral concepts are taught,

perpetuated, and enforced through attitudes, situations, and behaviors, empirical research must ask how exposure to such elements over development impacts individual development of naturally-occurring moral reasoning while also guiding the direction of study towards a consideration of how malleable and likely-to-change products of exposure.

Moral norms are essentially domain-specific social conventions, most obviously displayed in a customary way of feeding, sleeping, and using aggression. Though possessing universal ingredients, such norms vary widely among different social and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, moral norms can only be understood as a subset of the broader range of norms that govern human behavior. An integrated framework of moral and conventional norms may only be reached when morality is conceived as it is in the realm of everyday life: a diffuse, malleable, and reciprocal construct intimately tied-up with social interactions. (Odom et al.2021)

2. Theoretical Framework

Many psychological models have been developed in an effort to explain the manner in which children comprehend morality. In considering child behavior in high-conflict situations, it is useful to reflect upon these theories and consider their implications for the behavioral young child. Current understanding of moral development is heavily influenced by contributions from psychologists, predominantly from three perspectives (Dahl & Killen, 2018). Viewing moral reasoning as a developmental progression, a number of researchers have proposed stage models. According to these theorists, moral reasoning undergoes several qualitative changes as children mature. Preconventional, Conventional, and Postconventional levels are commonly delineated, each level comprising two stages. Piaget, Kohlberg, Turiel, and Elkind have been active proponents of this perspective. Alternatively, more recent approaches have examined the manner in which children socialize with persons from various segments of their world. Building upon social learning theory, these researchers have examined the processes through which children learn to evaluate the rightness or wrongness of actions. Here environmental events are salient, and the focus is on the acquisition of specific behaviors rather than the comprehension of abstract principles. Finally, moral development may be understood in the context of a child's social environment

incorporating her cognitive understanding of moral principles. A beneficial first step is to distinguish between these disparate theoretical perspectives. While there are common thematic elements, distinctions become clearer when the models are considered in detail. Thus moral reasoning is defined somewhat differently, thereby influencing the possible means of studying it. A common theme among these definitions, however, is that moral reasoning is viewed as one aspect of a broader interaction. Each of the three perspectives mentioned above emphasizes complementary components of this interaction. Broad models of cognitive development are built upon already complex edifices. How then can moral reasoning be defined such that it is both distinctive and theoretically homogeneous? A possible approach is to embed moral reasoning within broader theories of development. This takes cognizance of prevailing theories, while allowing their respective strengths and shortcomings to be examined. Understanding the foundations of moral reasoning from such a perspective goes hand in hand with conceptualizing it as a dynamic process. As children progress through their developmental course, moral reasoning undergoes various changes and modifications. (Fragkiadaki et al., 2022)

2.1. Piaget's Theory of Moral Development

After detailed observation of children during episodes of social play, including their interactions and verbal exchanges, Piaget highlighted changes in moral reasoning during the pre-operational period. Piaget's theory of moral development is anchored in the broader cognitive and intellectual theorisation of the Swiss psychologist. The shift from unilateral or heteronomous moral reasoning to reciprocal or autonomous morality unfolds through a number of stages and is conditioned by cognitive change. During the playing interactions with peers, children are more likely to reinterpret moral rules flexibly as they begin to engage in cooperative play. First, children reinterpret rules about moral reciprocity. Second, they reinterpret rules related to authority and change agents. Third, they reinterpret rules about equality of social rights and duties. Fourth, they reinterpret hegemonic moral reciprocity rules.

Piaget's theory of cognitive moral reason mediates the engagement of playing situations with other peers. This framework proves essential to understand the negotiation processes of social rules. Piaget's theory is particularly adapted to

describe the changes throughout early development of children's conceptions of moral rules. Although most of the moral rules children handle early on are still based on objective and concrete characteristics, just as social rules do, children are likely to engage more often in complex moral reasoning as they begin to play together. The preparation of elementary moral reasoning is instrumental in understanding the rapid changes that occur in the reinterpretation of moral rules through more advanced forms of play. This framework is reinforced by the recent spate of studies in the field of moral neuroscience (Dahl & Killen, 2018) which provides new perspectives to investigate child moral development in relation to neuroscience. Piaget's theory constitutes the foundation as well as a reference to most subsequent research in child psychology. Therefore, Piaget's perspective is useful to evaluate educational issues inasmuch as it questions the children's morality and implications are still valid. (Blewitt et al.2021)

3. Empirical Studies

Underlying the socially sensitive disposition with a moral sense there are certain biological features called predispositions that, interacting with the environment in which individuals grow, give rise to the development of cooperation and compliance of avoidance behaviors; i.e. behaviors that, both at the behavioral and socio-cognitive level, when presented in the form of social interactions between self and others, configure what is commonly defined as moral sense. This perspective helps to contextualize human moral sense within a broad evolutionary reflection and call into question an integrated and interific reexamination of the intricate web of variables that sustain the refinement and diversification of human moral sense. The article ends with new horizons, trends, and bioethics applications. In early morality, inquiring into distinguishing the elicited and non-elicited preference for characters who help and hinder others in need, and combining preferential attention tasks with reaching tasks to further explore the association between social evaluation and action (Limone & Antonia Toto, 2022). A study shows that socio-environmental factors support the presence of moral sense in toddlers and young infants, which emerges from the interaction of prepared minds with the environment which acts on it. This causes a distinction between the morally well-founded violations of intentional actions and the

comprehension of the consequences of the intentions behind the action itself. These findings are discussed in the light of a cognitive mechanism dedicated to the attribution of intentions from action outcomes, and explain the emergence in the first two years of life of the ability in specifying the social and moral evaluation of various types of antisocial actions. Starting from a constructive approach, three fundamental reflections are stated; the first is methodological and underscores the need for a complete and satisfactory definition of morality. Up to date, interest and research on the moral development of the child have emphasized the cognitive and dispositional aspects of morality. However, the social environment greatly influences the development of moral knowledge and the moral choices of the child. Therefore, a wide theoretical-conceptual review on the social and cultural components of morality is performed. Subsequently, the results of various empirical studies that investigated the socio-moral development of the child are examined to detect to what extent these investigations have taken into consideration forms of moral sense that go beyond the individual evaluation. Finally, on the basis of a systematic review of the literature, directions for future research have been identified, aimed at filling the identified gaps in the studies carried out, and emphasizing the need to focus on socio-morality in education and training interventions. (Lunga et al.2022)

3.1. Longitudinal Studies

Decades of research have assessed moral reasoning in infants, toddlers, and older children; these behaviors include social evaluations of helping/hindering, fairness, and preference for instrumental behavior versus acts that socialize or inform (Dahl & Killen, 2018). Longitudinal studies have the potential to go beyond age differences to examine growth curves, within-individual stability, and change.

Previous research suggests that moral judgment and social evaluations evidence marked changes across the preschool years. Some foundational precursors are in place by 5-years but children's understanding of most moral concepts is quite limited at this age. Past research supports the assertion that moral understanding is relatively simple in preschoolers. By 7-years most children believe that rules stem from the authorities that enact them; personal choice is not salient for young children, rather, the salience of authority underscores their difficulty with moral domains. With age and experience,

children more frequently base judgments on considerations of intent rather than outcome. Infants' and preschoolers' preferences and evaluations of prosocial and antisocial agents provide converging evidence that social evaluations evidence considerable change with age and maturity. (Bodén, 2021)

4. Factors Influencing Moral Reasoning

Moral reasoning refers to the way in which individuals analyze moral problems, justify their opinions, and resolve moral conflicts. It underlies moral judgment and leads individuals to make moral decisions. The main aim of moral reasoning is to determine whether a situation or an action is right or wrong. Several factors influence the perspective people can have in regard to a moral issue. Moral reasoning would be subject to cognitive influences, such as the authenticity of the situation or the context. Also, empathy can greatly affect moral reasoning. The way an individual evaluates, responds, and feels about a given situation has a significant incidence on their moral reasoning (Bentahila et al., 2021). In addition, social interactions can mold moral reasoning. Research with peers, for example, would be one remarkable support to expand moral perspectives. In the same vein, media, especially the news, contributes to amplify the spectrum of moral reasoning.

Cultural context plays a decisive role in shaping moral perspectives. The variation of moral detection across cultures supports this idea, with some cultures receptacle to a wider range of moral ideas. Exposure to other socio-cultural contexts can broaden moral perspectives and bring out a better understanding of morality. Social learning theory would stand for the distance comparison explanation- individuals get ideas from comparisons with others, generally regarding paradigms- and the social uncertainty account- people learn from a different perspective and infer more acceptable norms. In most societies, values are ideals to be shared, and some moral dispositions would be transmitted in a unique way. In non-WEIRD societies, there would be a low cultural diversity in morality, therefore resulting in lesser moral reasoning content compared to WEIRD societies. (Cumbo and Selwyn2022)

4.1. Parental Influence

Formation of moral reasoning in young children has been the subject of increasing research interest in recent decades. While understanding of morality in psychology

dates back to the time of Piaget and Kohlberg, their studies are limited to children in middle childhood and adolescence, respectively. However, recent studies have shown that even infants are sensitive to prosocial and antisocial behaviours, suggesting that the emergence of moral cognition occurs earlier than previously thought. Little is known regarding the development of more complex moral reasoning in early childhood, including the capacity to judge mental states that underpin actions of agents in hypothetical moral dilemmas. It has been shown that children between the ages of 3 and 7 years are capable of making such mentalistic judgments in very simple situations (Dworazik et al., 2019). However, this ability may not be fully developed until children are older, affecting their responses to complex moral dilemmas. The purpose of the current study is to contribute to a better understanding of this nascent ability between 5 and 7 years of age using a new set of stories designed to vary the valence of the anticipated positive or negative outcome, or intention, of harmful acts. This study is of particular interest due to the severe nature of the situations depicted.

Four sets of stories were read aloud by a male or female experimenter to 96 children, divided by age group, who were then asked to judge the wrongness of a harmful act by its outcome or intention. The acquired results suggest that both outcomes and intentions are taken into account when performing such judgments. However, a significant interaction reveals a triumph of judgments by outcome (greater wrongness) over those by intention in the older group, especially when acts are harmful but beneficial. This study provides evidence for the burgeoning but fragile ability of 5- to 7-year-olds to judge harmful acts in moral terms led to outcomes and intentions. A better appreciation of the complexity of these judgments is provided by the inconsistency found in their performance. (Yang et al.2022)

5. Educational Implications

Research has consistently demonstrated that there is a critical connection between moral reasoning and educational practices. This interrelation is revealed through the importance of adult pedagogical interventions in the shaping of children's moral understanding, and is further supported by the success of empirical research in promoting an increase in level of moral reasoning in pre- and elementary school

students through training-like interventions (Paris, 2011). Based on this literature, those involved in early childhood education are able to best investigate the moral reasoning context of elementary school students. It is recommended that more widespread efforts be made to investigate this aspect of children's developing understanding in the context that spends the large majority of time with children – the educational context. In response to this call for expanding research, a cross-sectional study of elementary school student moral development in the classroom and home environment was conducted (O'Brien, 1998). Through the integration of moral reasoning into the early childhood education curriculum, teachers will be able to focus instruction and intervention on tasks specifically designed to prompt the examination of different perspectives, concessions of reciprocity, and moral evaluation of others' life dilemmas. Beyond the curricular changes in the way teachers can foster moral development, the results of this study suggest that the manner in which the classroom environment is organized can also have important implications for the moral development of elementary school children. Creating a more egalitarian and impersonal environment, such as one smaller in class size, emphasizing affection and cooperation, emphasizing active and participatory-style instruction, nurturing autonomy within the students, encouraging participation in decision-making, and emphasizing consistency in the application of classroom rules can all contribute to the normative development of children. (Syakhrani & Aslan, 2022)

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