

MORAL REASONING IN THE EARLY YEARS: AGE AND GENDER PATTERNS AMONGST YOUNG CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) the study sought to examine children's moral reasoning about situations involving conflicts and how they would resolve them. It also explored whether children's choice of moral orientation varied across individual factors such as age and gender. The study was conducted at a primary school in a working class suburb in THE province of KwaZulu-Natal. The participants in the study were a group of 72 grade one and two students. They were randomly selected stratified by age (6, 7 and 8 year olds) and gender. The children were required to respond to three scenarios depicting real life moral dilemmas. A key finding was that children's responses across gender and age reflected more of a care than a justice orientation. Across age ranges boys' responses reflected more of a care orientation than a justice orientation which is contrary to Kohlberg's view. Girls' responses reflected a greater care orientation than a justice orientation, as found in studies by Gilligan.

Key words: children, Gilligan, moral reasoning, South Africa

Introduction

There has been considerable debate as to how children acquire morality. Social learning theorists believe that children learn morality by being rewarded or punished for various kinds of behaviour (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963). Cognitive theorists

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assert that like intellectual development morality develops in progressive, age-related stages (Piaget, 1965). Piaget also reasoned that there was a process by which children conform to society's norms of what is right and wrong, and that the process was active rather than passive. Children's understandings of rules progress from comprehending at about age six that rules are sacred and cannot be violated to a final stage at about age ten when they understand that rules are the result of mutual consent. According to the psychosocial theory of Erikson (1964) the morality of childhood is based on the fear of threats to be forestalled. The outer fears are abandonment, punishment or exposure and the inner fears are of guilt, shame or isolation. The development of a moral attitude implies certain forms of feelings where others have been treated unfairly or where self has violated others rights or failed in responsibility to other persons. Feelings of shame are related to the failure to live up to one's self-ideal and identity.

A model of moral development that has dominated the field for over 30 years has been that of Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1969). Kohlberg (1973; 1981; 1984) cultivated a theory of moral development, which shared with Piaget's the view that moral reasoning is fundamentally a cognitive process. Consistent with Piaget, Kohlberg proposed that children form ways of thinking through their experiences, which include understandings of moral concepts such as justice, rights, equality and human welfare. Kohlberg followed the development of moral judgement beyond the ages studied by Piaget, and determined that the process of attaining moral maturity took longer and was more gradual than Piaget had proposed. In Kohlberg's theory moral reasoning is evaluated in terms of an individual's ability to consider issues of fairness and justice, and to balance the needs of the self and larger society. Kohlberg (1969) identified justice as an essential factor in the socialisation process and significant in the adolescent years. He identified 6 stages of moral development in the individual that are relative to the "justice structures" (Kohlberg, 1984). The stages begin from a primitive mode of obedience to the judgement of a situation on the basis of universal principles of justice. The adolescent is believed to become more sensitive to the morality of particular circumstances as his or her judgement becomes free from personal or situational constraints.

Though widely respected and cited, Kohlberg's work has been criticised for its attention to only one mode of reasoning, for its use of

decontextualized hypothetical dilemmas, and for its focus on moral thought rather than moral action. In Kohlberg's theory moral maturity is equated with autonomy, independence, impartiality, objectivity, and individualism which some critics argue remain exclusive to the masculine ideal (Gilligan, 1982; Jorgensen, 2006; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau & Thomas, 1999)).

A number of writers have since argued that morality is multi-faceted, and that morality is more than the rational determination of the moral thought. It involves also the ability to see that a situation has moral dimensions. Rest (1983; 1986) referred to this as moral sensitivity. Morality requires that one has the motivation to behave morally (Rest, 1986). Carol Gilligan, an American feminist ethicist and psychologist, appeared to be one of Kohlberg's strongest critics. She argued for the need for a more complex understanding of morality. Gilligan (1982) who came to be known as the founder of 'difference feminism' claimed that women have different moral and psychological tendencies than men. Based on her research, Gilligan suggested that men think more in terms of rules and justice, and women are more likely to think in terms of caring and relationships. She argued that society should begin to value both equally.

Gilligan (1982) also challenged Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development. She asserted that that in Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development, the male view of individual rights and values were considered at a higher stage than women's view of development, in terms of its caring effect on human relationships. According to Kohlberg the highest stages of moral development (fifth and sixth stage) can only be derived from an objective reflective understanding of human rights and social justice. Based on her research, Gilligan critiqued this by arguing that the psychology of women is distinctive in that it is more oriented towards relationships, interdependence, and a strong sense of responsibility to the world, and therefore a more contextual kind of judgement and a different moral reasoning. Therefore, women order human experiences in terms of different priorities (Gilligan; 1977; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Gilligan, Murphy & Tappan, 1990).

Gilligan's (1982) studies showed that women tended much more often than the men to see morality in terms of care rather than justice, in terms of responsibility rather than rights. Gilligan & Attanucci (1988) explain men see things as moral issues where they

involve competing claims about rights. Women, on the other hand, see problems as moral when they involve the suffering of other people. Whereas men see the primary moral imperative as centring on treating everyone fairly, women see that moral imperative as centring on caring about others and about themselves. Men typically make moral decisions by applying rules fairly and impartially, whereas women are more likely to seek resolutions that preserve emotional connectedness for everyone. Similarly, men tend to look back and to judge whether a moral decision was correct or not by asking whether the rules were properly applied, whereas women tend to ask whether relationships were preserved and whether people were hurt. The quality of the relationships, rather than the impartiality of the decisions, is the standard for evaluating decisions for women.

In the last two decades or so, drawing from her research, an alternate framework was presented by Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Gilligan & Wiggins, 1988). She argues for two moral orientations (rather than stages) in the understanding of the social world: a justice perspective (leading to equality of rights and fairness), and a care perspective (leading to attachment, responsibility, dependency and loyalty). Following on these debates, numerous studies examined these theories from different angles (for example, Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Muthukrishna, Hugo, Wedekind & Khan, 2006; Walker, de Vries & Trevethan, 1987; Woods, 1996). Several studies with adolescent and adults showed conflicting findings (Lyons, 1983; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Walker, 1989; Walker, Devries & Trevethan, 1987, Enomoto, 1998, Johnstone, 1988). Gilligan & Attanucci (1988) and Lyons (1983) found that women were more likely to focus on issues of care and concern when talking about real life dilemmas, whereas men have a tendency to focus on the justice and fairness views. Walker (1989) and Walker et al (1987) found few consistent gender differences in moral orientation. In engaging with these conflicting findings, Walker et al. (1987) argue that the use of hypothetical dilemmas may be irrelevant or unfamiliar and as such may minimize the individuals' identification and emotional involvement with the task. Johnston (1988) found in studies using the 'fable task' that female adolescents described concerns about relationships more often than males than when asked to talk about real life dilemmas.

Pratt, Golding, Hunter & Sampson (1988) suggest that gender differences appeared to reflect the different types of real life problems

that were likely to be experienced by men and women. In other words, the social experiences of males and females differ in everyday life, and may explain the nature of the moral experiences they relate. However, other studies have found both men and women using the care modality over the justice modality (for example, Vera & Levin, 1989), depending on the level of importance and degree of difficulty of the problem. This makes sense, the more important a case is to a person, the more one cares about it and the greater the level of difficulty the more problematic it becomes to use clear cut justice orientations. This finding is reasonably consistent with the meta-analysis of gender differences in moral orientation conducted by Jaffee and Hyde (2000). They concluded that, although there was a gender difference, it was small and it provided only modest support for the arguments made by Gilligan that men are predominantly justice oriented and that women are predominantly care oriented. It is important to remember, however, that most of the studies Jaffee and Hyde (2000) reviewed were conducted with white samples, and ethnicity was not included as a variable.

In the study reported in this article, we examined how the two moral orientations, justice and care, are manifested in the ways *young* children define and resolve moral problems. The key research questions were: Are there differences in respect of age and gender in how morality is developed in young children? Do the children's age and gender reflect one orientation over another in conflict resolution?

THE STUDY

Theoretical framework

The social construction of childhood as outlined by James and Prout (1997) formed the theoretical framework of the study. From this perspective, childhood is seen as a negotiated process where children are active in constructing their own social world, and interpreting the meaning of that world and its significance in their personal lives. Mayall (2002) argues that this approach accepts children as competent reporters of their own experiences, takes them seriously, and places their views at the centre of analysis enabling research to work for the children rather than on them. James and Prout (1997) argued that childhood is a distinct, intrinsically interesting, and important phase in human experience. Children are fully formed and complete individuals with perspectives of their own. They are autonomous subjects. Rayner (1991) asserted that children are a

large influential section of the community. Thus, Hardman (1973) stresses the need to give voice to children, as people to be studied in their own right. Mayall (2002) suggests that we can no longer talk about children, rather we should talk with children. We took the approach that even young children are active in the construction and determination of their own lives.

Context of study

Although South Africa has undergone a dramatic economic, social and political transition in the last decade, the socio-economic landscape in South Africa continues to be characterised by widespread poverty and inequality (Armstrong & Burger, 2009). Extreme levels of inequality have led to high levels of crime and violence. The extreme levels of inequality in the country have led to high levels of crime and violence. South Africa has the highest rates of violent crime in the world. In South Africa, the fact that children experience the symbolic and physical violence of murder, abuse of women and children, rape, prejudice and discrimination, robbery and assault on a daily basis as a result of the combination of a highly unequal society and high crime levels in urban areas is well documented (Barbarin & Richter, 2001; Gie, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2001 Human Sciences Research Council, 2003).

Given the above context of childhood in South Africa, we were of the view that it was important to examine the ways in which children make everyday moral judgements and engage in moral decision making when confronted with incidents of symbolic and physical violence. The study was conducted at a primary school situated in province of KwaZulu-Natal. The school is situated in a historically disadvantaged and predominantly working class and lower middle class community... It is a co-educational public school with a population of approximately 1100 students.

Participants in the study

The participants in the study were a group of 72 grade one and two students. They were randomly selected from an alphabetical class list, and stratified by age (6, 7 and 8 year olds) and gender in that 12 boys and 12 girls were selected from each age group.

Data collection methods

The children were required to respond to situated scenarios that reflected a moral dilemma. The scenarios were used for obtaining

data on the children's reasoning. A scenario is a carefully constructed description of a particular situation under investigation. The scenarios were used to explore the ethical frameworks informing children's thinking about moral issues. The use of scenarios removed some of the pressures of being interviewed creating a more informal, relaxed atmosphere for the children. The scenarios below were developed taking into account the context of the lives of the participants.

Scenario One

One day after school Peter and Brandon were arguing. They go to the same school. I stopped and listened. This is what the fight was about. Two weeks ago, Brandon begged Peter to lend him R10 because he was hungry and wanted to buy chips from the school tuck shop. Peter gave him the money. Brandon promised to return the money on the next day. Peter told Brandon that the money was his brother's money - his brother asked him to keep the money for him. His brother wanted to buy pens for school with the money. It was now two weeks gone by - Brandon kept on hiding from Peter and Brandon still did not return the money. Peter was very angry. He caught Brandon after school, was shouting at him, and threatened to beat him/hit him. Brandon was also shouting at Peter - saying that he would return the money one of these days.

Questions

1. What do you think happened in this story?
2. Was what Brandon did right?
3. Was it right that Peter wanted to hit Brandon?
4. Is there any other way in which Peter could have got his money back from Brandon?
5. When do you think it would be okay to hit someone?
6. Should we help people like Brandon? Why?

Scenario Two

John is 20 years old, and lives with his parents. Next door lives the neighbour Themba and his family. John loves music and everyday he plays his music very loud. John says that he can only enjoy his music when it is very loud. When the people walk past John's house, they can hear the "Boom", "boom", "boom" from the road. Many times Themba complained about the noise to John and John's father. The father said that John loves music

and he cannot stop him from doing what he likes. Yesterday, Themba came from work very tired - he heard the loud noise of the music and got very angry. He rushed to his garage, took a big stick and went over to John's house. There was a big argument. John kept on saying that his music was not loud, and that it was good music. Themba threatened to break the sound system in the house and beat up John.

Questions

1. What happened in this story?
2. Was John right in what he did? Why?
3. What did Themba do? Is it right what Themba did?
4. Should Themba have behaved in such a way? Why?
5. How can two people make things right? What can they do to be friends again?
6. Themba wanted to hit John. When is it okay to hit someone?

Scenario Three

Mala and Rita are in the same class. One day Mala wanted to borrow Rita's ruler and Rita said that she cannot lend her the ruler as she is afraid that the ruler may get lost. The next day Rita was leaving the classroom to go outside. It was break time. As she reached the stairs, Mala pushed Rita from behind, and Rita fell down three steps. Rita was hurt and began crying. Mala just stood there and laughed at Rita.

Questions

1. What do you think happened in this story?
2. Was Mala right or wrong in what she did? Why?
3. Was Rita right or wrong in what she did? Why?
4. How would you have felt if you were their friend and saw what happened? Why?
5. When is it okay to hurt someone like this? Why?
6. What would you say to Mala and Rita to make things right? Why? Can they be friends again?

Research procedure

Each child was interviewed for approximately 30 minutes either in English or in isiZulu depending on the child's language proficiency. Each interview was based on three tasks in which children had to listen to scenarios depicting real life dilemmas, and to respond to questions based on the scenarios. The questions were asked during

individual interviews, and the researcher probed to clarify responses and to encourage elaboration.

The teacher read the scenarios. Pictures were used to draw the children's attention to the presented characters, and to render the task more understandable and more concrete. The children were first asked to explain the scenario to ensure that the event was fully understood, and then to respond to the questions. Interviews were audio-taped, translated into English where necessary, and later transcribed for scoring.

Data analysis

Through a process of content analysis, children's moral orientations were examined within and across the two dilemmas. Using the transcripts, firstly, responses across both the dilemmas were independently examined to identify moral judgements, and then they were coded for the orientational logic that they represented. The coding procedure used was adapted from Beal, Garrod, Ruben, Stewart & Dekle (1997), Johnston (1988) and Ward (1988). Children's responses were classified as showing an orientation to care/concern for others, or an orientation to justice/rights.

The process of data analysis began with searching for the conventional hallmarks of justice and care began data analysis. Each moral statement could be coded and counted separately. *Justice* as a moral orientation has fairness as its moral objective. Responses that were judged to invoke rules or refer to duty, fairness, and taking advantage of unequal power or issues of personal rights, norms, standards or obligations were coded as operating from justice logic. The *care orientation* focussed on ways to maintain the relationships between the individuals, concern that individuals may get hurt, be harmed, experience pain, or experience psychological or physical suffering, or aim to promote the welfare of all involved.

However, the data did not fit neatly into only these two categories. Some of the statements combined considerations of justice as well as considerations of care. These formulations were categorized as "both". The "*integrated*" category is unique in that both justice and care considerations and judgments must occur together in the same statement. The final category "uncodable" included statements that did not offer enough information to be reliably coded.

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were taken into consideration when conducting the research. Written permission was sought from the Department of Education, the school principal, parents, and caregivers who were informed of the nature of the research. A letter was sent home to parents of all children who were selected for this study. The nature and purpose of the study was explained to them and informed consent was sought. The letters were in English and isiZulu to ensure that all parents could access the information. Parents or caregivers had to sign the letters to signify approval of a child's participation in the research. It was explained to parents and caregivers that their identity and that of their children and any information that they provided were in all circumstances to be treated as confidential. In addition, they were informed that participation was totally voluntary and that they were free to withdraw their children from the study at any stage and for any reason.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Is there a justice vs care orientation distinction?

Across the three scenarios, participants made 930 statements that depicted some moral orientation. 237 (30%) were statements that supported a justice orientation and 554 (70%) a care orientation. The other two categories 'unintegrated' and 'uncodable' comprised 139 (15%) of the responses. There were 31 responses that fell into the unintegrated category and 108 in the uncodable category. The responses that fell in the "both" category were counted twice (46 responses – 46 justice and 46 care) and allocated to both justice and care.

An analysis of the data revealed that it was possible to identify the distinctions in moral orientations proposed by Gilligan (1982) in responses of the children in the study. The most common justice orientations were: duty, fairness, taking advantage of unequal power, attention to undeserved punishment, issues of personal rights, norms, standards, rights, obligations and child protection. The most common care orientations were: maintain relationships between the individuals, engage in communication and dialogue, concern that individuals may get hurt, be harmed, experience pain, or experience psychological or physical suffering, or aim to promote the welfare of

all involved. Examples of responses illustrating justice orientation and care orientation from scenario are presented below:

Care orientation

Peter should have told his parents to intervene. His parents would speak to Brandon's parents and sort out the problem. (girl, 6 yrs) (maintain the relationships between the individuals)

No. Peter should ask very nicely to get the money back from Brandon. (boy, 6 yrs) (engage in communication, dialogue)

It is not right to hit Brandon in any given circumstances because he will get hurt. (boy, 7 yrs) (empathy)

Peter can phone Brandon's mother and tell her. Brandon will be forced to pay back the money. (girl, 8 yrs). (maintain the relationships between the individuals).

Justice orientation

No, because if you steal no one can help you. (boy, 8 yrs) (norms of society).

No, because if Peter lend Brandon the money, he must give Peter back the money because Peter is doing him a favour by lending him the money. (girl, 8 yrs) (duty)

No, because Brandon need to pay Peter back if he owed him money. (girl, 7 yrs) (obligation)

Peter should lay a complaint against Brandon at the police station. Because Brandon does not want to pay back Peter's money. (girl, 6 yrs) (standards, norms)

Trends in children's moral orientations by age and gender

There are interesting trends with respect to age and gender that emerged in the data (refer to Table 1). The combined responses reflected a greater care orientation than a justice orientation across gender and age. 70% of the responses reflected a care orientation, and 30% reflected a justice orientation.

Overall, across age boys' responses reflected a more care orientation than a justice orientation, contrary to Kohlberg's view. 68% of the responses by boys reflected a care orientation compared to 32% that reflected a justice orientation. Furthermore, the findings for boys did not support Gilligan's views. The boys' use of a care orientation increased with age from 61% in the 6-year age group to 64% in the 7-year age range and 74% in the 8-year age group.

Peter could have told his mother that Brandon took his money or they could have talked about it. (boy, 6 yrs). (engage in communication, dialogue).

No, hitting another person is not right. Fighting is not good because people who fight get hurt. (boy, 7 yrs) (empathy)

Apologize and Peter could have said sorry for threatening Brandon. Then he could have got his money back. (boy, 8 yrs) (maintain the relationships between the individual)

Peter could have just asked Brandon nicely for the money without fighting and he could have given the money back. (boy, 8 yrs) (engage in communication, dialogue)

However, across age girls' responses reflected a greater care orientation (72%) than a justice orientation (28%), as suggested by Gilligan.

Table 1: Number of moral orientation responses by age range and gender *

Age	Gender	Justice Orientation	Care Orientation	Total
6 yrs	Boys (n = 8)	26 (39%)	41 (61%)	67
	Girls (n = 9)	35 (35%)	65 (65%)	100
Total		61 (37%)	106 (63%)	167
7 yrs	Boys (n = 13)	48 (36%)	87 (64%)	135
	Girls (n = 13)	44 (29%)	108 (71%)	152
Total		92 (32%)	195 (68%)	287
8 yrs	Boys (n = 12)	44 (26%)	127 (74%)	171
	Girls (n = 12)	40 (24%)	126 (76%)	166
Total		84 (25%)	253 (75%)	337
Total across Gender	Boys (n = 33)	118 (32%)	255 (68%)	373
	Girls (n = 34)	119 (28%)	299 (72%)	418
Total statements made		237 (30%)	554 (70%)	791

**adjusted for the "both" category.*

The girls' use of a care orientation increased with age, which was consistent with findings suggested by Gilligan. In the 6-year age group, 65% of the girls' responses reflected a care orientation, while in the 7-year age range, 71% of the responses by girls suggested a care orientation and in the 8-year age group 76% reflected a care orientation. Gilligan predicted an increase in care orientation for girls as they grow older (Gilligan, 1982).

However, in both age groups they were more care orientation, with an increase in care orientation with age. In fact, the results indicate a decrease in justice orientation with age. In the 6-year olds, 37% of responses reflected a justice orientation, the 7-year olds 32% of responses reflected a justice orientation, and in the 8-year olds 25% of responses were justice oriented.

Overall, the results converge with other findings to suggest that boys' and girls' reasoning about moral problems appear initially similar in childhood, even though their experiences growing up as male or female have been quite different (Walker, De Vries, & Trevethan, 1987; Walker, 1989; Langdale, 1993; Beal, 1994). The growing evidence for gender similarity in childhood presents a challenge to the suggestion that early differences in patterns of attachment might lead to differences between males and females in notions of relationships and moral orientation (Beal, 1994). The possibility that males are socialised early to adopt a more individualistic, detached perspective on moral problems does not fit well with the present findings indicating that both boys and girls showed a large and consistent preference for the care orientation. Thus, early in development, both boys and girls appear to understand the importance of solving problems in a way that considers the needs and concerns of all individuals.

Conclusion

In the study, embedded in children's understandings of violence could be identified concepts of justice and care as moral orientations, in line with the view of Gilligan (1982).

The findings in this study revealed that, contrary to Kohlberg's view, across age and gender the students' responses reflected a higher moral orientation to care than justice. An interesting finding was that across age boys' responses reflected a more care orientation than a justice orientation. A similar pattern was evident with girls across the age ranges. In fact, children in this context are more likely to choose

the care perspective because early in development both boys and girls appear to understand the importance of solving problems in a way that considers the needs and concerns of all participants. Therefore, the findings did corroborate fully with Gilligan's theory of moral orientation

Girls' responses reflected a greater attention to hurt, pain, or suffering compared to boys. Boys' most frequent explanations given for justice reasoning involved violation of a principle. This is in line with Gilligan's view (Gilligan, 1982).

The distinctive feature of this study is the use of real life rather than hypothetical dilemmas. The scenarios were standardized rather than the children providing their own experiences of violence for analysis. Kohlberg's hypothetical dilemmas were an integral component of his interview method. Gilligan and her colleagues (Gilligan, 1982; Lyons, 1983; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Gilligan et al., 1988) have suggested that hypothetical problems tend to elicit rights-orientated reasoning, and that the care orientation is best observed in responses to the real life moral dilemma. In other words, these hypothetical dilemmas presupposed a definition of morality as justice and were biased towards justice-based resolutions. In contrast, Gilligan used open-ended interview questions about real life dilemmas. In our study, real life dilemmas were developed taking into account the context of the lives of the participants.

Our study highlights that although the children who have been exposed to violence and situations where their rights may have been restricted unfairly, they still exhibited a care orientation. Their concern was for moral solutions expressing principles of care, responsibility, dependency, loyalty, concern that individuals may get hurt, and be harmed, experience pain, or experience psychological or physical suffering. However, further research is needed with a larger sample to confirm and clarify the trends in this study.

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