

Final Research Paper

Peter E Ziropiannis

Long Island University

C.W. Post Campus- EDU-1003

Abstract

This paper concerns itself with two very important topics: Moral Development and Moral Education. In order for institutions (schools, churches, etc.) to employ “best practices” in teaching children morality, it is imperative for us to understand how children acquire morality. There is more concern than ever before about the declining moral values of our society. Increased violent juvenile crime and blatant disregard for authority leads many to question the strength of our value system. In light of such concerns, is there an obligation for schools to teach moral and social values, as a means of finding solutions to these and other social problems? In this paper, a number of classic theoretical studies, which attempt to explain how children’s morality develops, are examined. Several recent biological studies, which purport to have isolated certain areas of the brain responsible for our morality, are also reviewed. Finally, the paper discusses the apparent linkage between moral development and cognitive development in children, and explores certain factors that may influence both.

KEYWORDS: morality, moral education, cognitive development

Introduction

What is morality? Morality is generally considered a code of conduct. However, it can also be viewed in its universal normative sense “as a guide to behavior that, in plausible specified conditions, all rational persons would put forward for governing the behavior of all moral agents.” Is our morality relative or universal?- put forward by society or some other group, or is there a universal morality that applies to all human beings across all cultures? In examining the works of theorists like Kohlberg, the answer to this question may become clearer. Whether or not our morality is relative or universal may depend upon which stage of moral development we attain.

What is moral education, and how do we acquire our morality? As the world becomes more crowded, poverty becomes more pervasive-- the media reports on the disintegration of society's moral fiber. Violent juvenile crimes, teen pregnancy, drug use and suicide are only a few of the societal ails that can be linked to a break down in our moral structure. People are trying to navigate the treacherous waters of modern society without a reliable moral compass. Our moral education is the product of childhood teachings, conventional wisdom and questionable institutions. The domain of moral education is the concern for such moral virtues as honesty, responsibility and respect for others. Therefore, moral education should help children acquire those virtues or moral habits that will enable them to live good lives, and become productive, contributing members of society. Does moral education accomplish its goal? The reason it may not, might have to do with the fact that moral education is not tailored to the cognitive development of the audience it preaches to. In addition, our educational system

could actually be stunting children's moral development, as well as their cognitive development due to current educational policy, such as High Stakes Testing.

Jean Piaget (1960) is among the first psychologists whose work remains relevant to modern theories of moral development. Piaget concerned himself with the moral lives of children as he studied the way they interacted while playing games. Based on his observations, Piaget concluded that children begin in a "heteronomous" stage of moral reasoning marked by a strict adherence to rules. He then speculated that as children's cognitive functioning developed their moral reasoning became more "autonomous." Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) modified and expanded upon Piaget's work as he developed his three major levels of moral reasoning which consisted of six stages.

It will be in the theories of Piaget and Kohlberg that I believe research can provide the greatest benefit to the reformation of moral education. In this paper, I hypothesize that Kohlberg's distinction between relative morality, as defined by the Pre-Conventional level and the Conventional level, and universal morality, as defined by the Post-Conventional level, is attributable to several factors, including the child's acquisition of Formal Operational thought. Critical thinking may be a skill that when fostered in children will aid the shift from heteronomous thought to autonomous thought. It may be that this shift to autonomous thought is as vital to the development of higher moral reasoning as it is to the development of Formal Operational thought. Our approach to teaching moral principles must take into consideration the cognitive development of the child. Our educational system must also strive to promote critical thinking skills in children. If Piaget and others are correct, then as children move from stage to

stage, and achieve more competencies, they will be better prepared to understand the complex issues involved with higher moral reasoning.

Discussion

Theoretical Framework- Piaget

In researching this paper it was extremely important to refer to theorists like Piaget and Kohlberg, who formed the theoretical foundation for future research in the area of morality. Although technology has attempted to create a more biological and scientific explanation for the development of morality, early studies such as the ones I will be discussing here are still relevant.

In his book, *Cooperation and the Development of the Idea of Justice*, Piaget (1960) describes what he calls two moralities, the morality of constraint (heteronomy) and the morality of cooperation (autonomy). Piaget suggests that moral development, much like cognitive development takes place in stages. For Piaget the earliest form of moral development he called heteronomous morality. Much of this chapter is devoted to the later stage of moral development- autonomous cooperation. According to Piaget this stage begins to take place around age 10 (it is interesting to examine how these stages align with Piaget's stages of cognitive development, since Piaget believes that children construct their own moral world view). According to Piaget (1960) the result of autonomous cooperation is the child's notion of justice. He stresses that the child's moral view in this stage is not mandated by parental authority (p.195). Piaget proceeds to compare and contrast what he calls distributive justice and retributive justice, and their implications for punishment. Distributive justice is defined by equality, whereas retributive

justice is defined by due proportion between acts and punishments. Various scenarios are presented to the children and they were offered several forms of punishment, and asked which was most fair. Reactions from the children could be broken down into two types: some who thought punishment is just and necessary, and others who thought it was only necessary to restore the situation to what it previously was. It is here that Piaget distinguishes between what he calls “*expiatory punishment* and *punishments by reciprocity*.” For Piaget children do not simply learn and internalize the norms of the group, but rather define morality individually through their struggles to arrive at fair and equitable solutions to moral dilemmas.

The work of Piaget is important to my discussion of “Moral Education and Cognition”, because his theories lay some of the foundation for my hypothesis about how moral education should be approached. Piaget considered morality to be a developmental process. In his comparison of “heteronomous” (strict adherence to rules and duties), and “autonomous” (the ability to consider rules critically), stages of morality, he suggests that the child’s evolution to less egocentrism is a function of his developing cognitive structure. The key to moral education may depend on the ability to nurture and encourage “autonomous” thought in the child. Based on Piaget’s work it can be determined that schools should emphasize cooperative decision-making and problem solving, nurturing moral development by requiring students to construct rules of fair play. If parallels do exist between moral development and cognitive development then it is worthy to consider whether or not all education should be approached in the same way. Piaget has suggested that teachers need to provide students with opportunities for personal discovery and growth through problem solving and critical thinking rather than indoctrinating students with norms.

Theoretical Framework-Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg, a stage theorist as well, modified and elaborated the earlier work of Piaget. He was consistent with Piaget when he proposed that children form ways of thinking through their experiences which include understandings of moral concepts such as justice, rights, equality and human welfare. In his book, *Stages and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization*, Kohlberg (1984) spends a good deal of time discussing the cognitive-developmental approach to socialization and contrasting it to other popular theories, such as social-learning and psychoanalytic. Prior to applying cognitive-developmental theory to the phenomena of moral socialization, Kohlberg seems to reinforce and expand upon Piaget's theory of cognitive stages. Kohlberg, like Piaget stresses the fact that his stages unfold in an invariant sequence. Children will always go from stage 1 to stage 2, and so on. As a stage theorist, Kohlberg like Piaget says that his stages are hierarchically integrated. Children do not lose the insights that they have acquired at earlier stages but rather integrate those insights into new frameworks. Kohlberg also tells us that cognitive-developmental theories are "interactional", impacted by the interactions between the organism and the outside world, and is not a reflection of either one directly. According to Kohlberg it is this notion of "interaction" that leads to cognitive stages. A very significant statement is made by Kohlberg when he says, "The core of the cognitive-developmental position then, is the doctrine of cognitive stages." He states that the question of whether cognitive stages exist is an empirically testable question. Like all stage theorists, Kohlberg maintains, and attempts to prove, that his stage sequence is universal, the same in all cultures. Studies with Atayal boys indicated that their response to interviews about their dream experiences were much like the youngest American boys. Kohlberg concluded from

these studies that regardless of culture, and despite the rate, all children's conception of dreams as either real or subjective, is a product of cognitive development rather than the learning of adult teachings. Much in the same way as Kohlberg, Piaget stressed that the child's evolution to less egocentrism is a function of his developing "cognitive structure" and not a strict adherence to rules and authority.

The work of Kohlberg further serves to support my hypothesis about moral education. In expanding on Piaget's work, Kohlberg attempts to provide empirical data to validate the existence of cognitive stages. This is increasingly important because much of what is to follow from Kohlberg regarding moral development is predicated upon this concept of cognitive stages. This work clarifies some very important features of cognitive stage theory, such as: qualitative differences, invariant sequence, structured wholes, and hierarchical integrations. These distinct features will become important in the discussion of Kohlberg's stages of moral development and the acquisition of formal operational thought according to Piaget. Kohlberg also tried to relate his moral stages to other forms of cognition. He first analyzed his stages in terms of their underlying cognitive structures and looked for parallels in purely logical and social thought (Kohlberg, 1976).

The goal of moral education should be to help people to advance to the highest possible stage of moral thought. Ideally, society would benefit from individuals who not only understand the need for social order, but embody universal principles of justice and liberty. However, the approaches of traditional moral education might not allow for such enlightenment to occur. Moral education is premised in the idea that moral behavior is defined by virtue and vices.

Children are encouraged to practice the virtues of: honesty, kindness, patience and strength, and are rewarded when such behaviors are manifested. Kohlberg would disagree with such an approach because he felt it reflected a relativist view point of morality, and he favored a view that focused on stages of moral development with the pinnacle of moral maturity based in the principles of justice and fairness (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971). He also rejected the fact that traditional moral education lacked guiding principles for defining what virtues are worthy of cherishing.

Kohlberg's work is not without its criticisms. Later studies have addressed the following omissions in Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental approach: (1). A delineation of the stages of moral development of children ages 5 to 10, (2). A view of moral judgment that goes beyond justice and rights as an endpoint, and (3). A view of moral development which is concerned about moral behavior as well as moral reasoning (Scott, 1987). Kathryn Scott (1987) reviews the literature and presents four theories of development that extend and modify Kohlberg's theory in important ways: William Damon's research on children's development of positive justice is discussed, Robert Selman's research on the development of social role-taking abilities, Carol Gilligan's research on morality of responsibility and care, and Nancy Eisenberg's research on prosocial reasoning and the development of prosocial behavior. The author points out that moral education can be enhanced by considering the trends discussed in her paper. I consider the works of Kohlberg and Piaget to be merely a sound springboard from which many directions for research can be taken.

Current Studies

In a study by Assor, Broide & Weinstock (2009), they are working within the theoretical framework of Piaget and Kohlberg, accepting the premise under the cognitive developmental approach to moral development, that children progress from a heteronomous perspective to an autonomous perspective. This study explores whether autonomy supportive teacher behavior is associated with more autonomous moral judgment in adolescents. It also compared the effects of democratic schooling to regular schooling on moral judgment. The participants in the study consisted of 62 12th grade students from two regular schools and 33 students from two democratic schools. Students completed the measures assessing moral judgment, perceived teacher behavior and perceived parent behavior. In drawing from Piaget's theory of moral development, the instrument to assess one's moral judgment consisted of 14 vignettes describing morally problematic situations. Each vignette is followed by two responses: one reflecting a heteronomous judgment and the other a more autonomous judgment. The results of the study indicate that teacher encouragement of students' criticism has a direct positive relationship with autonomous moral judgment in students. In addition, students in democratic schools demonstrated more autonomous moral judgment than students in regular schools.

Although this study did not directly address my particular hypothesis, it did have implications for my study of moral education. The researchers make the point that with increased cognitive maturity children's moral thinking becomes more autonomous (based on individually determined principles). This would support my hypothesis that formal operational thought is required to achieve what Kohlberg called post-conventional morality. The results of

the study suggest that autonomy-supportive teacher behavior, namely the encouragement of critical thinking can foster autonomous moral thinking. I wonder if this is what Piaget and Kohlberg meant when they said that cognitive development is “interactional.” Perhaps this type of behavior helps to increase a child’s achievement of formal operational thought. Typically moral education does not support independent thinking and criticism. In fact, with the emphasis on High-Stakes Testing, education in general does not usually focus on independent or critical thinking. Piaget is quoted as saying, “The principal goal of education in the schools should be creating men and women who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done.” This study has interesting implications for the direction of moral education and demands further investigation. Although this study identifies a causal relationship between autonomy-supportive behavior and autonomous moral judgment, it does not explain the mechanism by which this occurs. The study also looks at senior in high school- adolescents. It would be interesting to replicate this study with various age groups of children, particularly ones under the age of 10.

A study that does examine the moral attitudes of younger children was conducted by Martin (2007). The researchers in this study examine the relationship between children’s exposure to superheroes and their moral values. Superheroes are vastly popular with young children, and it has been postulated that they learn moral values from watching these superheroes on television. The present study analyzed the relationship between children’s attitudes about themselves and their attitudes about their favorite superheroes. Forty-two fourth grade children from two classes in Massachusetts participated in the study. The questionnaire used in the study contained two subscales; the first was developed for this particular study and assessed children’s

familiarity with superheroes. The second scale used was taken from the Global Portraits of Social and Moral Health for Youths (GPSMHY). It measures the overall social and moral health of a community and its schools. Significant correlations between children's self-ratings and their ratings of superheroes were found on a number of the items. The study concludes that these positive correlations support the idea that children may learn their moral values from superheroes. The one area of concern that the study also seemed to support, is the children's potential identification with superheroes' use of violence to resolve conflict. The study acknowledged several limitations including: small sample size, and the fact that many of the researchers may have over estimated young children's recognition of several "popular" superheroes. In addition, the sample of superheroes did not adequately represent females- without any individual female superheroes included on the questionnaire.

The study introduces another variable to the equation of moral development, as understood by cognitive developmental theorists. Although the study reports correlational evidence, and does not attempt to explain how superheroes can influence moral development in children, it does seem to support social-learning theory. I think it would be remiss of any researcher studying how children acquire moral judgment to ignore studies such as this. Perhaps moral education would be more relevant to children if the characters in the lessons were ones with which they could identify. This seems to relate to Piaget's discussion of stage development. Children may have difficulty before they achieve formal operational thought to identify with abstract characters and concepts often indicative of traditional moral education. Children who are in pre-operational and concrete operational stages may do better with lessons of morality that objectify characters who they know well, such as superheroes. It might be interesting to look at

how well children identify with fables and cautionary tales.

A theme that seems to be consistent is the relationship between critical thinking, cognitive development, and moral development. The Kamii (1991) study pays particular attention to the importance of critical thinking and moral autonomy. This article discusses autonomy in the Piagetian sense, the ability to govern oneself. The author goes on to discuss moral autonomy and the role of autonomy in education. A question raised by the author is, “What causes certain children to become more autonomous than others?” According to Piaget, adults stifle the development of children and hinder their development of autonomy. It is through things like reward and punishment that heteronomy is reinforced, intentionally or not. Piaget saw punishment as having three possible outcomes: calculation of risks, blind obedience and revolt- none of which is autonomous. The author points out that according to Piaget “sanctions by reciprocity” serve better to foster autonomy than rewards. It is interesting to note that this is probably in contrast to goals of learning theory and operant conditioning. Kamii goes on to discuss the interdependence of moral autonomy and intellectual autonomy, noting that the child is incomplete without acquiring both. Piaget states that children acquire knowledge by constructing it from within, and that creating and coordinating relationships is important to this process. However, as the author indicates, children are not encouraged to think autonomously and critically in school, and as a result they will construct less knowledge than those children who have been. In making the connection between autonomy and formal-operational thought, the author refers to a study by McKinnon and Renner (1971), in which they found that only 25 percent of college freshman were capable of solid logical thinking at the formal-operational level. Kamii suggests that due to a lack of critical thinking, and through reinforcement by

parents and teachers, children are prevented from achieving both intellectual and moral autonomy.

It is apparent after reading this study that the Assor (2009) study was influenced by the work of Constance Kamii. The Assor (2009) study focuses on the importance of critical thinking and choice making as discussed by Kamii, and applies it to moral judgment. The Assor (2009) study attempts to demonstrate that critical thinking and other types of autonomy-supportive instruction can lead to autonomous moral thinking. This article is extremely relevant to my study of “Moral Education and Cognition.” The author makes a strong connection between moral and intellectual autonomy- what Piaget calls, “the full development of the human personality.” The jump from heteronomous perspective to an autonomous perspective is a process in which the child trusts in his own abilities and capacities. Interaction with the environment is an important factor in the child being able to successfully navigate this transition. As the author sees it, education, including moral education, does not encourage students to become autonomous. Autonomy should be the aim of all forms of education. By taking the perspective of others, critical thinking is encouraged in children, which leads to a higher level of reasoning (Formal Operational). It is this higher level of reasoning that will enable children to make their own decisions and evaluate the results of these decisions. In having the freedom to make these decisions, children will explore and develop their own view of morality. If we are to believe that critical thinking is a key component to the development of autonomy in children, and therefore higher levels of moral and intellectual abilities; it is easy to see why High Stakes Testing can be detrimental to the “full development of the human personality.”

Conclusion

The topic of morality is broad, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to answer all the questions surrounding how moral development takes place. The work of modern researchers focuses in on the brain and its role in morality. Psychologists, like Joshua Greene from Harvard, have examined the connection between the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and the way people make moral judgments (Carey, 2007, p.2). It seems that injury to this part of the brain transforms the way people make moral judgments in life-or-death situations. Young and Koenigs (2007) conducted a narrative review of neuroscientific studies focused on the role of emotion in morality. As the researchers indicate, moral decision-making has been a topic of much philosophical debate, and now a topic for empirical research. The central question is to what extent emotional processes in certain regions of the brain underlie our decisions about right and wrong? Again, in these studies, the region in the brain of most interest is the VMPC. It is interesting to note that even though neuroscience wishes to conclude that emotions are engaged during moral cognition, and that the VMPC is critical for human morality, it does not offer an explanation for “how” morality develops in people, nor does it necessarily shake the foundation of the theoretical framework laid by people like Piaget and Kohlberg. The relevance of such theories is evidenced by modern researcher’s use of classic moral dilemmas, such as the Trolley Problem, to study moral judgment. The Trolley Problem is a question of human morality, and an example of a philosophical view called consequentialism. This view states that morality is defined by the consequences of an action (what Kohlberg would consider to be level I moral judgment). Discovering a region in the brain that is the seat where moral judgments are made is important in our understanding of the biological mechanisms related to our behavior, but it does

not necessarily explain why certain people achieve a particular level of moral reasoning and others do not.

Other researchers have taken a more social psychological perspective on moral development, and have postulated a connection between physical cleanliness and moral purity (Zhong, Strejcek & Sivanthan, 2010). It has been suggested that when we clean ourselves we internalize an elevated sense of moral self. This can lead one to have a severe moral judgment. Research in this area again offers a piece of understanding to the puzzle that is our moral development, but does not adequately explain all the nuances surrounding how we acquire morality and the development of moral judgment.

The original intention of my research was to look at how moral education could be improved. I was concerned to see how our value system had seemingly disintegrated, particularly among young people. With strained economic times, and the increased need for both parents to work, it became evident that the nature of the family structure in this country had changed. The traditional roles of parents were no longer applicable, and we increasingly looked to institutions like school to reinforce and often times teach our children morality and values. What I came to realize from reviewing the literature is that the place where children learn their moral behavior might not be quite as important as the way in which they learn it. The use of religious or Biblical stories to convey abstract concepts of morality, such as good and evil, or Heaven and Hell, might be lost on younger children who have not reached what Piaget calls Formal-Operational thought. This seems to be substantiated by researchers who have looked at fable comprehension and appreciation (Jose, D'Anna & Krieg, 2005). The authors

attempted to explain why children and adults like fables and how they understand the moral message conveyed in this literary form. Perry (1959) defines a fable in this manner: “A fable . . . relates a fictitious event in the past for the obvious purpose of illustrating an ethical truth.” Fables are metaphoric in the sense that the fable’s narrative is nonliteral in that it conveys a message about human moral behavior, and this moral behavior is perceived as self-relevant by listeners or readers. But do children always understand the inferences that fables make about our moral behavior? Literature regarding children’s understanding of metaphors has typically examined proverbs instead of fables, but is believed to still be relevant. Piaget (1926/1974) first studied this in the 1920s with children between the ages of 9 to 11. He found that in a majority of the cases children did not understand the metaphors embedded in proverbs. Piaget also observed that young children have difficulty with identifying and coordinating intention and consequence information in short moral stories. Perhaps this is best explained by the fact that children of this age had not achieved Formal-Operational thought, and therefore had difficulty dissecting and understanding abstract concepts, such the ones described in fables. It is interesting to see the differences between fables and superheroes as vehicles for conveying moral messages. Superheroes are less abstract and something more entrenched in our culture. Children can identify with superheroes in a way that is not possible with many characters in fables.

The former discussion brings us back to the important linkage between cognitive development and moral development. It should be quite evident from these studies that a connection exists between our level of moral reasoning and our stage of cognitive development. In the limited scope, what this suggests is that moral educators need to be mindful of their methods for delivering moral messages, because unless they consider the cognitive development

of the children they might not be accomplishing anything. On the broader scope, what educators need to take away from this research is the impact that educational policy, curriculum and pedagogy can have, not only on the academic development of children, but on their moral development as well. If we as educators continue to ignore the importance of developing critical thinking skills in our children, we are doomed to create generations of people who lack the necessary cognitive skills to solve our complex world problems, and the necessary moral compass to understand the consequences of those decisions.

References

- Assor, A., Broide, G., & Weinstock, M. (2009). Schools as promoters of moral judgment: essential role of teachers' encouragement of critical thinking. *Social Psychology of Education* 12: 137-151. doi: 10.1007/s11218-008-9068-9.
- Carey, B. (March 21, 2007). Study finds brain injury changes moral judgment. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/21>. Retrieved: 10/09/2011.
- D'Anna, C.A., Jose, P.E. & Krieg, D.B. (2005). Development of the comprehension and appreciation of fables. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs* 131(1) 5-37.
- Kamii, C. (1991). Toward autonomy: The importance of critical thinking and choice making. *School Psychology Digest*, 20(3) 382-388. doi: 10.1108/eb015901.
- Koenigs, M. & Young, L. (2007). Investigating emotion in moral cognition: a review of evidence from functional neuroimaging and neuropsychology. *British Medical Bulletin*, 84: 69-79. doi: 10.1093/bmb/ldm031.
- Kohlberg, L. (1976). Moral stages and moralization: the cognitive-developmental approach. In T.Lickona (Ed.), *moral development and behavior: theory, research, and social*

issues. 31-53. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, New York

Kohlberg, L.(1984). Stages and sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization, *The Psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages*. San Francisco: Harper & Row. 7-24.

Kohlberg, L. & Turiel, E. (1971). Moral development and moral education. In G. Lesser, ed. *Psychology and educational practice*. Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman.

Martin, J.(2007). Children's attitudes toward superheroes as a potential indicator of their moral understanding. *Journal of Moral Education*, Vol. 36, No.2. 239-250.
doi: 10.1080/03057240701325381.

McKinnon, J.W., & Renner, J.W. (1971). Are colleges concerned with intellectual development? *American Journal of Physics*, 39, 1047-1052.

Perry, B.E. (1959). Fable. *Studium Generale*, 12, 2-37.

Piaget, J. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved December 10, 2011, from BrainyQuote.com

Web site: <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/jeanpiaget403394.html>.

Piaget, J. (1960). Cooperation and the development of the idea of justice, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press. 195-214.

Piaget, J. (1974). *The language and thought of the child*. New York: The New American Library

(Original work published 1926).

Scott, K. (1987). Missing developmental perspectives in moral education. *Theory and Research*

in Social Education. Volume XV Number 4, 257-273.

Sivanathan, S., Strojcek, B. & Zhong, C.B. (2010) A clean self can render harsh moral judgment.

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 46, 859-862.