Review of Selected Research on Moral Development in Early Adolescence

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Moral development focuses on the emergence, change, and understanding of morality from infancy through adulthood. In the field of moral development, morality is defined as principles for how individuals should treat one another, with respect to justice, others’ welfare, and rights. In order to study how individuals understand morality, it is crucial to measure their beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to moral understanding. This field studies the role of peers and parents in facilitating moral development, the role of integrity and values, socialization and cultural influences, empathy and altruism, and positive development. Moral developmental psychology research focuses on questions of origins and change in morality across the lifespan (Fleming 2005). The two most influential scholars on adolescent moral development, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, studied the moral judgments of adolescents and response to stressful hypothetical situations.

Piaget believed that observing children playing games and interrogating them about the rules provided a realistic “lab on life” for understanding how morality principles develop. Piaget often used a practiced technique of false innocence; he pretended to be ignorant of the rules of the games and asked the children to explain them to him. In this way he was able to comprehend the way that the children themselves understood the rules, and to observe how children of different ages related to the rules and the game (Boom 358). A second technique used by Piaget in studying moral understanding was to relate a short story or scenario that described some form of misbehavior by a child or by an adult. He then presented the children with possible corrective actions that might be given out to the offender and asked the children to tell him which were fair and just and which were not, and why. If a child neglects a chore, for example, after repeated requests, what is an appropriate punishment or correction? Here Piaget distinguished between punishment and exchange as punishment strategies. Punishment meant that some form of
disciplinary action (spanking, confinement) would be summoned in which the offender must “pay the price” for the offense. In contrast, exchange implies setting things right. With reciprocity the child must be made to see the consequences of his or her neglect, and to clearly understand the need to behave in a more cooperative manner (Boom 361).

Piaget observed four stages in the child’s development of moral understanding of rules, based largely on his observation of children’s games. The first stage characterizes the sensorimotor period of development (children under four years) in which the child merely handles the marbles in terms of his existing motor schemes. Play is purely an individual endeavor. In the second stage, preoperational (about ages four to seven), game playing is egocentric; children don’t understand rules very well, or they make them up as they go along. There is neither a strong sense of cooperation nor of competition (Cowan 265). The third stage, concrete operational (about ages seven to ten or eleven), is characterized by developing cooperation. Interactions are more social, and rules are mastered and observed. Social interactions become more formalized as regards rules of the game. The child learns and understands both cooperative and competitive behavior. But one child’s understanding of rules may still differ from the next; therefore mutual understanding still tends to be incomplete. In the fourth stage, formal operational (beginning at about age eleven or twelve), cooperation is more serious and the child comes to understand rules in a more legalistic manner (Cowan 267).

Piaget’s studies of moral judgments are based both on children’s judgments of moral scenarios and on their interactions in game playing. In terms of moral judgments, Piaget found that younger children (around age’s four to seven) thought in terms of moral realism or moral heteronomy. These terms imply an absolutism, in which morality is seen in terms of rules that are fixed and unchangeable (heteronomy means “from without”). Guilt is determined by the
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extent of violation of rules rather than by intention (Cowan 268). The second stage in making
moral judgments comes later, usually around age 10, when children come to realize that rules
have randomness and are formed by mutual consent for reasons of fairness and equity. This
applies equally to society’s laws, game rules, and family standards of behavior. Older children
realize that rules are not fixed and absolute, but that they can be changed as the need arises.
Piaget called this second stage moral autonomy. Egocentricism plays into moral heteronomy, as
the child is unable to see rules from the broader perspective of another child or adult, or of
society in general (Cowan 270). On the contrary, moral autonomy requires just such an ability. In
actuality, the stages of morality overlap one another to some degree.

Lawrence Kohlberg admired Piaget’s approach to studying children’s conceptions of
morality. If Piaget saw children as little logicians, Kohlberg viewed them as moral philosophers.
Kohlberg believed that it was not possible to study moral understanding without also coming to
grips with philosophy, or more specifically, what could possibly be meant by morality. In brief,
Kohlberg evaluated morality by asking children to consider certain moral dilemmas; situations in
which right and wrong actions are not always clear. He was not concerned with whether the
children decided that certain actions were right or wrong, but with their reasoning, at how they
arrived to their conclusions (Fleming 2005).

Based on his study of children’s responses to such dilemmas, Kohlberg expanded
Piaget’s two stages into six, organized into three levels. Level one, pre-conventional morality:
The pre-conventional child thinks of morality in terms of the consequences of disobedience to
adult rules in order to avoid punishment. Behaviors are good or bad depending on their
consequences, or in other words, behavior is guided by rewards and punishments. The child at
this stage does not comprehend the rules of society. The first stage has been called punishment
and obedience. Rules should be obeyed to avoid punishment from those in authority. The second stage is individualism and purpose. What is right is what satisfies one’s own needs and occasionally the needs of others, and what leads to rewards for oneself. Level two, conventional morality: the child begins to grasp social rules and gains a more objective perspective on right and wrong. What is right is whatever agrees with the rules established by tradition and by authorities. The third stage is interpersonal concordance. Care of and loyalty to others is emphasized and it is seen as good to conform to what others expect in a certain role. Stage four is referred to as social systems. Moral judgments are explained by reference to concepts such as social order, law, and justice. It is argued that social rules and laws must be respected for social order to be maintained. Level three, post-conventional morality: moral reasoning at this level is based on the individual’s own independent judgments rather than on what others view as wrong or right. What is right is derived from the individual’s perception of objective, universal principles rather than the subjective perception of either the individual or the group. The fifth stage is community rights and individual rights. The person reasoning at this stage views society’s law and rules as important, but also sees it as important to question them and change them if they become obstacles to the fulfillment of ideals such as freedom and justice. The sixth stage is called universal ethical principles. The person has developed an independent moral code based on universal principles. When laws or social conventions conflict with these principles, it is seen as better to violate the laws or conventions than the universal principles (Arnett 113).

Moral development proceeded in the predicted way, in the sense that the participants did not skip stages but proceeded from one stage to the next highest. The research of Kohlberg and his colleagues indicated that moral development was correlated with socioeconomic status,
intelligence, and educational level. In general, studies confirm Kohlberg’s hypothesis that moral development progresses with age (Arnett 114).

Kohlberg’s theory has been subject to diverse criticisms, such as gender and cultural critiques. Kohlberg’s original research sample included only males. Later, when he began to study females as well, he initially found that in adolescence females tended to reason at a lower moral level than males of the same age. After various studies to see whether any overall differences existed in how males and females were rated; the results indicated that no significant differences existed. As with Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, Kohlberg believed his stages to be universal. Despite differences in cultures with regard to manners and morals, Kohlberg still believed in the universality of his stages because they referred to general patterns of thinking rather than to specific cultural ideals. Kohlberg’s concepts of post-conventional morality reflect Western philosophical ideals based on Enlightenment values of individualism freedom and rights (Arnett 114-115).

In his research on moral development, Kohlberg used only hypothetical dilemmas instead of moral issues in everyday life. Kohlberg believed that this lack of connection to everyday experience was a strength of his dilemmas because people would reason about them without preconceptions. Lawrence Walker, a top scholar on moral development, expanded research on morality to include the moral issues of everyday life. The kinds of dilemmas people reported from everyday life most often had to do with personal relationships. Another striking difference from studies of hypothetical dilemmas was that in reasoning about real-life moral issues people of all ages often relied on practical costs and benefits. Also, people of all ages frequently appealed religious justifications for their moral judgments (Arnett 117). Thus, in many ways,
Walker’s study demonstrated that studying morality in everyday life greatly expands our understanding of how people reason about their moral issues.

Development of moral reasoning is not automatic; it occurs overtime as individuals encounter moral dilemmas and are forced to act upon them. Similarly, children develop moral ideas in stages and that create their conceptions of the world. Consequently, children make moral judgments based on their observations of the world. Overall, this group project was a great learning experience and chance to collaboratively work with others. It was nice to have other group members because it allowed us to talk about different ideas and approaches for this project. The members of my group were all great participants and equally shared the work. We were able to get together to discuss our presentation style and specific individual responsibilities. In conclusion, the group effort made this project a much better learning experience.
References


