Moral judgment of preschool children of the State of Kuwait

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This paper examines aspects of Piaget’s ideas in a non-European culture and is unique in that no study has previously been attempted on preschool children from the State of Kuwait. Consequently, this study has been designed to determine the moral reasoning of preschool children from the State of Kuwait on the dimensions of moral realism and justice of Piaget’s morality.

moral judgment, moral realism, justice, Piaget, preschool children

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most prominent contribution to our understanding of children’s moral development has been made by Jean Piaget. Piaget (1932) described moral judgment as formative processes that follow on one another. He defined two ideal types: the heteronomous and the autonomous. The heteronomous type shows unilateral respect for authorities and the rules they prescribe. The heteronomous type of moral reasoning is characterised by moral realism. Moral realism is associated with ‘objective responsibility’ which tends to value the letter of the law above the purpose of the law. This is why young children are more concerned about the outcomes of actions rather than the intentions of the person doing the act. Thus, preschool children are inclined to rely on the magnitude of the material damage caused by the actor, and not on their intrinsic motivation (Subbotsky 1993, p.77). In the same way it is difficult for the preschooler to understand the concept of an accidental wrong. It may be impossible to convince the young child that a classmate accidentally knocked down his block building or stepped on his toe because the area was crowded (Vasta, Haith and Miller 1995).

The autonomous type of equality and respect established at 10 to 12 years of age, is characterised by the ability to consider rules critically and selectively apply these rules based on a goal of mutual respect and cooperation. Human actions are judged by intentions and motives as well as consequences of actions. Children no longer rely on the magnitude of the material damage, but give priority to the story characters’ intentions. They are now motivated in their relationships to others by mutual respect for others. Piaget (1932) stressed the benefit for children having experiences of interacting with others on an equal footing. He thought that a prime vehicle for such experience was discussion among peers.

As the child grows up the prestige of other children diminishes … he can discuss matters more and more as an equal and has increasing opportunity of freely contrasting his point of view with that of others. (Piaget 1965, pp.95-96)

From Piaget’s point of view, the child ‘s concept of justice thus, centres on a social system where there is balance and coordination of the interests of the individuals who are participating in it. In other words, each is given his fair share.
Since Piaget’s seminal work, much research has been conducted from the Piagetian perspective on children from Western-countries to examine their moral judgments of damage done under accidental and intentional conditions (Johnson 1962; Ozbek and Forehand 1973; Flynn 1984; Berg-Cross 1971; Gutkins 1972; Keiten and Garg 1993). To date, however, there is a striking paucity of research on preschool children from Arab cultures. To this author’s knowledge, no study has been attempted on preschool children from the State of Kuwait. Consequently, this study has been designed to determine the moral reasoning of preschool children from the State of Kuwait on the dimensions of moral realism and justice of Piaget’s morality. Specifically, the following research questions are addressed in this study.

1. To what extent preschool children at the ages of five and six use intention and outcome information in judging other’s deeds?

2. Are there differences between boys and girls in both judgments in terms of motive and magnitude of physical damage (intrinsic-externic dimension)?

3. To what extent preschool children use equality or authority/obedience justification in their judgment about justice?

4. Are there gender differences in making judgments about justice issues (justice-dimension)?

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

Subjects were 108 preschoolers from private kindergartens. They were equally divided into sex and age: 27 boys and 27 girls aged 5 years; and 27 boys and 27 girls aged 6 years (mean age = 5.3). All the children were Muslims from the State of Kuwait. They were contacted through their schools. Information about age and sex were taken from the school record.

**Material**

Four moral items were chosen for this study. They consisted of a pair of short stories patterned after Piaget’s clinical method (1932) to assess the children’s moral realism; and two moral items dealing with justice. The four stories were derived from Piaget’s work which intended to be a representative subset of the stories that Piaget reported in his work on moral realism (Piaget 1932, p.117) and on the development of the idea of justice (Piaget 1932, p.195). The moral realism stories deal with the child’s ability to consider subjective intention when making moral judgments about clumsiness/stealing. The justice stories contained questions involving equality versus authority. The four stories and probe questions were translated by the author into Arabic without changing any of the content except of the Christian names were replaced by Muslim names; John and Henry were replaced by Ahamd and Khalid (masculine version) and by Aisha and Fatima (feminine version):

The following are the pair of stories dealing with moral clumsiness/stealing:

1. John was playing in his room when his mother asked him to come to dinner. While John was walking by the table, he accidentally slipped and bumped the dishes: 15 dishes fell and broke.

2. One day, when Henry’s mother was not home, he decided to eat some cookies even though his mother told him not to. While he was opening the cupboard to take some cookies, one dish fell and broke.

Which of these boys did the worse thing? Why?
The following two stories deal with authority/obedience (justice):

3. One afternoon, a mother asked her two daughters to help around the house because she was tired. She asked one girl to dry the plates, and the other to set the table. One of the girls decided she did not want to help and went outside to play. The mother asked the other girl to do both of the chores.

What did she do?
Was it fair of the mother to ask her to do both chores?
Why or why not?

4. One day a father asked his two sons to wash the car because he was tired and could not wash it himself. He asked one boy to wash the outside of the car, and the other boy to clean the inside of the car. One of the boys did not want to clean the car, and went to play with his friends. The father asked the other boy to do both the washing and the cleaning of the car.

What did he do?
Was it fair of the father to ask him to do both the washing and cleaning?
Why or why not?

Coloured drawings were used to draw the children’s attention to the presented stories and to render the task more understandable and more concrete. It may be useful to note here that the cultural items of the stories seem suitable for the children’s culture, and therefore, they translate well into that cultural context.

**Procedure**

After a brief contact with each child to establish rapport, the author, a trained examiner with the preschool children, and whose language was that of the child, interviewed the children individually. Prior to assessing the subjects’ moral judgments, they were asked to recount the pair of stories in their own words. They did not have any difficulty in grasping the stories. The answers were transcribed verbatim for further analyses. The scoring of the responses to the mortal stories was done on the basis of a scoring system similar to the one presented by Lourenco (1991). Responses were classified according to the outcome of an act, or the intention of an act (stories 1 and 2); and according to the justification for the fairness or unfairness of an act (stories 3 and 4). Percentages of answers for each category were calculated on the basis of their frequencies.

**RESULTS**

**Children’s evaluations of the moral items related to moral realism**

The results of the study indicate that 74 children (69%) regarded the protagonist who broke one dish as having done the worse thing, whereas 34 children (31%) opted for the protagonist who broke 15 dishes as having done the worse as displayed in the Table 1.

Thus the sample as a whole prefers the significant use of the intention of the actor rather than the magnitude of damage (Chi-square = 64.8, p < 0.05). The older children (6 years old) made significantly more moral judgments in terms of intrinsic motivation (80%) and less moral judgments in terms of physical damage (20%). Whereas, younger children (5 years old) did the opposite; (57%) made less judgments in terms of intrinsic motivation, and (43%) made more
judgments in terms of physical damage (Chi-square = 24.9, p < 0.05, and Chi-square = 41.3, p < 0.05) respectively as displayed in Table 2.

Table 1. Frequency and percentages of responses in terms of physical damage and intrinsic motivation of the whole sample (n = 108)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical damage</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Frequency and percentages of types of judgments according to age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>5 years</th>
<th>6 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical damage</td>
<td>23 (43%)</td>
<td>11 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>31 (57%)</td>
<td>43 (80%)</td>
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In order to determine whether sex of children is related to their judgments a series of chi-squares was performed. For the younger children (5 years), females made significant moral judgments in terms of intrinsic motivation (24%) than boys (15%). Chi-square =20.6, p < 0.05. Similarly, for the older children (6 years), females made more significant moral judgments in terms of intrinsic motivation (44%) than boys (26%) (Chi-square = 46.3, p < 0.05). However, concerning judgments in terms of physical damage, the reverse was true. For the younger children (5 years), boys made more significant moral judgments in terms of physical damage (48%) than females (30%) (Chi-square = 41.3, p < 0.05). In a similar vein in the older children (6 years) group, males made more significant damage (22%) than females (7%) (Chi-square = 71.0, p < 0.05).

Children’s evaluations of moral items related to justice

The results indicate that the majority of the children said it was not fair that the protagonist should do both of the chores (89%), because the second protagonist should also do his part (Equality orientation). However, only 12 Children (11%) responded that it was fair because the mother/father said so (Authority/obedience orientation). Table 3 displays the results of the children’s evaluations and justifications of their judgments according to age.

Table 3. Children’s evaluations and justifications related to moral items about justice according to age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of judgment and justification</th>
<th>5 years</th>
<th>6 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not fair (Sister/Brother should help) (Equality Orientation)</td>
<td>45 (83%)</td>
<td>51 (94%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair (Mother/Father said so) (Authority/obedience)</td>
<td>9 (17%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
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</table>

The Chi-square test performed on these findings indicate no significant differences between the two age-groups in terms of their judgments related to justice (Chi-square 1.7, p < 0.05). However, concerning their judgments of justice in terms of obedience/authority, the Chi-square test revealed a significant difference between the two age-groups (Chi-square: 85.7, p < 0.05). It should be noted here that the children who made judgments related to justice in terms of authority/obedience were all females (n = 12).
DISCUSSION

Children’s evaluations of moral items related to moral realism

The results of this present study reveal that the subjects’ moral judgments were made predominantly in terms of intrinsic motives (69%). However, their orientation towards moral judgments in terms of magnitude of physical damage (31%) should not be ignored. These findings are consistent with Flynn’s (1984) study which indicate that preschool children are capable of making moral judgments in both apology-restitution and guilt-innocence. Likewise, in this study preschool children made judgments in terms of both intrinsic motivation and amount of physical damage.

Results by chronological age are quite consistent with Piaget’s theory which suggests that immature moral judgments reflect centring on consequences while disregarding intent. In contrast, mature responses reflect a recognition that both intent and consequence are important in solving moral dilemmas (Foye and Simeonsson 1979). Thus, older children (6 years) made more significant judgments in terms of intrinsic motivation than younger children (5 years). On the other hand, younger children made more significant judgments in terms of magnitude of physical damage. This finding corroborates research that suggests that chronological age substantially influences moral development in children (Johnson 1962; Ozbek and Forhand 1973).

The findings that boys develop moral judgments earlier than girls was not consistent with Piaget’s (1932) suggestion that boys develop moral judgments earlier than girls because of differential demands of peer cooperation. Gender differences in moral development has always been an issue of debate in the research literature. A lot of inconsistent statements have been made as to the effect of the gender on moral development (Huston 1983; Lytton and Romey 1991). Consequently, a clear verdict cannot be given in favour or against a gender difference issue, since consistency has not been established yet. The findings of this study seem to support the assumption that children around the age of five years judge an actor who had no bad motives, not to be bad, although he had unintentionally caused damage. They base their judgments on the criterion of a match between an actor’s motive and the outcome of his action (Nunner-Winkler and Sodian 1988). Piaget contends that moral judgment begins to be made at the age of six or seven after a year of socialisation in school. Children in this study, however, attended kindergarten schools, which may have enhanced the socialisation process and hence the early emergence of their moral judgment. A common feature in these schools concerns the social atmosphere that seems conducive to children’s moral growth. Curriculum activities provide opportunities for children to judge moral events they encounter in their interactions with their peers. Children are exposed to many activities that involve them in discussing stories and puppet skits presented to them from time to time as part of the curriculum. It is quite interesting to mention that children in these schools are introduced early to explore the concept of intention and motive using stories and puppet skits to discuss the characters’ motivation. Dramatic play and role play are also encouraged. Such activities surely enable the children to stand on another person’s shoes and promote their development of perspective taking. Hence, it may not be surprising that children display some surprisingly sophisticated moral judgments at this age.

Children’s evaluations of moral items in terms of justice

Concerning the children’s judgments on the issue of justice, the results of the present study indicate that the majority of the children 96 (out of 108) clearly indicated the idea that it was not fair of the mother or father to treat the children unequally. Both children should do their part of the chores. They all responded in terms of equality. These data indicate that the children begin to
give up their moral realism and to make judgments consistent with the notion of justice, equality well before the age of 7. Piaget reported, by means of stories similar to the ones used in this study, that about 75 per cent of the children of 5 to 7 years defend obedience; and that about 80 per cent of the children between 8 and 12 years defend equality (Piaget 1932, p.268). The present finding is not consistent with Piaget’s original findings. This may be due to the early socialisation process of the preschool children in the sample. Only nine children responded in terms of obedience. They identified what is just with what is in conformity with obedience. This finding illustrates well the differences of children’s judgments as a function of sex. All the girls reported that the mother was fair because she said so (authority/obedience). This result may be interpreted in terms of socialisation processes in Muslim families where it is stressed that girls should be more obedient than boys. This finding also illustrates that the issue of gender differences in moral judgment might be the result of many factors. It is differentially influenced by social-cultural environment, and hence the inconsistent findings reported in the literature concerning this issue (Smetana 1981, 1985; Smetana and Braeges 1990).

In conclusion it might be interesting to attempt to link the main findings of this present study to current research and debate in this area. A major finding of this study is that Piaget’s time-line for moral development of Muslim Kuwaiti children apparently does not hold. Instead, children in this study had greater moral reasoning ability at a younger age than children in Piaget’s study. This result is consistent with findings of the proponents of domain theory. Domain theorists contend that young children’s thinking in the moral domain is actually quite sophisticated (Smetana 1995; Tisak 1995) and some even claimed that early moral thoughts should be characterised as “moral, not premoral” (Killen 1991, p.115). Domain researchers have shown that “young children do make moral judgments that go beyond heteronomous obedience to authority and rules” (Turiel 1983, p.148). They have equally shown that by the age of five years children have the competence to think of moral issues as “obligatory, generalisable, and impersonal” (Turiel, Killen, and Helwig 1987, p.169). In this vein, there may be no surprise that in this present study five and six year old children had greater moral reasoning ability at this early age. Thus, the major finding in this study seems to support the claim of domain theorists and challenge Piaget’s account of early morality.

REFERENCES


