

A Moral Step Outside of the Framework:

A Discussion On Moral Development

Morgan A Belveal

University of Pennsylvania

The discussion of morality is one that sounds different in the contexts of academia than it does on the streets of America. Literate representation of morality lives in the lexicons of most people in the world. However, what makes the discussion of morality rigorous is the lack of agreement in academia regarding the development and application of morality. In general, there is a significant lack of cross cultural research into morality. Further, the field's reliability on isolated stages in morality restricts the field to traditional interpretations of development. In addition, the field of morality and moral development is particularly interested in framing the morality of children in an adult framework. The field of moral development will advance the rhetoric if it increases the amount of cross cultural research, challenges the idea of stage isolation, and proposes a new child focused framework of morality.

I would make the argument that morality is universal across all of humanity. What is not universal is the definition of morality and the mechanisms behind its development. International research, especially in non OECD nations, is rare in every discipline. The research is expensive and often considered to be nontransferable to Western academia. As a result, the vast majority of research is conducted in the west and then is forced to apply to people in different countries. Some research is much more generalizable, for example sensorimotor development. However, the concept of morality is much more challenging. I would argue that each person has a very different definition of moral maturity. This innately makes research difficult. Without a unified definition of moral maturity, we do not have a framework through which we can assess and evaluate the change mechanisms responsible for morality.

As morality develops through childhood, the culture's expectations of goodness are passed on through a set of norms and rules. If this is the basis upon which children are developing their morality, then it is clear that this field of cognitive development is one of the

most contextually influenced and bears one of the lowest generalizability thresholds. From culture to culture, definitions of morality will change and the importance of morality will also shift. At this stage however, it does the field no justice to simply start researching morality in countries around the world. If we apply the current state of morality research to other cultures, we will restrict ourselves to viewing their morality through a western framework. Instead we need to reassess the uniformity of morality and design a new framework from the ground up for nonwestern cultures.

The field of development is focused on identifying stages that can be used to track development over time. This method of development may be overextended when it is applied to moral development. For the most part, Krebs (2005) discusses the flaws in Kohlberg's interpretation of stage morality. Krebs (2005) even goes so far as to challenge the idea of stages in moral development. I agree with Krebs on this challenge. I think that morality acts more like a tool belt than an expanding skill and moral based skills are applied to different situations. Instead of developing in stages, children acquire moral tools and then, with practice, they apply them appropriately to different situations. The stage theory is based almost completely on the mechanisms behind moral decision making in hypothetical situations which lack external validity. In actuality, Krebs (2005) suggests that it isn't until adulthood that people become rigid in the moral skills they utilize. This implies a drastically different morality framework for children and adults and, unique to this area of cognitive development, it implies a distinctive developmental path.

In the majority of the field of development, childhood is viewed as a means to an end of adulthood. We develop physically and emotionally progressively through childhood until we achieve adulthood. For morality, I challenge the idea that childhood is simply a means to

adulthood. I propose a new framework for morality that looks at childhood morality development as a completely separate development track from that of adulthood morality development. The research in the field of morality development utilizes an adult framework to assess a child's morality. In this framework, we have no option but to see children as either having or not having adult morality. As an alternative, the field would benefit from looking at childhood independently from adulthood. Using case studies in adult free spaces such as adventure playgrounds, researchers could assess which morals are important to children and what mechanisms they employ to develop and make decisions about their own experiences in childhood. The morality of childhood is completely reliant on context and social interactions. Sequentially, I would argue that adult morality does not develop from a blank slate as childhood morality but instead signals the beginning of a shift away from external morality and towards internal morality.

The field of morality development is divided on many fronts. The lack of a cross culturally coherent lexicon makes research expansion difficult and the current frameworks make explanatory research nearly impossible. In response, I propose the addition of cross cultural foundation research, a challenge of the idea of stage isolation, and the development of a completely new and child focused framework for exploring morality.

Reference

Krebs, D. L., & Denton, K. (2005). Toward a more pragmatic approach to morality: A critical evaluation of Kohlberg's model. Psychological Review. 112, 629-649