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Author(s)	Gan, Linda
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Assessing Childrens' Moral Beliefs

LINDA GAN

What do young children believe to be morally "good or bad" and who do they most admire and aspire to be like? These are just two of the questions which will be discussed in this article, using information gained from a 1989 research study undertaken in Britain which investigated the moral beliefs and judgements of children aged 5, 8 and 10.

The acquisition of a "language or morality" has been the domain of developmental psycholinguists in recent years. Researchers like Judy Dunn and Catherine Snow have shed light on the ontogeny of moral understanding in young children and the inferred meanings of key words children require in order to adequately express their beliefs. Dunn's (1982) intensive unstructured observations of children in their own homes revealed the enormous amount of talk generated in this context about moral issues, which is frequently 'provoked' by childrens' growing interest in what is 'right and wrong' and 'good and bad'. She noted how children learn about rules not only in conflict situations but in social role-play with siblings and conversations about feelings with the mother in particular. Her detailed analyses of such conversations revealed that girls were more often talked to about feeling states from the age of eighteen months and engaged more frequently in conversation about empathising with others from the age of two.

Snow (1987) traced the development of four key words in one young child's 'moral language repertoire' from the age of 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 6. She found that 'good, bad, should and shouldn't were used in increasingly sophisticated ways during the preschool years and stimulated relevant input from both parents and siblings. In half the cases she studied 'good' and 'bad' were being used in conjunction with one another and with key words which clearly defined the moral consequences for the child – for example 'bad' was associated with punishment and spanking, and 'good' with nice, or kiss or love. This combination of 'bad' and 'good' was also linked to a limited number

of semantic domains which seemed 'salient' for children in defining morality – for example 'good and bad guys', 'good and bad words'. She also noted a developmental progression in the use of these four key words: talking about 'bad' things dominated moral discussion at 2¹/₂, but this shifted to 'good' at 3¹/₂, and between 4 – 6 to 'should' or 'shouldn't'. This final shift, Snow observed, paralleled the increasing sophistication in the kinds of reasoning revealed in discussions with these older children.

The 'Wicked And Good' Deeds And 'Ideal Persons' Tests

A common technique for collecting information on children's moral beliefs has been to ask children to list the most 'wicked and good' deeds they can think of and to name who their 'ideal' person is. The following questions were posed to children in the 1989 study with alternative words being substituted for 'wicked', 'good' and 'ideal' for those younger children who were confused about these concepts.

- What are the three most wicked/bad/cruel/unkind/naughty things you can think of that people do to one another?
- What are three good/kind/nice things you can think of that people do for one another?

And in the 'Ideal Person' test:

- Which person would you most wish to be like? Why?

Responses to the 'Wicked Deeds' tests were classified according to the following 4 categories (adapted from Turiel, Killen and Helwig's summary of stimulus events in domain-distinction studies – ref. *The Morality of the Young Child* edited by Kagan & Lamb, 1987, p. 174).

'Wicked Deeds'	Examples
(a) Physical harm	Killing, hitting, pushing
(b) Psychological harm	name calling, breaking promises, ridiculing
(c) Fairness + rights	stealing, destroying others property, lying
(d) Anti-social	smoking, littering

Categories for responses to the 'Good Deeds' test followed a similar pattern to that used for 'Wicked Deeds' but the 'physical' category was excluded as it was considered inappropriate.

'Good Deeds'	Examples
(a) Psychological support	being affectionate, sharing, keeping people company
(b) Fairness + rights	being obedient, polite and honest
(c) Pro-social	running errands, doing charity work, conserving the environment

What 'Wicked Deeds' Do Children Suggest?

Results of this test revealed some interesting differences in age and gender responses. Harmful physical actions were seen by all age groups as the 'most wicked' with 10 and 8 year old boys being more preoccupied with aggressive acts and the youngest girls being more concerned with such deeds. The seriousness of these physical actions increased with age.

The 5 Year Olds

High on the list of 5-year olds most wicked deeds were petty physical actions, ranging from: "punching, pulling people's hair, scratching, tripping people up and cutting them with a piece of glass". An interesting point to note was that more girls in this age group named physical offences as 'wicked' compared to boys. Causing psychological harm was the largest category of wicked action for these young children which included "calling people horrible names and telling tales." On the whole the 5-year olds seemed less worried by actions classified as 'fair' and 'anti-social' although some did mention "stealing, being mean, taking drugs, trespassing and littering".

The 8-Year Olds

Aggressive physical actions continued to preoccupy 8-year olds but more serious offences like "murder, stabbing and assault" crept onto their lists. Acts infringing the rights of others ("being rude and unhelpful", for example) were also emphasised by this age group who also paid the most attention to transgressions involving theft (e.g. "stealing packed lunches") and lying (e.g. "being deceitful"). Only boys made mention of anti-social acts as being wicked, making specific reference to "littering and people who cause accidents".

The 10-Year Olds

More serious life-threatening offences like "murder, stabbing, rape, mugging and kidnapping" were mentioned by the majority of 10-year olds as being the most 'wicked deeds' they could think of. Overall there was a more even distribution of choices by these older children across the four categories with harmful psychological actions taking second place in their prioritising of wicked deeds, and unfair deeds and anti-social actions following in third and fourth place. Gender differences were noticeable in this age group with more boys than girls mentioning serious physical acts like "shooting civilians and kidnapping", and "torture and assault" as wicked. Girls

paid more attention to acts causing psychological damage, for example "breaking someone's heart, ignoring and shutting people out and being jealous of others".

Turiel (1983) would suggest these differences in emphasis by the three age groups are a result of five year olds being more conscious of physically harmful actions because the 'wrongness' of hitting someone for example, is cognitively more 'accessible' to the younger child than the 'wrongness' of swearing. The moral norms concerned with issues of justice and the welfare of others are, he maintains, constructed early in childhood through interactions which allow children to notice the harmful consequences of moral transgressions – in playground disagreements and 'sibling squabbles' for example. Similarly, conventional values, serving to regulate and organise civilised social behaviour develop in middle childhood, through increased interaction with others, hence the awareness of violating such 'social system norms' as 'wicked' by the ten year olds.

The more serious life-threatening acts suggested by the older children reflect those transmitted through the mass media today with more sophisticated crimes being mentioned like "mugging, rape and shooting civilians". Low priority was given to acts like disobedience and disrespect for adults which was also borne out by studies conducted in the sixties (Pringle & Edwards, 1964; Gooch & Pringle, 1965). Murder and stealing were mentioned most frequently in these two studies and "cruelty to animals" also featured prominently in childrens' lists of wicked deeds – a deed which was only given scant attention by two children in the 1989 study!

What 'Good Deeds' Do Children Suggest?

Psychologically supportive acts were the most popular choice of the 5 and 8 year olds, with prosocial acts heading the list of 'kind deeds' by the 10 year olds. Deeds promoting people's rights came a poor last in all three age groups' choices of good deeds, with the 10 year olds showing minimal attention to such acts concerned with filial piety, being polite or playing fair for example and the 8 year olds showing the most concern for such deeds.

The 5 Year Olds

The youngest children showed the greatest awareness of the need to provide kindness in the form of psychological and emotional support, like "playing together, making people happy, sitting next to people, sharing toys and loving, cuddling and kissing!". The boys in this age group also attached more importance than the girls to deeds promoting fairness and people's rights, like being "good to Mum" and prosocial actions which included "helping people who fall over, stopping fights and helping people who are starving".

The 8 Year Olds

In this age group the gender differences were reversed. Girls noted more psychologically 'kind' actions, like "consoling people who are upset" and "being happy for others when they do well". The boys were more conscious of remote prosocial acts, like conservation and charitable deeds, for example "looking after nature" and "raising money for charity". No gender differences existed in the number of acts classified as 'fair' like "being sensible, playing correctly with people and not stealing things".

The 10 Year Olds

In contrast to the other two age groups, the oldest children placed greater stress on prosocial acts rather than psychologically supportive actions in their consideration of what constituted a 'good' deed. Examples of prosocial actions from these older children included "not drinking and driving to make the roads much safer and contributing money to things" and "being tidy, running errands and helping people in difficulty". More diverse comments derived from children who did consider psychologically supportive acts to be 'good' which ranged from: "letting you have free time to spend with the family, and taking your wife out for a surprise dinner!". Gender differences were erratic with the exception of equal numbers of choices being made by both sexes regarding actions affecting the rights and liberties of others, like "offering to do something with no charge".

Overall the variety of 'kind' deeds suggested by all age groups was more limited than those mentioned for 'wicked'. Quite a number of children did experience difficulty with thinking of 'good' actions – possibly, suggests Snow (1987), because more attention is paid to childrens' 'naughty and bad' actions than those 'kind and helpful' acts which often go unnoticed and are not sufficiently acknowledged by adults.

Who Are Children's Ideal Persons'?

The results of the 'Ideal Person' test provided interesting insights into the types of people children admire at different ages in their lives. Familiar figures within the young child's immediate circle of friends and relatives, especially mothers and best friends, appeared to have the most marked influence on the 5 and 8 year olds. At 10 however these friends and acquaintances were replaced by distant and more glamorous celebrities principally from the world of show business, sports and royalty (a finding which coincides with the 1964 Pringle and Edward's study of 'ideal persons' with eleven year olds).

The 5 Year Olds

Clear gender differences were revealed in the 5 year olds choices of their 'ideal' persons: friends seemed to have a noticeable effect on girls who mainly chose their 'best' friends as their 'ideal' person. Whilst appearing to be most influenced by fantasy characters, like cowboys and Superman, a good third of the boys at this age also regarded relatives, especially their mothers and brothers, as being important influences in their lives.

These younger children focused principally on the physical appearance of their 'ideal' persons to justify their choices: girls for example in describing their best friends, (all of whom are female) seemed preoccupied with long hair and clothes, and with good behaviour as well:

- She has nice long hair. She looks smart and not messy when she comes to school.

- She looks nice and she wears nice clothes and she behaves well in the classroom.

Some children however were less superficial, emphasising the importance of friends in helping one another and being there to play with:

He does lots of work and he's a nice person. He shows me where the words are in our Breakthrough folder.

He plays good.

Responses from boys in this age group ranged quite dramatically from God to cowboys!

- Cowboys, because they make big noises and have nice clothes and horses who go galloping fast.
- God. He sent his son to us – he's everything.
- God. He's very special . . . he made all that is alive.

The 8 Year Olds

Within the 8 year old group there were also noticeable gender differences in childrens' choices of their 'ideal' persons: half of the boys chose celebrities, with relatives taking second place. In contrast relatives appeared to be more important in girls' lives, with nearly half of the girls choosing their mother as their 'ideal' person, at the expense of peers. 8 year olds' seemed to shift their focus more towards the benefits that persons they most admired were able to give them, in terms of material and moral support:

- My Dad. He's nice to me, gives me pocket money and clothes and shoes to wear.
- My Mum. She's always helping me and we get along well together.

- My Mum. She's kind and takes time off work to take care if I'm sick.

Physical attractiveness still however dominated girls' choices:

- Princess Diane . . . she's pretty.

but merit was given where due:

- Kylie Minogue . . . she's pretty, a good singer and a good actress.
- Frank Bruno. He boxes good.

The 10 Year Olds

Freedom and efficiency in one's chosen profession, coupled with an altruistic spirit became noticeable reasons for the oldest children's choices of their 'ideal' persons:

- Michael Jackson, because he earns a lot of money, has fame and loads of girls after him. He's a good singer, he's cool and donates money to charity.
- The Queen . . . she's rich and allowed to do anything she wants.
- Daly Thompson . . . he's got a family and does things for charity. A good character and a good sportsman.
- Enid Blyton, because she writes good adventure books.

Moral support was also important:

- My Mum . . . she's kind and thinks about other people. You can talk to her freely.
- My best friend. He takes things as they come and he's a good friend.

'Good' in the sense of being efficient was also the most popular justification for all children's choices in the Pringle and Edwards study 27 years ago. Further qualitative differences which emerged from their research however were not substantiated by this 1989 study: the number of 'male ideal persons' named by girls was much larger than that of females named by boys in the Pringle and Edwards study. There were no quantifiable differences between the choice of the opposite sex as children's 'ideal' persons in this study – Michael Jackson was the only male mentioned by the girls, and boys' mothers the only female. Pringle and Edwards also found that some of the girls named religious and humanitarian figures as their 'ideal' persons – only two children in the 1989 study mentioned 'God' and they were both boys. Girls' choices in all age groups in this study showed less variety than the boys' with Kylie Minogue from a current Australian television 'soap opera' being the most popular choice. Boys' choices were more varied, but sportsmen, and war figures do not appear as influential as they were in 1964 – the world of celluloid seems to have overtaken the more subdued world of heroes and heroines from the world of adventure in books and comics mentioned by Pringle and Edwards' children. The 10 year olds in both studies however justified their choices of their 'ideal' persons with reference to recognition and success, with more boys than girls equating such success with earning power in the 1989 study.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the perceptions that boys and girls, at different ages have of actions which inflict 'harm or help' at the opposite ends of the moral continuum, and insights into the types of personalities they most admire. Whether similar results would be obtained in the multi-cultural climate of Singapore merits further study . . . hopefully by teachers who are interested in discovering just what their children believe to be 'good and bad'.

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