

# The Role of Parents in Moral Development: A Social Domain Analysis

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**A**lthough socialization theorists have viewed moral internalization as stemming primarily from parents' influence on children through their parenting practices, structural-developmental theorists (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Damon, 1977; Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932/1965) generally have proposed that the hierarchical nature of parent-child relationships constrains children's moral development. This has led to a predominant focus on the formative role of peers and social institutions such as schools in moral reasoning development and a relative neglect of the role of the family. In this article, parents' role in moral and social development is discussed from the perspective of **social domain theory**, an approach that is structural-developmental in origin but that departs in significant ways from previous theorizing (for other reviews of this approach, see Nucci, 1996; Smetana, 1995a, 1997; Tisak, 1995; Turiel, 1983, 1998).

**A**ccording to **social domain theory**, children construct different forms of social knowledge, including morality as well as other types of social knowledge, through their social experiences with adults (parents, teachers,

other adults), peers, and siblings. In keeping with the focus of this special issue, this article focuses primarily on moral development. But to understand social domain theory, morality must be described in the context of, and as distinct from, other social-cognitive domains. Therefore, in the following sections, the broader framework of social knowledge domains is described briefly. Then, two propositions about the role of parents are elaborated in subsequent sections. First, it is proposed that the affective nature of parents' interactions may facilitate children's moral development, and specific affective mechanisms are described. Second, it is proposed that cognitive aspects of parents' interactions also facilitate children's moral development; the importance of providing domain-specific feedback regarding the nature of children's social interactions is discussed.

## **Domains of social knowledge**

**A**ccording to social domain theory, the social world is not unitary. Children have qualitatively different social interactions that lead to the construction of different types of social knowledge systems, or domains of social knowledge. Thus, children's thinking about and actions in the social world are characterized by heterogeneity and the coexistence of different social orientations, motivations, and goals.

**P**arents are concerned with ensuring children's welfare, protecting their rights, and helping children learn how they ought to relate to others. According to social domain theory, these concerns are all aspects of the *moral* domain. Morality pertains to the system of rules that regulates the social interactions and social relationships of individuals within societies and is based on concepts of welfare (harm), trust, justice (comparative treatment and distribution), and rights. Morality is defined here as individuals' prescriptive understanding of how individuals ought to behave towards each other. Moral judgements are proposed to be obligatory, universalizable, unalterable, impersonal, and determined by criteria other than agreement, consensus, or institutional convention. (For greater elaboration of the criteria defining the domains and related empirical research, see Nucci, 1996; Smetana, 1995a, 1997; Tisak, 1995; Turiel, 1983, 1998.)

**A**lthough morality is constructed from children's reciprocal social interactions, not all social concepts are moral. Parents are also concerned with maintaining appropriate social behaviour and facilitating the smooth and efficient functioning of social interactions. According to social domain theory, these

concerns are aspects of individuals' understanding of social systems, social organizations, and social conventions, which are viewed as conceptually and developmentally distinct from an understanding of morality. **Social conventions** have been defined as the arbitrary, consensually determined rules, uniformities, and behaviours that coordinate the interactions of individuals within social systems and a set of expectations regarding appropriate behaviour. Conventions are hypothesized to be alterable, contextually relative, and contingent on the rules and dictates of authority.

**S**ocial interactions also may require an understanding of self and others as psychological systems. The **psychological** domain pertains to an understanding of self, identity, personality, and attributions regarding the causes of one's own and others' behaviour. Two aspects of the psychological domain have been distinguished. **Prudential** issues pertain to harm to the self, safety, comfort, and health. Like moral rules, prudential rules regulate acts that have physical consequences to persons. Whereas morality pertains to interactions among people, prudence pertains to acts that have immediate and negative consequences to the self. **Personal** issues pertain only to the actor and fall beyond the realm of conventional regulation and moral concern. Personal issues entail preference and choice pertaining to such issues as friends or activities, the state of one's body, and privacy. Personal issues are an aspect of the self that forms the boundary between the self and the social world, and these boundaries may be actively negotiated within families. Maintaining an arena of personal discretion is seen as representing an important aspect of the individual's autonomy or distinctiveness from others.

**T**raditional structural-developmental theories (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932/1965) have described moral development as a process of increasing differentiation between moral and nonmoral concepts, such as convention, prudence, and pragmatics. Social domain theory departs from this view by proposing that the moral, conventional, and psychological domains are separate, self-regulating developmental systems that are not developmentally ordered. Rather, they are hypothesized to coexist from early ages on, although concepts in each domain are seen to change qualitatively with age. A great deal of research (reviewed extensively in Nucci, 1996; Smetana, 1995a, 1997; Tisak, 1995; Turiel, 1983, 1998) has indicated that from early childhood through late adolescence, children distinguish the domains using the theoretical criteria outlined above. Although most of the available research has focused on white, middle-class children, there is a growing body of research in a range of cultures (including Brazil, Columbia, Israel, Hong Kong, China, Japan, Korea, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and

Zambia), as well as research on children from varying social classes, religions, and ethnicities within the United States (see Smetana, 1995a; Turiel, 1998 for reviews) that provides broad support for these theoretical distinctions (while still allowing for cultural variations in the boundaries and content of the domains; see especially Nucci, 1996 and Turiel 1998 for discussions of cultural issues).

**M**ost of the theorizing from the social domain perspective has focused on children's development. A corollary assumption, however, is that parents' understanding of social rules, their child-rearing goals, and their views of and responses to children's transgressions likewise are differentiated by conceptual domain. Evidence for this assertion comes from a number of studies of adult and child responses to transgressions (reviewed in Smetana, 1995a), which indicates that parents respond differentially to transgressions in different domains, as well as from research indicating that parents' choice of discipline strategy depends on the nature of the misdeed (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994).

## **Experiential origins of morality**

**S**ocial domain theory focuses on children's active construction of knowledge from varied social experiences and different interaction partners, including parents as well as peers. Numerous studies have documented that young children have ample social experiences with physical and psychological harm, fair distribution, and the violation of rights through their experiences of rules, rule violations, misdeeds, and peer conflicts. These types of experiences are hypothesized to lead to the construction of moral concepts.

**M**ore specifically, children's experiences as participants in moral conflicts and as victims of and observers to moral transgressions lead to the construction of abstract notions of fair and unfair, right and wrong. Children generate an understanding of the wrongness of moral conflicts and rule violations from their experiences of the intrinsic features of those acts, such as their harm or unfairness. The proposition that social interactions form the experiential basis for the development of social knowledge has been tested by examining responses to children's naturally occurring social interactions. Researchers have looked for systematic patterns of social interactions that parallel hypothesized distinctions in social concepts. Correspondences between social interactions and social judgements are seen as demonstrating that social

interactions provide the experiential basis for the construction of social knowledge (Smetana, 1995a; Turiel, Smetana, & Killen, 1991).

**T**he results of numerous observational studies (again, reviewed in Smetana, 1995a, 1997) are consistent with Piaget (1932/1965) in demonstrating that children's conflicts over moral issues such as object possession (taking a toy or not sharing), rights, turn-taking, hurting, aggression, psychological harm (such as teasing and name-calling), and unkindness --all moral issues -- do occur primarily in interactions with peers (see Ross & Conant, 1992, for a review), often in free-play settings (Nucci & Nucci, 1982; Smetana, 1989). Furthermore, as Dunn and her colleagues have high-lighted, moral conflicts and interactions frequently arise between siblings (see Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992 for a review), whereas the available research has demonstrated that moral conflicts are relatively infrequent between parents and children (Ross & Conant, 1992; Smetana, 1989).

**M**oral conflicts are often resolved without adult intervention, leading some researchers to propose that peer conflicts play a positive role in children's moral development (Killen & Nucci, 1995). Research on naturally occurring social interactions among toddlers and school-age children (reviewed in Smetana, 1997) demonstrates that children (primarily the victims) respond to moral transgressions with statements of injury or loss, emotional reactions, and evaluations of rights, as well as with physical retaliation and commands to cease the offending behaviour. When adults do respond to moral breaches and conflicts, however, the research indicates that mothers (as well as teachers) typically focus on requests to take the victim's perspective and evaluations of rights. As elaborated in the following sections, both the affective context of these interactions and the cognitive features of parents' responses are important in the construction of more mature moral concepts.

## **The Role of Affect**

Affect may inform moral development in two ways. First, moral conflicts and misdeeds occur in the context of the broader affective climate of parent-child relations. A great deal of research suggests that the quality of the parent-child bond and the degree of warmth in the parent-child relationship (Bretherton & Waters, 1985) affect many different facets of children's development. **Indeed, one of the most consistent (and least anticipated) findings from research examining the family interactions that facilitate Kohlbergian moral reasoning stages is that the affective components of those**

**interactions, such as parental warmth, involvement, and support, are related to moral reasoning development (Hart, 1988; Powers, 1988; Walker & Taylor, 1991).** Therefore, a warm, supportive bond between parents and children may enhance the likelihood that children are motivated to listen to and respond to parental messages.

**S**econd, affective reactions are an inseparable aspect of children's experiences of transgressions, and social interactions regarding moral rules, rule violations, and conflicts may be highly affectively charged. Parental affective reactions, in conjunction with reasoning, may facilitate children's understanding and encoding of moral and social rules. Research by Arsenio (reviewed by Arsenio & Lover, 1995) has shown that children may employ affective responses to transgressions to understand, differentiate, and remember moral and social events. Indeed, previous research indicates that maternal responses to moral transgressions accompanied by intense feelings leads to greater reparation among children than when cognitive messages are not so embellished (Grusec, Dix, & Mills, 1982; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979). Parents are more likely to employ negative affect, including dramatizations of distress (Zahn-Waxler & Chapman, 1982) and greater anger (Grusec et al., 1982) in response to moral than other transgressions. Such affective responses, used in conjunction with explanations that focus on others' welfare and rights, may increase the effectiveness of reasoning because it helps focus children on the harm or injustice they caused.

**H**owever, research also indicates that there are optimal levels of affective arousal. **Too much anger may be too negatively arousing and therefore may inhibit children's focus on others' feelings.** For instance, a great deal of recent work on vicarious emotional arousal has indicated that too much emotional arousal leads to self-oriented, aversive emotional reactions rather than other-oriented reactions such as sympathy (Eisenberg, Fabes, Bustamante, Mathy, Miller, & Lindholm, 1988).

**T**he assertion that affect may be an important component of moral development is consistent with Hoffman's (1991) proposal that witnessing another individual in distress leads to empathic arousal. However, Hoffman has proposed a developmental sequence wherein empathy is transformed with age. In contrast, the view articulated here is that children's affective experiences are part of and influence children's understanding and encoding of moral transgressions, but that conceptual knowledge, not emotional responses, is transformed with age.

## **Cognitive aspects of parents' interactions**

There is also an important cognitive component to parents' interactions with their children that may facilitate children's moral development. Research indicates that children may obtain information about transgressions from varied sources, including observations and direct experiences with moral transgressions. **However, direct experiences are not the only sources of moral and social development, nor are they always the most desirable or effective source.** In the social domain view, parents' communications with their children are one aspect of children's social experiences that may be used in the construction of moral knowledge. By explaining the reasons for rules and responding appropriately to moral violations, parents can facilitate moral development by stimulating children to think reflectively about their actions.

This assertion implies that the more explicit parents are about the nature of the event and why a behaviour is expected or a misdeed is wrong, the more effective such messages might be, particularly for young children (but see Grusec & Goodnow, 1994, for an analysis of situations when more indirect approaches may be more effective). This suggests, in turn, that reasoning, explanations, and rationales will be more effective than other types of disciplinary strategies in facilitating children's moral development, as well as development in other domains.

Although a great deal of developmental research has advocated the use of reasoning as a disciplinary strategy, others have asserted that reasoning is a broad and poorly defined category (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). **The social domain view adds specificity to our understanding of reasoning as an effective parenting practice by suggesting that reasoning will be effective only if it is coordinated with the domain of the act under consideration, because only such explanations would provide the child with domain-relevant information.**

More specifically, to effectively facilitate moral development, explanations of moral rules and responses to moral violations need to highlight the consequences of the acts for others' rights and welfare. Support for this assertion has been found in previous research, which indicates that parental reasoning, and in particular, other-oriented reasoning (Hoffman, 1970), is associated with greater moral internalization and the development of concern for others (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967; Zahn-Waxler & Chapman, 1982;

Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979), as well as greater resistance to temptation (Kuczynski, 1982).

**O**bservational studies of responses to transgressions (reviewed in Smetana, 1995a, 1997) indicate that mothers (and other adults) naturally coordinate their explanations with the nature of the misdeed. They rarely focus on the intrinsic consequences of acts for others (a moral concern) in response to conventional events, nor do they reason about social order (a conventional concern) in response to moral transgressions. Considered alone, these findings do not definitively support the assertion that responses that are coordinated with the domain of the transgression are perceived as more appropriate by children. However, several experimental studies have tested this proposition more explicitly.

**The results of several studies suggest that children actively evaluate social messages in terms of their domain appropriateness and reject messages that are domain inappropriate and inconsistent with the nature of the event (Killen, Breton, Ferguson, & Handler, 1994; Nucci, 1984).** In one study, children evaluated teacher responses to moral and conventional transgressions that were concordant, discordant, or undifferentiated with respect to the domain of the transgression (Nucci, 1984). For instance, children evaluated statements focusing on the intrinsic features of acts (e.g., the harm or injury they caused) in response to moral or conventional transgressions (considered a domain-appropriate or domain-inappropriate response, respectively). Conversely, they evaluated statements indicating that the act was creating disorder in response to moral transgressions (domain-inappropriate) or conventional transgressions (domain-appropriate). Children rated domain-appropriate teacher responses (and the teachers themselves) more favorably than domain inappropriate or domain-undifferentiated teacher responses (and teachers). Similar findings were obtained in a more recent study of preschool children's evaluations of teacher responses to peer conflicts (Killen et al., 1994) and replicated in a study of Japanese preschoolers in Tokyo (Killen & Sueyoshi, 1995). Therefore, these studies indicate that across ages, children make prescriptive judgements about adults as social agents and evaluate adult messages in terms of their domain appropriateness.

**S**ocial domain theory also suggests that effective parental reasoning needs to consider the child's developmental status. At the most basic level, parental reasoning may not be effective until young children develop the verbal capacities to comprehend such messages. Studies suggest that during the



second year of life, parents shift from employing physical strategies for intervening in children's transgressions to employing verbal strategies (Dunn & Munn, 1987). These findings suggest that parents naturally respond to developmental changes in children's comprehension, but they also may reflect parents' increasing expectations for morally and conventionally appropriate behaviour (Kuczynski, 1984; Smetana, 1989).

**S**tructural-developmentalists have provided evidence that reasoning slightly above the child's own level stimulates development, although research has varied as to the degree of discrepancy that is optimal. The findings suggest that parents' messages need to be somewhat more sophisticated than children's level of understanding, but not so much above that children will assimilate parental messages to their own level. **Research also indicates that parents typically do accommodate their level of reasoning to their child's level when reasoning about actual moral dilemmas in their children's lives (Walker & Taylor, 1991).**

**T**hese findings and the research reviewed previously on reasoning provide an additional explanation for the consistent associations found between authoritative parenting and moral internalization (Baumrind, 1989; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). **Recent research indicates that authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parents differ in the domain appropriateness of their social judgements (Smetana, 1995b).** In contrast to other parents, authoritarian parents of adolescents (as assessed by a global parenting inventory) were found to moralize social-conventional acts in their judgements and justifications; for instance, they treated conventional transgressions such as cursing and putting elbows on the table as prescriptive acts that were obligatory and universally wrong. Authoritarian parents also were more likely than other parents to treat personal issues (such as choice of clothes and hairstyle and how to spend allowance money) and friendship issues (such as choice of friends) as conventional and legitimately subject to their authority (rather than as personal and up to the child). Taken together findings are consistent with Baumrind's description of authoritarian parents as moralizing, overintrusive (especially in terms of the child's personal domain), and valuing obedience as a virtue (Baumrind, 1989). Permissive parents, in contrast, were more likely than other parents to construct broad boundaries of personal discretion for their children and treat a range of issues, including personal, prudential, and friendship issues as personal for the child.

**Only authoritative parents drew clear boundaries between moral, conventional, and personal issues in ways that were consistent with**

**domain-theoretical expectations.** These parents clearly distinguished moral and conventional regulations, but they also were responsive to the child's need for an arena of personal control and choice, treating personal issues as adolescents' personal prerogatives. At the same time, they treated friendship and multifaceted issues, defined as issues containing both conventional and personal components (such as the child's room, which can be seen as either the child's personal territory or part of the household) as conventionally regulated. These findings are consistent with Baumrind's (1989) assertion that authoritative parents negotiate more with their children, but they also suggest that parents negotiate primarily over personal issues.

**Social domain theory also accounts for the consistent finding (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979) that power assertion is associated with poorer moral internalization.** Some forms of power assertion, such as commands, statements of rules, references to parental authority, and some types of sanctions may be ineffective in inhibiting antisocial behaviour or facilitating moral development simply because they fail to communicate the reasons for the rule or prohibition. This may explain why power assertion successfully terminates unwanted behaviour and induces short-term compliance but does not facilitate moral maturity (Kuczynski, 1984). **More extreme forms of power assertion, for instance, responses that are extremely negative, angry, or coercive, may scare the child and threaten the child's sense of security (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), thereby hindering the child's moral development.**

**P**arent-child relations also may influence children's social understanding in more subtle ways. As others have noted (Okin, 1989; Turiel, 1998), families consist of complex social arrangements that entail hierarchical social roles and power relationships. In most families, there are gender (as well as parent-child) inequalities in the distribution of power, the way resources are allocated, and how opportunities (for instance, for work or recreation) are encouraged or discouraged (Okin, 1989; Turiel, 1998). Children (and adults) do not necessarily accept these structural arrangements as given. An emerging body of research (reviewed in Turiel, 1998) suggests that children and adults also construct notions of the fairness of different social arrangements and that these evaluations depend on one's position in the social hierarchy. Those in more subordinate roles (e.g., females), who may experience greater restrictions in their choices and freedoms as a function of their social position, tend to evaluate social practices as more unfair than do those in more dominant positions, who may be accorded greater entitlements and choices (Wainryb & Turiel, 1994). Thus, children receive many tacit social messages

that may be used to construct moral knowledge. Furthermore, the results indicate that individuals do not unquestioningly accept the social messages they receive.

## **Conclusions**

**T**o summarize, in prohibiting actions, giving instructions, and responding to transgressions, parents are an important and, because of their emotional bonds to their children, valued source of children's social experiences that lead to the construction of moral concepts throughout childhood and adolescence. In the view outlined here, parents are not the sole sources of influence on children's moral development, nor is morality seen as directly transmitted by parents; moral transgressions and conflicts are seen as originating primarily in interactions with peers and siblings. Rather, parents underscore and amplify the lessons that are constructed from these interactions.

**P**arents are centrally important by virtue of their concern with their child's development and welfare, their affective relationship and extensive interaction history with their child, and their ability to provide the types of interactions that facilitate moral development. The research reviewed here suggests that parents' responses to children's transgressions and moral disputes and their explanations of the reasons for rules and expectations may facilitate children's moral development. The proposition that parents' domain appropriate and developmentally sensitive reasoning and explanations helps to promote children's moral understanding is consistent with previous research from socialization perspectives (see Grusec and Goodnow, 1994) but expands on this prior research by providing greater specificity regarding the types of reasons that may effectively stimulate development. Reasoning and explanations must be domain-appropriate to help children focus on the consequences of their actions for others and delivered at a cognitive level that is comprehensible to the child.

**T**his prescription does not mean that effective facilitation of moral development necessarily entails rational discourse devoid of affect. As the research reviewed here demonstrates, affect is an important component of these social interactions. Parents' affective reactions to children's behavior -- including negative affect, within reasonable limits -- in conjunction with reasoning, may facilitate children's moral development by signaling to children that parents' messages require attention. Although the focus here has been

on parenting, it should be clear that the same prescriptions are relevant to school-based moral education curricula (see Nucci, 1989 for a description of such an approach to moral education).

**A**s noted earlier, much of the research discussed here has been conducted on white, middle-class American children, and more research on children from different cultures, as well as children from diverse groups within the United States is needed. The social judgments of individuals within and across cultures are heterogeneous and contain diverse social orientations that may involve conflicting concerns with justice, interpersonal obligations, conventions, autonomy, personal choice, and personal entitlements. Research needs to examine how these different social concepts are applied in different social and societal arrangements. Finally, although more research is needed to test the propositions advanced here, social domain theory resuscitates parents' positive role in children's moral development from a constructivist perspective.

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