The Impact of Parents on Adolescent Moral Development

Meibaohong Hou[1,*]

[1]Department of Psychology, Kings College London, London, SE5 8AB, United Kindom

*Corresponding author: houwen@nuc.edu.cn

Abstract. Development of moral reasoning and the family factors affecting adolescent moral development had been a research focus for a long time. Levels of moral reasoning increase with age, and is correlated to social interactions, and some extent is determined by the ability of internalizing moral values of the surroundings and moral authorities. A good family cohesion (close bond within the family), flexible family adaptability and effective communication styles towards moral issues is undoubtedly correlated to higher levels of adolescent moral reasoning as they open the individuals susceptible to well-accepted social norms and social rules which then shape the moral reasoning. The mother's and father's roles in child development are not quite the same; the father's use of transactive dialogue and comparing, and the mother's being sensitive to the child's moral views are more predictive of better development. However, the gender difference in parents as a factor was less researched in the past, which needs to be explored in future studies. This paper provides a general review and existing discussions on family influence on adolescence moral development.

Keywords: Social interaction; Moral authority; Adolescence; Moral judgement.

1. Introduction

The emergence, evolution, and comprehension of morality are the main topics of moral development. There have been many focuses on factors influencing progress on moral values. Approaches include Freud talking about ego as a morality principle; Skinner suggesting morality is learned by socialization through operant conditioning; interpretation of morality and autonomous shift from moral authority was concerned by Piaget [1]. Kohlbergian theory explained moral development as six structurally different stages. Stages are mergers of hierarchies; higher-level thinking incorporates or comprehends lower-level reasoning [2]. Stage 1 and stage 2 combined to pre-conventional level, occurring around the age of 9, at this level, the child is receptive to cultural norms and categorizations of right and wrong, what is good or bad to do; their decisions are significantly influenced by parental expectations and the consequences of breaking the rules [2]. In the next two stages which are in the conventional level, upholding the group's expectation is seen as valuable, and adolescents internalize the moral concepts they have learned from society and their role models during this period, which is characterized by acceptance of social standards regarding what is proper [2]. In the third, the post-conventional level, there is a development of personal values including the more abstract moral principles and principles internalized previously from moral authorities, and in this level, people will follow their own reasoning even if they obey the laws [2].

Among understanding the stages, social interactions including taking other's roles or perspectives determine the development of moral reasoning [2]. The two dominant groups for the adolescent to interact with are family and peers; Kohlberg suggested that peer relationship is of more importance to development than family influence as adolescent have approximately the same social status as their peers, while parents have an unquestioned position of authority, playing a limited role in moral development. However, researchers argue that particular types of parents or family interaction styles best predict adolescent moral development [3], and thus there is a need of understanding the role of parents or family in adolescent moral reasoning development.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss parental influence on adolescent moral development. The first section states Kohlberg's stage theory, the concept of the moral self and prosocial reasoning to broadly explain the development of morals during adolescence. The family impact that could have on moral improvement is concluded in the second part. Child rearing techniques or in other words,

parental interaction styles are found to have a consequence, and reasons for that effect of parents' own moral reasoning have been included. Less research on, the two genders in a family (parents or siblings) contribute to a child's moral reasoning on different levels. Supported by experiments, White concluded that cohesion, adaptability and communication between families are seen as three family social environments which can cause a great effect [4].

2. Moral Reasoning of Adolescen

2.1 Stages of Moral Development

Most adolescents are in the conventional morality stage (Kohlberg's theory), stage 3, where they make decisions for approval, and stage 4, where being moral is based on the maintenance of law and social order. In these stages, adolescents' moral reasoning does not come from their personal values or opinions, instead it is a respect for moral authority, (for example family, friends, faith, educators) and obedience to their responsibility [5]. In continuing to the third level, the post-conventional or autonomous level, stage 5 and 6, there is a clear effort made to distinguish the individual's own moral standards [5], whether it is internalized, with those values and social norms held by the authority. The distinction is only to be made when the adolescents had agreed with any authority groups or person, suggesting development through these stages is linear. Moral judgement is determined by social interaction with an individual's environment, while this interaction demands being in relationships and role-taking [2]. Therefore, environmental factors that shape them need to be investigated.

2.2 The Relationship Between Moral Development and Social Interaction

Social interaction is seen highly related to adolescent moral development. Environmental forces shape one's moral self-concept, while behaviour regulation is mostly defined by parents, until adolescent transit to autonomous behavioural control, taking on more accountability for their decisions and actions [6]. The two aspects, moral and prosocial aspects shift from childhood to adolescence. In late adolescence, social and psychological concepts define the self, while belief systems are essential to forming the psychological self, and social interaction is closely connected with morality [7]. Stereotypic prosocial moral reasoning increases in use from childhood until 15-16 years old and then declined until 19-20, late adolescence [8]. Though moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour are not directly correlated and differ in circumstances, other-oriented moral judgement and prosocial reasoning are both empirically and theoretically linked to perspective-taking skills, therefore showing a linear increase in moral judgement or moral reasoning [9]. Also, a linear increase in taking social perspective among adolescence was found by Selman, and similarly, empathy and perspective taken towards others increase during adolescence, though the general increase of empathetic reasoning and self-reflective is found among females only [10]. However, this female-only perspective can be counter-argued as sex differences in social roles and socialisation, for example, parents or older siblings mention more about emotions with girls than boys, and therefore females care more about their internal state and introspect more about moral issues [11]. Abilities to take others' perspectives is seen as an important display of cooperative interaction, as the increase of perspective-taking can indicate the development of reasoning, thus supported by that moral development is associated with cooperation, as Curry suggested, morality can be explained and corresponded by aspects of cooperation [12].

3. Influence of Parents

Previous research had been inconsistent regarding parental influence. Kohlberg had a viewpoint that Family involvement is not unique or essential for moral growth, suggesting that parents have a relatively weaker relationship with a child's level of moral reasoning than the environment, as social learning theory would have suggested: child learn moral rights through observation and imitation from consequences of actions, mostly with their peers as the imitated role model; parents as for not

having the same characteristics as their social status will be considered less to be imitated, therefore have less consequence on the child's moral reasoning [5], [13]. However, parents are still an important factor in children's moral reasoning. Adolescence is a critical period for maturity in morals and development, while the majority of teenagers in this stage spend most of their time with the family. The caregivers more or less determine their development.

3.1 Family Environment Affecting the Development

Among the two major aspects of family's influence on a child's moral development, conducted by previous work, parents' own moral reasoning levels and their interaction or parenting strategies in child rearing, parents' moral reasoning was found unlikely to have an impact, as in most studies of relationships between parents and children's levels of moral reasoning have produced inconclusive findings [14]. Therefore, it could be child-rearing techniques that have a greater impact on adolescents' development. In later years, White furthermore proposed family climate as an important factor, including family cohesion, adaptability and communication, developed from Olson's family-systems framework [4].

3.1.1 Family cohesion

Family cohesion predicts how important an individual perceives the family as a moral authority. The term "family cohesion" refers to the emotional ties that exist within a family, between family members [15]. Adolescent in a family with moderate cohesiveness spend the same amount of time in their immediate family and in society as a whole, therefore is expected to view their family as having equal moral authority to other sources; in a family with tight emotional bounds, adolescent have little opportunity to be connected with the wider social environment, and they perceive the family as a major source of moral authority, and over-identification in connected families prevent individuate of family members by loyalty and consensus; in contrary, a very well disconnected family system creates independent family members [15], which have little impact on one another, and therefore they interact and are exposed to a wider source of moral authority. Those who perceived the family as less cohesive and lacking emotional warmth tend to believe the family, as well as other sources, have less impact on their moral judgement, this could be that they generalized the disengagement with the family toward other socializing agents and perceive themselves as independent moral thinkers and less susceptible to other sources of moral authority [4].

3.1.2 Family adaptability

Family adaptability was defined by Olson as "the ability of a marital or family system to change its power structure, role relationships and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress" [15]. Kohlberg emphasizes the importance of experiencing different roles as essential to moral judgement development. Such opportunities allow people to process and interact with issues concerning fairness [16].

Adolescents are given the chance of assuming different roles, which opens them to varieties of viewpoints and broader moral perspectives, therefore they are more likely to agree with moral authorities [4]. Being likely to be attributed to sources of authority gives chances to develop similar well-established moral values of the public. In support, family giving opportunity for a child to express their opinion and seek clarification from parents is the best indicator of the child's moral development [3].

3.1.3 Communication styles within a family

Parent-child agreement on issues is a way for an adolescent to develop moral judgement, but it depends on the communication styles parents used. Parents' understanding child's concern about an issue is a key factor in attitudinal agreement, and this can be generalized to the moral-judgement agreement [4]. Supportive interactions are predicted by high open positive communication, and children's levels of moral judgment are more likely to be higher when the parent-child discussion involves Socratic questioning and supportive interactions [15]. In a family environment of more open

positive communications, the parent-child relationship should be more likely, and thus adolescents are more tend to be more aware of others' moral judgement. And in contrast, adolescents within a family system which is filled with negative communication will be unwilling to receive parental moral views [4] [17]. It is also worth mentioning that moral development is better predicted within a different interactional environment with peers than parents: a non-operational, gentler representational and supportive style within the family, but an operational style of interaction between peers is suggested to be the best; this can be argued that having the same social state with peers allows challenging interactions, but a family climate of lecturing and direct challenges may arise defense as it is seen as criticism [17]. Adolescents' decision-making on whether to agree with any authority can be largely influenced by how their parents communicate. If they can be pursued that a perspective makes sense that they are likely to agree with, for example, social issues [18]. In conclusion, agreements occur when family communication is positive and effective and thus, adolescent within a high-communication family replicates more parental decision-making processes [4].

3.2 Gender Relation to Moral Development

The ways that a child's moral development is influenced by his or her parents' gender difference. Pratt et al revealed that there was seldom research concerning gender differences in family members that interact differently [14], forming different moral climates, and therefore have an effect on a young adolescent's moral development. Within a sample of 40 Canadian families, a modest difference was found, that the mothers were more authoritative in understanding the adolescents' moral situation than the fathers [14].

Fathers and mothers affect child's moral growth differently through the usage of transactive dialogue. Transactive dialogue focuses on the interpretation of reasoning and logical operations [19]. A higher frequency of using active transacts in discussions is positively correlated to a child's moral reasoning, and the use of transactive reasoning has a causal link to immediate greater reasoning level in peer interactions, whereas the mother-child interactions are not predicative to higher reasoning level, which could be a result of indifference in the parent-child transaction [20]. Although there is no indication that fathers employ more operational transacts than mothers, fathers' use of transactive conversation had an effect on teenage moral reasoning in contrast to mothers' usage, which was unrelated [14].

Differences also lie in the level of being sensitive toward a child's views. Fathers, overall, was seen not as well understanding and responsive to adolescent voice as mothers, especially for girls, and the result remained consistent in many studies, and in contrast, mothers were found to be more authoritative in parenting young adolescent and could be a reason for mothers being more understanding and responsive for child's voice [21][14]. Based on the sociocultural theory which suggests social interactions play an important role in psychological development, parents being more sensitive to a child's view would create a family climate that facilitates on child's moral development as it provides more opportunity to stimulate moral reasoning, and mothers overall contribute more on adolescent development [14]. Also as mentioned above, parents or siblings tend to talk more about morals and emotions with girls, resulting in females caring more about moral issues [11], [22].

4. Summary

Parental influence on adolescent moral development is discussed in this paper. Adolescents normally fall into the conventional stage of Kohlberg's theory, with moral values they possess as a result of: 1. need to be liked and 2. conformity toward laws and values held by the authority. Successful continuing to progress onto the post-conventional stage requires an understanding of social norms in the previous stages. Social interaction, empathetic reasoning and self-reflective are found to be correlated to moral reasoning and increase during adolescence. Family as a non-negligible factor, have had much research discussed previously. As opposed to what Kohlberg had said, the family does have an impact on an individual's life, family interaction techniques in specific. A

supportive interaction and a non-operational style of conversation were found best to predict adolescent moral development. There was less research concerning parents' sex differences. However, among both sex of parents, the mother is usually in an authority position, and cares more about the child's moral situation, but has less importance when using transactive conversation, compared to the father. Three factors having a relationship with adolescent moral thought was family cohesion, family adaptability and family communication as parts of family socialization, each affecting internalization of values held by moral authority. It is suggested that having a closer bond with the family, being more able to alter the power structure (parent-child role relationship), and a family system with more open positive communications can best facilitate a child's moral development. In the past, there had been limited investigations on the different contributions of morality growth between the father and the mother, and little but effective evidence suggested there is a difference; this however requires to be studied in the future, and furthermore, the influence of a single family, the possible influences of individual differences, and varying degrees of parents' gender differences on influencing child's moral development between cultures.

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