

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology

Psychology, Department of

September 2005

Moral Development in Adolescence

Daniel Hart

Rutgers University, daniel.hart@rutgers.edu

Gustavo Carlo

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, carlog@missouri.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub>



Part of the [Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#)

Hart, Daniel and Carlo, Gustavo, "Moral Development in Adolescence" (2005). *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*. 8.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

From: *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 15:3 (September 2005), pp. 223–233.

Copyright © 2005 Society for Research on Adolescence.

doi:10.1111/j.1532-7795.2005.00094.x

“The definitive version is available at www.blackwell-synergy.com.”

Moral Development in Adolescence

Daniel Hart, *Rutgers University*

and

Gustavo Carlo, *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Themes in the papers in this special issue of the *JRA* on moral development are identified. We discuss the intersection of moral development research with policy concerns, the distinctive qualities of moral life in adolescence that warrant investigation, the multiple connotations of “moral,” the methods typical of moral development research, and the influences that shape adolescent moral development. Suggestions are made for new methods and new directions in the study of moral development.

Moral development in adolescence has reached maturity as an area of research. This special issue of the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, which collects some of the very best investigations on adolescent moral development, is one indication. Expansive reviews of the large literature will also appear in the *Handbook of Moral Development* (Killen & Smetana, in press), the *Handbook of Child Development* (Damon, in press), and in the most recent volume in the *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* series (Carlo & Edwards, in press). Moreover, there are hundreds of research papers related to moral development in adolescence appearing each year, many of which escape synthesis in the various reviews and collections just mentioned.

THE INTERSECTION OF MORALITY AND ADOLESCENCE

Why has moral development in adolescence become such a popular topic among researchers? There are political and theoretical reasons for the

attention paid to moral development. The political reason is that research is influenced by public opinion particularly through federal funding of research, and the public believes that adolescents are morally deficient. When asked in a recent national poll to describe adolescents, almost three-quarters of American adults used words suggesting moral shortcomings such as “rude,” “irresponsible,” and so on (Duffett, Johnson, & Farkas, 1999). Only 15% of adults in the same survey described teenagers positively (Duffett et al., 1999). Asked to identify the most serious problem confronting youth, American adults answered that it is the failure of adolescents to learn moral values (Duffett et al., 1999). Given the perceptions that American youth are morally deficient and that this shortcoming threatens society (perceptions that are surely wrong; see Youniss & Hart, 2002 for an exploration), it is not surprising that policy makers and researchers have focused attention on moral development.

While the burgeoning of literature on moral development in adolescence has been driven in part by the mistaken belief that today’s cohort of youth is particularly immoral, it is also a product of the recognition of the genuine theoretical opportunities offered by focusing on adolescents’ moral capacities. The papers in this issue capitalize on this insight in various ways.

One important theme in the papers in this issue is that adolescence is the foundation for adulthood. Matsuba and Walker suggest that moral exemplars—Gandhi, for example—can be understood by studying the developing moral commitments of adolescents and young adults. Implicit in their article is the supposition that adult moral character is given some shape in adolescence. In other words, by understanding and eventually controlling the influences acting on the adolescent, adult moral character development can be set on the correct path.

The same theme is found in the article by Lawford and colleagues (Lawford, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer). Lawford et al. suggest that adult generativity has its roots in adolescent experience. The results of their work suggest that young adults who are committed to caring for others are more likely than those less committed to have had good relationships with their parents and community service experiences in adolescence. Similarly, Smetana and Metzger suggest that civic engagement, which reflects adults’ moral obligations to their communities, is vitally connected to experiences within the family and church.

A second theme found in all the papers is that adolescence has qualities that make it developmentally distinct from childhood. As a result of these distinct qualities, moral character can be transformed between childhood and adulthood. Certainly, in many Western cultures, one quality that generally separates adolescents from children is that the former spend more time than

the latter with peers. Moreover, adolescents spend less time with their parents than children. As a consequence, adolescents are probably more influenced by their peers than are children. For this reason, Pardini, Loeber, and Stouthamer-Loeber focus particularly on the contribution of adolescents’ peers on the sustenance of delinquency. In addition to the prominence of peers, there are a variety of other age-graded changes that distinguish the contexts of adolescents’ lives from those of children. These include transition into large schools, the world of work, and romantic relationships, to name just a few. As a consequence, moral life has new challenges, opportunities, and influences.

Adolescence brings with it not only distinctive contexts and experiences but skills as well. As Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, and Shepard point out in their article, there is a substantial research base demonstrating that a variety of skills and types of expertise related to moral life are more developed in adolescence than they are in childhood. For example, Eisenberg and her colleagues review research suggesting that there are improvements in the abilities to infer the perspective of others, to understand the self, and to solve social problems. Development in most of these skills builds upon childhood achievements and, consequently, adolescence does not constitute a unique psychological stage set apart from that of childhood. Nonetheless, the refinements in skills permit adolescents to engage in moral life more effectively than is typically possible for children.

Together, the variety of contexts and new skills make adolescence a particularly interesting period in which to investigate influences on moral development. The research in this special issue examines the effects on moral development of psychological processes (Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, Matsuba, & Walker), parents (Lawford, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, Smetana, & Metzger), peers (Pardini, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber), social institutions (Smetana & Metzger), and cultural practices (e.g., volunteering, Lawford, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer). During childhood, parents mediate children’s contact with social institutions, monitor their contacts with peers, and control their participation in cultural practices. The powerful influence of parents on children makes the study of moral socialization in childhood less complex, and perhaps less challenging, than the investigation of the factors affecting moral growth in adolescence.

Adults, like adolescents, live in a rich milieu of family, friends, institutions, and cultural practices. Unlike adolescents, however, adults do not change rapidly. As William James (1890, p. 121) noted, “It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again.” While James probably underestimated the potential for change

in adulthood, there is little evidence to indicate that adulthood is as fertile a period in which to examine age-related change as is adolescence. It is because adolescents are both (1) open to a rich variety of influences and (2) change considerably as a result of these influences that make them particularly interesting to study for psychologists interested in the factors influencing moral development.

WHAT CONSTITUTES “MORAL” IN THE STUDY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT?

There is broad agreement that interest in moral development among psychologists was kindled by Kohlberg's (1984) work on moral judgment. Kohlberg sought to synthesize insights from liberal philosophers such as Rawls (1971) with the cognitive-developmental psychology of Piaget (1965) and Baldwin (1902). The result was a line of work that focused on the development of understanding of moral issues such as rights and justice. Much of the field followed Kohlberg's lead, and as a consequence a substantial body of work has accumulated over the last 40 years concerning children's and adolescents' understanding of rights, responsibilities, and the principles that can be used to adjudicate among conflicting claims.

The gradual elaboration of understanding of justice and moral claims is not all there is to moral development, of course, and in the last 20 years many theorists and researchers have enlarged the domain of investigation by focusing on other topics. This expansion is evident in the papers in this special issue. In their contribution to this issue, Eisenberg and her colleagues present their latest findings on adolescents' prosocial reasoning. Eisenberg was one of the leaders in the movement to broaden the study of moral development beyond the boundaries of the study of conflicts of rights and an understanding of justice (see, for example, Eisenberg-Berg, 1979), and the work on prosocial moral reasoning in this issue, and her research on the emotional components to moral life (e.g., Eisenberg, *in press*), continues this effort.

Like Eisenberg and her colleagues, Matsuba and Walker focus on the prosocial domain. They seek to understand the roots of sustained prosocial action by examining the life stories provided by dedicated volunteers, a line of research much followed by personality researchers. Lawford, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Pancer study generativity, which they define as “care and concern for the next generation,” a construct drawn from Erikson's (1968) influential theory of psychosocial development, which has evident prosocial qualities. Smetana and Metzger focus on civic participation, a form of obligation to the pub-

lic good that is most frequently studied by political scientists (e.g., Putnam, 2000). Finally, Pardini, Loeber, and Stouthamer-Loeber are concerned with beliefs about anti-social or delinquent activity.

Each of the topics examined in the articles in this issue bears clear connections to our everyday notions of morality. Moreover, the diversity of the topics represents well the breadth of investigations in moral development, a breadth necessary to track the complexity of real life. The concern for practical morality—charity to others, caring for the next generation, delinquency, civic engagement—make the field more relevant to policy makers and the general public than moral development research was 30 years ago, when its principal focus was moral judgment sophistication.

The cost of this increased relevance is that it is difficult to abstract clear boundaries for the moral domain from the collection of topics in this issue. If the study of moral judgment that dominated the field 30 years ago sometimes seemed irrelevant for understanding moral life, it did offer fairly clear criteria demarcating its subject matter. This clarity now seems lost. For example, it is difficult to read the article by Pardini, Loeber, and Stouthamer-Loeber on delinquency and discern clear conceptual links to the research on civic engagement by Smetana and Metzger. Similarly, one could as easily read the paper on generativity by Lawford, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Pancer or the article by Matsuba and Walker on the life narratives of moral exemplars in an issue on adolescent personality as in an issue like this one on moral development.

In our view, there is conceptual benefit in seeking the essences of notions like “morality” even if the collection of topics in this issue makes evident how difficult this search is likely to be. The outline of topics within the moral domain offered by Bernard Williams (1995, p. 551) is particularly useful in this regard. Williams suggests that moral philosophy seeks answers to three questions: “What is the right thing to do?,” “How is the best possible state of affairs achieved?,” and “What qualities make for a good person?” These three questions, which correspond to the deontological, utilitarian, and virtue traditions, respectively, overlap and yet, are not identical to each other. One of the benefits of a broad outline of the moral domain such as this one is that it helps prevent parochialism. The deontological line of investigation, which gained ascendance in psychology as a result of Kohlberg's pioneering work, elicited controversy concerning whether it construed morality “correctly” or “incorrectly.” In retrospect, the energies of those involved in the debate might have been better spent complementing research in the deontological tradition with investigations best framed within the virtue and utilitarian traditions.

William's outlining of the moral domain not only alerts researchers in the field to the full range of issues that merit consideration, it also helps to distinguish the study of moral development from investigations in the related areas of personality development, social development, cognitive development, and positive psychology. For example, the study of positive psychology, which has grown rapidly over the last decade, has as its foci "valued subjective experiences" such as happiness, "positive individual traits," and "civic virtues and the institutions which move individuals toward better citizenship" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Clearly, there is an overlap in the investigations of moral development and positive psychology (the study of civic engagement, for example, may fall within both). Nonetheless, the questions that the two lines of work seek to answer are quite different. Positive psychology seeks to answer questions such as "How can human flourishing be promoted?," while moral theories, as we noted earlier, seek answers to questions such as "What is the right thing to do?," "What is the best possible world?," and "What qualities make a morally worthy person?" Neither set of questions can be reduced to the other; both sets of questions are deserving of research.

HOW IS MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE BEST STUDIED?

Every primer on research methods for developmental psychology suggests that complex psychological phenomena are best understood by using a variety of methods. Methodological pluralism is difficult to obtain in practice, particularly so in the study of adolescents. For example, all of the articles in this special issue rely on adolescent self-reports for data, and most of the articles rely exclusively on these self-reports. For example, Lawford, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Pancer tap adolescents' sense of generativity by asking participants to judge the self-descriptiveness of items such as "Others would say that I have made unique contributions to society." In the same study, adolescents rated the parenting they received resulting in a measure of parenting quality. Similarly, Pardini, Loeber, and Stouthamer-Loeber relied on adolescents' self-reports concerning their beliefs regarding delinquency and their peers, Matsuba and Walker elicited adolescents' narratives concerning their lives, and Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, and Shepard used self-report measures of empathy-related responding and prosocial moral reasoning. For four of the five articles in the special issue, then, self-reports were the primary sources of data.

Self-report measures are often valid and reliable indicators of attitudes, behavior, beliefs, and other psychological attributes. Moreover, it is often difficult to collect other sorts of data when participants are adolescents. For example, it would be very difficult to observe the peer associations of the large sample of adolescents in the study by Pardini, Loeber, and Stouthamer-Loeber, both because adolescents are unlikely to exhibit their typical behavior when they know they are being watched and because such a study would require an army of trained, sympathetic, observers. The demonstrated value of self-report measures combined with the difficulty of obtaining other sorts of data on adolescent participants results in a line of investigation reliant on adolescent self-reports.

All of the studies in this special issue are correlational in design, with none utilizing experimental procedures. The lack of experimental research seems to characterize the study of adolescence generally (Hart & Markey, 2004), and is not limited to research on moral development.

Correlational research has demonstrated its value in the study of moral development. Piaget's (1965) work on age-related changes in moral judgment created a model for research that continues to influence research today. Researchers in moral development have been particularly attracted to longitudinal, correlational designs, following after Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs, and Lieberman (1983). Indeed, four of the five studies in this special issue are longitudinal. The general advantages of longitudinal research are well known and have been reviewed in methodology texts, and we believe that readers of this special issue will be convinced that longitudinal designs can contribute important knowledge to the study of moral development.

Methodological pluralism should still be an aspiration for those involved in moral development, because even well-designed correlational, longitudinal studies cannot by themselves answer all questions of interest. One question for which longitudinal, correlational research may be unsatisfactory concerns the design of large-scale interventions. A number of reviewers (see, for example, Duncan, Magnuson, & Ludwig, 2004) have pointed out that estimates of the effects of different influences (e.g., parenting, neighborhoods, schools) on adolescent development derived from correlational, longitudinal studies are both prone to statistical artifacts and bear little correspondence to estimates derived from genuine large-scale interventions. This is not to suggest that correlational studies ought to be abandoned, as this type of research has, and will continue to make important contributions to the study of moral development. Our point is that there remains a need for research of other designs, and that there may be real opportunity for investigators who venture off the beaten path.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR INFLUENCES OF MORALITY IN ADOLESCENCE?

Primarily because of the contributions of cognitive developmental and moral socialization theories, the bulk of research on the influences of morality has focused on moral cognitions and socialization agents (such as parents). The study of adolescence reminds us, however, that other agents of change are important to study.

As several scholars have noted, there is growing evidence on the biological basis of morally relevant tendencies and behaviors such as altruism and aggression (Carlo, *in press*; Coie & Dodge, 1998; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Puberty signifies the reemergence of biologically based processes that might impact moral development during adolescence. The physiological and physical maturation changes of puberty might be expected to enhance emotional sensitivity and intimacy, and consequently care-based emotions (e.g., empathy, sympathy) and social behaviors. Conversely, the hormonal changes have also been linked to irritability and aggressiveness (although the findings are mixed), which might mitigate altruism and facilitate aggression (Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1998). To our knowledge, research on pubertal timing and its possible links to moral processes and behaviors have yet to be conducted. However, other research suggests that specific neurotransmitters and hormones might be associated with prosocial behaviors and aggression (see Carlo & Bevins, 2002). One recent study showed specific brain regions as being activated during moral decision making (De Quervain, Fischbacher, Treyer, Schellhammer, Schnyder, Buck, & Fehr, 2004). Investigations of the interplay of biological and socialization influences will provide more powerful models of morality.

Although family (including parents) has been the focus of much of the socialization research, another study area of importance is peers—especially during adolescence. Peers provide added “role-taking opportunities” and expose adolescents to novel moral behaviors (Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004; Hart & Atkins, 2002). Furthermore, moral dilemmas can become much more important and challenging because their moral consequences become increasingly significant and personally relevant to the self and to others. For example, the development of intimate and romantic relationships during adolescence can expose them to personally significant decision situations with far-reaching implications about who they are as a moral agent.

Adolescents also have more opportunities to become agentic in their social roles and responsibilities. For example, their engagement in work and commu-

nity activities (e.g., community service, extracurricular) and their increased exposure to socially regulated behaviors (e.g., driving, smoking, alcohol, joining the military) frequently places adolescents in moral decision-making situations. The media (e.g., internet, magazines, film) access and literacy level among many adolescents provide additional unique and significant socializing experiences that cannot be underestimated. Not only do adolescents have access to novel moral information but they are also capable of creating and promoting their moral beliefs and actions to others. No doubt, the influence of these socializing experiences is intertwined with the impact of the authority figures and the peers who are part of the socializing spectrum of these opportunities.

WHAT IS THE MORAL CULTURE OF ADOLESCENCE?

The contributors to this special issue present a diverse set of findings that provide a glimpse of the complex and multidimensional nature of the moral culture of adolescents. However, the moral culture of the adolescent is likely to be different across different societies as a result of culturally based practices that transmit moral messages. As ecocultural theorists note, parents from different cultures create unique opportunities and practices to train their children in their own moral system (e.g., Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Although there may be similarities in the change processes that occur, their meanings and perceptions are likely to vary as a function of the unique social norms, mores, and belief systems. In turn, these perceptions likely impact their behaviors. The dynamic interplay among beliefs, norms, and perceptions creates a moral atmosphere that is embedded in one’s culture. Thus, there are likely multiple cultures of morality in adolescence.

At the level of the individual, understanding the multiple contexts (e.g., home, school, neighborhood, work) that adolescents navigate and the various agents of influence (e.g., biological, family, peers, media) bring us closer to understanding their complexity. All adolescents must learn to navigate through their own moral cultures in their respective communities. These multiple moral cultures may comprise their family demands, their peer demands, and the demands placed on them by the broader society (e.g., school systems). Each of these cultures presents different cultural norms, beliefs, and norms that impact their moral functioning. The task is to develop theories and models of adolescents’ moral development that consider these various levels of influence and their multiple contexts. The relevance of the research and policy making on adolescents’ moral development rests on our explicit acknowledgement of these complex issues.

Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank a number of individuals without whom this special issue would not have been possible. Brad Brown and Lisa Crockett provided encouragement and support for pursuing the idea. The staff of *JRA*, including Detra Davis, Elliot Harik, and Laura Padilla-Walker, whose invaluable assistance (and persistence) in keeping us on track, was much appreciated. Finally, we wish to acknowledge the time and efforts of the various expert scholars who graciously reviewed the manuscripts.

The support of the W. T. Grant Foundation to the first author and from the National Science Foundation (BNS 0132302) to the second author, is gratefully acknowledged.

References

- Baldwin, J. M. (1902). *Social and ethical interpretations in mental life*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Carlo, G. (in press). Care-based and altruistically-based morality. In M. Killen & J. G. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Carlo, G., & Bevins, R. A. (2002). The need for proximal mechanisms to understand individual differences in altruism. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences (Commentary)*, 25, 255–256.
- Carlo, G., & Edwards, C. P. (Eds.), (in press). *51st Annual Symposium on Motivation: Moral development across the lifespan*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Coie, J. D., & Dodge, K. A. (1998). Aggression and antisocial behavior. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & N. Eisenberg (Volume Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology, Vol. 3: Social, emotional, and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 779–862). New York: John Wiley.
- Colby, A., Kohlberg, L., Gibbs, J., & Lieberman, M. (1983). A longitudinal study of moral judgment. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 48 (1–2).
- Damon, W. (in press). *The handbook of child development*. New York: Wiley.
- De Quervain, D. J.-F., Fischbacher, U., Treyer, V., Schellhammer, M., Schnyder, U., Buck, A., & Fehr, E. (2004). The neural basis of altruistic punishment. *Science*, 305, 1254–1258.
- Duffett, A., Johnson, J., & Farkas, S. Kids these days 99: What Americans really think about the next generation. Retrieved December 31, 2003 from <http://www.publicagenda.org>
- Duncan, G. J., Magnuson, K., & Ludwig, J. (2004). The endogeneity problem in developmental studies. *Research in Human Development*, 1, 59–80.
- Eisenberg, N. (in press). The development of empathy-related responding. In G. Carlo, & C. P. Edwards (Eds.), *The 51st Annual Symposium on Motivation: Moral motivation*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Eisenberg, N., & Fabes, R. A. (1998). Prosocial development. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) N. Eisenberg (Volume Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology, Vol. 3: Social, emotional, and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 701–778). New York: John Wiley.
- Eisenberg-Berg, N. (1979). Development of children's prosocial moral judgment. *Developmental Psychology*, 15, 128–137.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Fabes, R. A., Carlo, G., Kupanoff, K., & Laible, D. J. (1999). Early adolescence and prosocial/moral behavior I: The role of individual processes. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 19, 5–16.
- Hart, D., & Atkins, R. (2002). Civic development in urban youth. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 227–236.
- Hart, D., Atkins, R., Markey, P., & Youniss, J. (2004). Youth bulges in communities: The effects of age structure on adolescent civic knowledge and civic participation. *Psychological Science*, 15, 591–597.
- Hart, D., & Markey, C. (2004). Coming of age in the study of adolescence [Review of the book *Handbook of Adolescence*]. *Contemporary Psychology*, 49, 727–729.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. New York: Holt.
- Killen, M., & Smetana, J. (in press). *The handbook of moral development*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Piaget, J. (1965). *The moral judgment of the child*. New York: Free Press (Original work published 1932).
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone in America: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5–14.
- Whiting, B. B., & Edwards, C. P. (1988). *Children of different worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, B. (1995). Ethics. In A. C. Grayling (Ed.), *Philosophy: A guide through the subject* (pp. 546–582). New York: Oxford University press.
- Youniss, J., & Hart, D. (October, 2002). Motivation, values, and civic participation. Civic Engagement Working Paper No. 1, The Democracy Collaborative—Knight Foundation Civic Engagement Project. Retrieved February 15, 2003 from Democracy Collaborative Web site: <http://cbvps.tempdomainname.com/vhosts/democracycollaborative.org/htdocs/research/citizenship/survey.html>