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January 1985

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# *Rationality, Culture, and the Construction of "Ethical Discourse":*

## *A Comparative Perspective**

CAROLYN POPE EDWARDS

The problem of ethical relativism has never been resolved or laid to rest. It turns out to be a complicated set of problems, involving many philosophical issues of meaning (Brandt 1954; Ladd 1957). For example, how should we define morality and ethics? How should we define the problem of ethical relativism? How does the problem of ethical relativism relate to the problem of cultural relativism?

One question that is part of this package is a scientific one and concerns whether there are even aspects of moral values and ethical discourse that can be validly abstracted from their cultural context and compared cross-culturally. This is the problem of "descriptive ethical relativism" (Ladd 1957; Spiro 1984). Obviously, if there are no such aspects, then we have good reason to embrace an extreme doctrine of descriptive ethical relativism. On the other hand, if scientific research indicates that there are comparable aspects, then we can go on to ask a second, primarily philosophical question.

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The second question (Ladd and Spiro call it the issue of "normative ethical relativism") concerns whether the ethical conflicts of individuals or cultural groups are somehow *resolvable*. They might be resolvable if ethical conflicts can somehow be reduced to mere differences in underlying factual beliefs (about nature, human personality, and so on). They might not be resolvable if ethical conflicts turn out to be based on differences in moral principles, even after the differences in factual beliefs are accounted for.

This paper shall address the first question, because I feel it is the one social scientists (as opposed to moral philosophers) are most qualified to answer. The question, as I see it, involves an analysis of *research methodology*. How can social scientists elicit samples of people's ethical discourse? Do these samples of discourse validly represent the individual's or group's moral and ethical understanding? Can these samples be compared in some systematic way cross-culturally without distortion of their basic meaning?

"Ethical discourse" can be defined as a string of statements or arguments containing "moral statements" (statements about *what* actions or attitudes are obligatory or virtuous) and/or "ethical statements" (statements about *why* those actions or attitudes are morally right or wrong). Ladd, who studied the ethical discourse of the Navaho (1957), believes that ethical discourse occurs in all cultural groups.

## TWO CONTRASTING APPROACHES

A subdiscipline within psychology, variously known as the "cognitive-developmental," "cognitive-structuralist," or simply "Piagetian" school, shares with anthropology a central interest in the formal or structured aspects of human ethical discourse. However, in spite of their common interest, the two traditions have remained unintegrated, with little cross-fertilization of ideas, because they are characterized by opposing assumptions. I shall try to argue, though, that steps toward integration would have much to offer both sides, in terms of wrestling with the bear of ethical relativism.

In earlier papers I have tried to persuade psychologists of the merits of the anthropological perspective (Edwards 1978, 1979, 1982, 1985b; Harkness, Edwards, and Super 1981). This paper goes the other way and suggests that anthropologists interested in the

study of values might well take a new look at the cognitive-developmental research. In particular, they might view its methodology as an additional useful way of eliciting information about the range and complexity of ethical beliefs held by people *within* a cultural community.

The underlying assumption that has created a chasm between the two traditions concerns not whether ethical discourse is structured or organized (both sides agree on that) but rather the *nature and source* of the structure (Shweder 1982). Anthropologists typically view ethical discourse as a *cultural product,* culturally constructed and transmitted from adults to children. These scientists therefore tend to be "descriptive relativists." That is, they tend to believe that each individual's moral and ethical ideas are relative to the cultural group in which he or she lives and determined in large part by contextual or experiential conditions. Furthermore, insofar as they also believe that every culture's ethical system must be treated as a unique whole, they may additionally assert a second thesis of "descriptive relativism," namely, that there is an *irreducible diversity of moral standards*—an incommensurability across cultural boundaries.

In contrast, the cognitive-developmental psychologists take a different view of the source of structure in ethical discourse. Without denying that a large part of any moral code is culturally transmitted, they assert that *rational considerations* also play a major role in the determination of the structure of ethical discourse. After all, they argue, the *speakers* of ethical discourse are *people,* thinking people, and the structure of people's knowledge in all domains—ethics included—involves the cognitive control and manipulation of concrete or abstract concepts, categories, or skills (Colby et al. 1983; Fischer 1980; Kohlberg 1983; Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer 1983; Turiel 1983). It is the logical structure of knowledge (in particular, its level of complexity) that is commensurable cross-culturally.

Thus, these psychologists assert, constraints set by the very nature of human cognition *limit the number of basic ways* in which people in any culture can judge, choose, validate or justify moral prescriptions as a part of ethical discourse. There may be an unlimited diversity of ethical *systems* but not of logical-types of ethical *arguments.* If this thesis is correct, then we have good reason to reject an extreme doctrine of descriptive ethical relativism. At least one part of



everyone's ethical system is determined not by his or her cultural experience but rather by cognitive reasoning processes.

Some anthropologists are forceful advocates of just such a proposal (e.g., Spiro 1984). However, most anthropologists would probably disagree with a further proposal of that group of psychologists, namely, that the set of logical-types of ethical argument and justification are tied to an *invariant, universal, developmental sequence.*

Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1983; Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer 1983), for instance, has proposed a six-stage sequence of moral judging involving an increasingly abstract, articulated, and explicit understanding of morality. The ethical discourse that is graded in terms of the stages is elicited by a dilemma interview method. Informants are told short hypothetical problem-stories and asked to explain both what a person should do and why. A description of the stages, in terms of their structures for deciding "what is right," "reasons for doing right," and the "social perspective" underlying decision making, is presented in Table 1. (The table is taken from Kohlberg 1983: 174-176.)

Within any cultural community, Kohlberg claims, individual differences are seen in ethical discourse that are tied to age and personal development (that is, to level of cognitive maturation and amount of "role-taking" experience). Thus, the young children in all cultures are hypothesized to "sound a lot alike" when they engage in ethical discourse because of their cognitive concreteness (information processing limitations).

Similarly, at the other end of the developmental continuum we might find the moral elders (perhaps those influential "good talkers," found in every cultural group, whose opinions are regarded by the whole community as worthy of respect). These moral elders, or "moralists" as Ladd (1957) calls them, might be expected to "speak in a similar voice" in terms of controlling highly abstract systems of moral judging and ethical reasoning. Under some cultural conditions, these same "moralists" might well be the people most able to cognitively "step outside" the bounds of local ethical concepts and generate a critical analysis, a meta-ethical perspective, on reality (Levy 1984).

Is there any reason for anthropologists to take a closer look at what must surely seem to many of them to be a preposterous pair of claims? I think there are four reasons to do so, and they relate to

TABLE 1
THE SIX MORAL JUDGEMENT STAGES

| *Level and Stage* | *What is Right?* | *Reasons for Doing Right* | *Social Perspective of Stage* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Level I: Preconventional<br>Stage 1:<br>Heteronomous morality | To avoid breaking rules that are backed by punishment. Obedience for its own sake. Avoiding physical damage to persons and property. | Avoidance of punishment; the superior power of authorities. | Egocentric point of view. Does not consider the interests of others or recognize that they differ from the actor's; does not relate two points of view. Actions are considered physically rather than in terms of psychological interests of others. Confusion of authority's perspective with one's own. |
| Stage 2:<br>Individualism, instrumental purpose, and exchange | Following rules only when it is to one's immediate interest; acting to meet one's own interests and needs and letting others do the same. Right is also what is fair, what is an equal exchange, a deal, an agreement. | To serve one's own needs or interests in a world where it is recognized that other people have their own interests too. | Concrete individualistic perspective. Awareness that each person has interests to pursue, and that these interests may conflict, so that right is relative (in the concrete individualistic sense). |
| Level II: Conventional<br>Stage 3:<br>Mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and interpersonal conformity | Living up to what is expected by significant others or what is generally expected of people in the role of daughter, brother, friend, and so on. "Being good" is important and means having good motives, showing concern about others. It also means keeping mutual relationships, such as trust, loyalty, respect, and gratitude. | The need to be a good person in one's own eyes and those of others. Caring for others. Belief in the Golden Rule. Desire to maintain rules and authority that support stereotypical good behavior. | Perspective of the individual in relationship with other individuals.<br>Aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations that take primacy over individual interests. Relates points of view through the concrete Golden Rule, "putting yourself in the other guy's shoes." Does not yet consider generalized system perspective. |
| Stage 4: Social system and conscience | Fulfilling duties to which one has agreed. Laws are to be upheld except in extreme cases where they conflict with other fixed social duties. Right also means contributing to society, the group, or institution. | To maintain the institution as a whole; to avoid the breakdown in the system that would happen "if everyone did it"; or the imperative of conscience to meet one's defined obligations. (Easily confused with Stage 3 belief in rules and authority.) | Societal point of view is differentiated from interpersonal agreement of motives. Takes the point of view of the system that defines roles and rules. Considers individual relations in terms of place in the system. |
| Level III: Postconventional or Principled | | | |
| Stage 5:<br>Social contract or utility and individual rights | Being aware that people hold a variety of values and opinions, that most values and rules are relative to the group. However, these rules should usually be upheld, in the interest of impartiality and because they form the social contract. Some nonrelative values and rights such as life and liberty, however, must be upheld in any society and regardless of majority opinion. | A sense of obligation to law because of the social contract to make and abide by laws for the welfare of all and for the protection of all people's rights. A feeling of contractual commitment, freely entered upon, to family, friendship, trust, and work obligations. Concern that laws and duties be based on rational calculation of overall utility. "The greatest good for the greatest number." | Prior-to-society perspective. Perspective of a rational individual aware of values and rights prior to social attachments and contracts. Integrates perspectives by formal mechanisms of agreement, contract, objective impartiality, and due process. Considers moral and legal points of view; recognizes that they sometimes conflict and finds it difficult to integrate them. |
| Stage 6:<br>Universal ethical principles | Following self-chosen ethical principles. Particular laws or social agreements are usually valid because they rest on such principles. When laws violate these principles, one acts in accordance with the universal principles of justice: the equality of human rights and respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons. | The belief as a rational person in the validity of universal moral principles, and a sense of personal commitment to them. | Perspective of a moral point of view from which social arrangements derive. Perspective is that of a rational individual recognizing the nature of morality or the fact that persons are ends in themselves and must be treated as such. |

Source: Kohlberg 1983: 174-1 76.

recent revisions or reconsiderations going on within the cognitive-developmental school.

## THE DILEMMA INTERVIEW METHOD

The purpose of using moral dilemmas to elicit ethical discourse is that they confront people with two genuine goods, two felt values, to choose between. The choosing process is difficult, therefore, and a deliberative or reflective judging process tends to move into consciousness and become accessible to the interviewer. Obviously, the validity of the whole approach depends upon the dilemma interview method being a *fair* way in which to tap moral standards and ethical reasoning.

Richard Shweder (1982; Shweder, Turiel, and Much 1981) has criticized the dilemma method for its basis in "reflective reasoning" (requiring an ability to articulate what is thought); he prefers to investigate "tacit knowledge" (implicit in people's practice and action choices). While I agree with Shweder that "tacit knowledge" is extremely important to study, nevertheless my own field experience in Kenya (Edwards 1974) has convinced me that the "reflective" reasoning process is not simply a Western cultural process, nor one dependent on formal education. Quite the contrary, persons of all ages, ethnic groups, and walks of life in Kenya seemed aroused, interested, and motivated to talk about moral dilemmas. Tacit knowledge and reflective knowledge seem to be two ends of the continuum of moral and ethical knowledge in at least many if not all cultural groups.

One dilemma in particular aroused genuine interest during my fieldwork and caused people to make comments like, "That's a very hard question. Let me think a minute." This dilemma was developed expressly for the Kenyan setting (I am indebted to John Whiting for it), and is presented in Table 2. The dilemma pits two sets of valued *status obligations* against each other (those a man incurs as "son" and "brother" versus those he incurs as "husband and father"). While quite different from the older Kohlberg dilemmas, this new problem proved quite easy to use and score.

How well does the interview method work with respect to cross-cultural research? By now there has accumulated a large body of studies involving the use of Kohlberg's moral dilemma interview



### Table 2
### Hypothetical Moral Dilemma

*Daniel and the School Fees*

A man, Daniel, managed to complete his secondary school education (Form 4) on the basis of school fees given him by his brother. Afterwards he married and took his wife to live with his parents in the rural area, while he got a job in the city. Eight years later, when his first son was ready to go to primary school, his mother and father came to him and said, "Your brother who educated you has been in an accident and cannot work, so you must now begin to pay for the education of your brother's child." This child was the same age as his own son. The man, Daniel, did not have enough money to pay school fees for both his own son and his brother's child. His wife said he must put his own son first.

1. What should Daniel do in this situation? Should he put his son or his brother's child first? Why?
2. What obligation does he have to his brother who educated him?
3. What does he owe his son?
4. Should he obey his parents in this case? Do you think a grown son has to obey all of his parents' wishes? Why, or why not?
5. What should a grown son do for his parents?
6. Is it more important to maintain harmonious relations with his wife or with his brother and parents? Why?
7. Would you condemn Daniel if he just moved his wife and children to the city and did not pay for the education of his nephew? Why?
8. Would you yourself expect your eldest children to help their younger brothers and sisters with school fees? Why, or why not?

method. Some 45 studies of moral development have been carried out in 27 countries (Snarey 1985). The *quality* of research has improved steadily over time. Recent reports are typically based on much more solid and extensive ethnographic understanding, a closer attention to translation issues, and more creative attempts to adapt the moral dilemma methodology to indigenous concerns than was typical of the early research.

For example, Benjamin Lee (1973, 1976) investigated Taiwanese philosophy and culture and concluded that a debate had gone on for centuries in China concerning the "filiality" of certain types of actions. One particular type of problematical actions are those that might be beneficial to one's parents or ancestors but morally wrong in terms of another major value. Lee constructed four dilemmas centered on filiality. One problem-situation, for instance, concerned whether a "filial son" should testify in court against his father if his

father is a spy for the communists. Lee found that his filiality problems worked well to elicit reflective ethical discourse by people of different ages and educational backgrounds in Taiwan.

More recently, Ann Tietjan and Lawrence Walker (in press) have reported research in Papua New Guinea for which they constructed a moral dilemma based on an actual village event. This dilemma involves a man who has to decide whether to break the ban placed on fishing in the sea by the elders of his village. The ban is the customary taboo following the death of a community member, but the man's problem arises because there is a food shortage and his family is hungry. Tietjen and Walker used their new dilemma along with adaptations of four of the standard Kohlberg dilemmas.

In sum, while a great deal more in the way of improvements is still needed, nevertheless, the research does suggest that a moral dilemma method can work in many cultural settings to elicit or tap a rich vein of informants' ethical discourse.

A productive approach for future researchers might be to draw heavily upon local proverbs and myths as a source of "problem situations." For example, in Kenya I found that many people from a diversity of ethnic groups produced a proverb as part of their response to the School Fees dilemma. Here are some examples of comments made by informants:

> This is the same as what we say, "Before you remove the speck from somebody's eye, you have to remove the speck in your own eye." [Meru man, age 28]
>
> Kikuyus say that, "You start with yours before you jump into another's," and Europeans say, "I first, you second." [Kikuyu man, age 65]
>
> It is said that when the fire sparks on you and another, you have to remove it off yourself first. [Kipsigis woman, age 40]
>
> It is said that if the fire sparks jump on you when you are holding the baby, you have to remove yours first, even though the baby is yours. [Kipsigis man, age 75]

It seems that this family of related proverbs codifies or distills ethical wisdom for the African groups of Kenya. Each proverb both presents a problem ("a burning spark lands on you and a baby") and an answer as to what one should do ("brush it off yourself first, then take care of the baby"). Given that the proverb implicitly involves a moral problem, why not focus on this problem and try to elicit ethical discourse about its meaning: *why* should one first help himself, then the baby?



## THE STANDARD SCORING SYSTEM

Not only the dilemma method but also the scoring system is under renewed examination in the light of evidence gathered in non-Western communities. At present the dilemma interview method may actually be more culturally elastic than the scoring system. However—and here is where the help of anthropologists is necessary—the same methods that have been used to refine the current scoring manual could also be used to truly open it to the panorama of ethical systems found worldwide.

The intention of the scoring system is to describe (give criteria for recognizing) the various forms that moral/ethical arguments may take and still embody the same basic logical structure. The scoring system has undergone a great deal of modification in recent years as Kohlberg and colleagues attempt to establish a valid, reliable, standardized, readily learnable methodology. They have settled upon a method called Standard Scoring (Colby et al. in press) that seems to meet most of the objections of the American psychological community to earlier versions of the scoring system (see Colby et al. 1983).

How well does the Standard Scoring System work for data collected in non-Western communities? John Snarey, who has studied ethical discourse in Israel (1985), has begun to treat in a systematic way the cross-cultural interview materials that past researchers have described as *difficult to score.* The focus is not on statements that are unscorable because they are incomplete or inadequately probed. Rather, the focus is on statements that are complete but *do not fit* the stage definitions and criteria in the Kohlberg scoring manual.

Snarey concludes that the Kohlberg scoring system is sometimes inadequate for *adult* specimens of ethical discourse. Some specimens are complete but seem ambiguous as to whether they should properly be assigned a score of stage 4 or 5, or stage 3 or 4. (The ambiguity does not seem to extend down to stages 1 and 2, which seem easy to recognize in every cultural sample tested so far.) These problems have arisen most frequently when statements include arguments for "what is right" or "reasons for doing right" that resemble the criterion-judgments for a certain stage, but seem to derive from a "social perspective" expected at the next higher adjacent stage. For example, Snarey, Reimer, and Kohlberg (1985) found that

some Israeli kibbutz subjects used collectivist/communa1 arguments that were initially "guess-scored" at Stage 4 but eventually understood as full postconventional Stage 5.

Thus, at present the scoring system may misinterpret or underestimate the abstract complexity of some sophisticated arguments in non-Western cultural groups. Are these problems correctable? Yes, I would argue that they are, in principle. Since the entire system of stage definitions and scoring criteria has been inductively derived, there is no reason why in principle the system could not be further revised and expanded in the light of new data. Certainly this endeavor would receive an immeasurable boost from the participation of anthropologists. To expand the definitions and prototypes in the scoring manual, what is required is an extensive body of well-elaborated ethical discourse with which to work, accompanied by linguistic and ethnographic background knowledge to provide the context for correct interpretation of the speakers' meanings.

Many anthropologists who have examined Kohlberg's theory have been disturbed by the definition of stages 5 and 6 in terms of a *universalistic morality of justice.* Kohlberg has explicitly stated that his theory is a "rational reconstruction of the ontogenesis of justice reasoning" (Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer 1983: 10). As justification he has reinvoked the Socratic claim that "virtue is not many but one and its name is justice" (1983: 18).

In contrast to Kohlberg, other cognitivists have argued that there is no necessity to limit the theory to justice reasoning. Kohlberg himself, in coming to terms with the criticisms of Carol Gilligan (1982), has recognized that the "dilemmas and scoring system were limited in the sense that they did not deal with dilemmas (or orientations to those dilemmas) of *special relationships and obligations.* Special relationships include relations to family, friends, and to groups of which the self is a member" (Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer 1983:20).

It seems a reasonable hypothesis that the understanding of particularistic, status obligations by people in non-Western societies may be far more sophisticated than is typical in our society (Shweder and Bourne 1984). Therefore, special attention of future researchers should be focused upon the development of moralities of status obligations, especially those related to kinship roles. This will require new dilemmas that involve problems of conflicting role



obligations, or problems in which disputants seem to have conflicting expectations about a role (as in Lee's "filiality" problems). A comparative science of ethical development must come to terms with ways in which people understand what is right about their culturally defined status obligations.

## THE THEORETICAL DEFINITION OF THE HIGHER STAGES

A third reason to take a new look at the cognitive-developmental perspective has to do with debate surrounding the *theory,* in particular the theoretical status of the upper stages. The upper stages have always been the controversial ones in Kohlberg's system because they are not equally distributed across cultural groups tested, nor even across socioeconomic classes within the Western industrialized societies (Edwards 1975).

You may be interested to know, therefore, that Kohlberg's close colleague and "sympathetic critic," John Gibbs, has recently argued that the upper stages are not actually true, "hard" develop-mental stages in the Piagetian sense. Rather, Gibbs (1977, 1979) asserts that the two upper stages (5 and 6) are "metaethical" reflections on morality—"soft stages"—tied more to education and cultural background than to cognitive maturation and role-taking experience. Gibbs suggests that the four "developmental stages" should be divided into two major levels: "immature morality" (stages 1 and 2) versus "mature morality" (stages 3 and 4) (also see the related arguments by German psychologist Lutz Eckensberger 1981).

Kohlberg himself (Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer 1983) now recognizes that development beyond a certain point (stage 5, he would argue) is best considered a matter of "soft stages."

This kind of theoretical revision should have the effect of moving the first four stages into center stage. These stages have actually been rather solidly established as a developmental sequence in a wide variety of cultural settings.

Indeed, should the anthropologically minded reader turn his or her attention to the research conducted in non-Western communities, that reader will discover that the first three to four stages of Kohlberg's system apparently capture *something* about the quality

and development of ethical discourse that is not culturally specific. (Is this the *rationality* element? Very likely.)

What is the basis of this conclusion? One argument derives from two sets of research findings that have compared the ethical discourse of indigenously defined "community leaders" versus "nonleaders." Harkness, Edwards, and Super (1981) studied 12 men in the rural Kipsigis village of Kokwet in Western Kenya. Half of the men had local reputations as the "most honest men," and were often called in to help resolve disputes, while the other half were comparably Christian, wealthy, and educated but not known for their "honesty." Tietjen and Walker (in press) studied 22 men living in the Maisin coastal villages of Uiaku and Ganjiga, in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea. The men were divided into four groups: traditional leaders, government leaders, religious leaders, and nonleaders.

Both studies report that the community-defined "moral leaders" showed more "mature" (stage 3) moral reasoning than did the comparison group of nonleaders (who showed significantly more stage 2). The leaders' ethical discourse, as elicited by the dilemma interview, was more systematic, and involved a *societal rather than merely dyadic role-taking perspective on issues of right and wrong*.

This point can perhaps best be made through illustration. Below are presented the answers of the Kipsigis men (interviewed by anthropologist Sara Harkness) to a question in one of the dilemmas concerning whether or not it was bad for a father to break a promise to his son. The answers of all 12 sample men are presented, to give readers unfamiliar with moral-dilemma interviewing a sense of the rich yield that the method provides.

The leaders' answers are not only longer and more carefully argued than the nonleaders'. Their answers also include more focus on the father's possible motivations for breaking his word, the potential psychological effects on the son, and/or the evolving nature of the father/son relationship. Further, the leaders attempt to address the question not as a specific instance only but rather as an example of a general case.

### Answers of Six "Non-Leaders" in Kokwet

1. It is bad because the father is the one who promised the son, "You work and when you get money, you can buy your own record player." But now the child has worked and he has got the money and the father comes and breaks the promise. Yet he is the one who promised the son [Age 29, 7 years school].
2. It was bad because the father had earlier on promised his son that he can buy his record player. The father should leave the money for the child and look for his own money for repairing his radio [Age 50, 4 years school].
3. It is not so bad because what could he have done? For when all things are arranged as you want them to be, they can be altered to another way. You may say, "I am going to do something or such and such," but a time may come when you'll change your mind and say, "It is better for me to do that one first, rather than the one I had intended to do." But that's not really changing your mind [Age 31, 8 years school].
4. He was supposed to give back the money to James because he had asked James to help him with money for repairing his radio. He was not to spend it without giving it back to James, since he had promised James that he can buy his own record player. It is bad to break what you said, and so nobody wants to break a promise [Age 47, no school].
5. In that case maybe the father had an idea that he was going to look for this money to repay his son [Age 55, no school].
6. It is bad for the father since he has made the promise. Breaking a promise is very bad and it applies to everyone. It is also bad if the father is not in good relationship with his son [Age 55, no school].



### Answers of the Six "Moral Leaders" in Kokwet

1. Once we have made a promise and none of us breaks it, then there is going to be respect and happiness between us. No one will be angry. Therefore, by showing respect to one another the friendship is assured, and as a result this will uplift our prosperity in the family. My son can take my advice. It is very bad to promise your child something and then you break the promise. If no truth prevails between you and your son, then you will not feel happy, since you will not be in unity. But if it is something you agree with one another, then it is not bad. If the child doesn't listen to you, then you find that maybe there is not a good relationship between the father and son [Age 55, no school].
2. It is better to say the truth because it is something like—we say it in our proverb, "It is better to say the truth or to say something kind to somebody else." It is something like obedience. If you don't keep the promise you will be wrong. You will lose your friend by saying lies—a liar. It is wrong to break a promise because, say, I promise a friend of mine that I will meet him somewhere and then I fail to go there. Let us say he waits today and tomorrow. The third day there is no friendship at all—no connection. So that James will be disobedient to his father if the father breaks a promise [Age 40, 8 years school].
3. Considering it in the first instance, the father took the money peacefully and not by force. Things taken from him by force is bad, but if it was agreed between

them it is good, that is, the father tells the son, "My child, now the money you intended to buy a record player with, let us use it for the other purpose, and next time you buy it." For the son and the father to agree upon one thing is good, because [otherwise] they will struggle without peace until they buy the intended player [Age 55, no school].

4. The father is asking for the money, telling James, "Because you haven't bought your record player yet, give me a hand in repairing my radio." But if James had already bought his record player, then there would be nothing that the father could say. Nothing could be done [Age 50, no school].
5. It is not bad because you are trying to mix your blood with that of your child. The first word to come out of his mouth is that he wants to go dancing to please himself. Then you tell him, "Work now until you get money." Now, how will you know that he is going to give you this money? What will you do, for example, when you have no food to eat or clothes to wear? How will you know [that he is being honest with you]? I, for one, as soon as my son gets money, I tell him, "Leave that, instead buy for me this ox for ploughing." You will not think that the child has been denied his money, but that he is checked to save his heart to see whether his heart is straight. But if his heart is astray, then he will say, "I want to buy a player." Thereby you are not in good coordination with him. So it is not bad [to ask him for his money]; but for the next time, he should be allowed to do his own work himself [keep his money for his own purpose] since he is a good child [Age 75, no school].
6. The father has the right to direct his children on what to do because he is the one who cares for them. [Yet] as I said earlier, the child might know that his father has got some money but seeks that of this child. The child might think, "Why should he take my money and yet he has got his?" That occurs when there is no unity, or there is misunderstanding between them at home. . . . The son might say, "I wish to buy a bicycle". . . . But when parents tell the son, "There is no money to buy for you a bicycle," the child might struggle to progress and is determined to buy a bicycle. If you now come and ask him to give you the money while he is still progressing, then it will not be easy for him to give you, especially when the son knows that the father clearly understands that the son has never been squandering his money. And so he will not be happy to give the money to his father. He will say, "How can I surrender to him some of my money and yet I want to buy a bicycle? Father has got some money and as such I am unable to give him mine." And therefore in such cases, the father doesn't have a right to make such unfair demands [Age 32, 6 years school].

In sum, in a basic way that has to do with formal characteristics of their ethical discourse, the moral leaders in study communities in Kenya and New Guinea-communities widely separated in time, space, and cultural tradition-sounded like each other, and the nonleaders similarly sounded like each other. Their individual samples of



ethical discourse were *commensurate*, to adapt Alan Page Fiske's (1984) phraseology.

## CONSTRUCTIVE PROCESSES INVOLVED IN EARLY MORAL CONCEPTS

A fourth and final reason for anthropologists to take a second look at recent cognitive-developmental research has to do with the debate raging within the discipline concerning the emergence of moral concepts in very young children. One group of cognitive-psychologists has actually defined for themselves a position much further out on the "rational self-construction" continuum than has the Kohlberg group.

Eliot Turiel (1983) of Berkeley and his colleagues, Larry Nucci (1982) and Judith Smetana (1983), claim that not only the structure but also the content of basic morality is rationally self-constructed. This content, they claim, centers on issues of justice and harm and arises out of young children's predisposition to engage in social role-taking. Children empathize with people in distress (Hoffman 1975) and consider such questions as, "What if this were to happen to me?" These experiences persuade them of the immorality of actions that harm others or violate their rights.

This self-construction process, they claim, can be indirectly observed by studying children's naturally occurring "transgression" situations. Their studies, conducted in U.S. settings (mostly classrooms) suggest that when justice/harm rules are violated, two consequences usually take place. First, victims provide "distress" or "outrage" feedback, and second, if and when adults intervene, they do so in a way that provides children with additional concrete information about "what is intrinsically wrong" with harming another or violating his rights. The consequences of moral transgressions, the researchers conclude, differ in critical respects from the consequences of transgressions that involve nonmoral rules such as table manners and other matters of etiquette (also see Much and Shweder 1978).

These brave people may have gotten themselves out on the end of a long limb that is about to break (see Edwards 1985a, in press; Shweder 1982). Struck by the power of even young children as active, "rational" constructers of rule-related knowledge, they have

underestimated the role of adults in "scaffolding" the knowledge-construction process and "orienting" children to the culturally defined meanings embedded in interpersonal interaction.

In recent papers I have critiqued certain aspects of the Turiel-Nucci-Smetana position, based on an empirical analysis of the social interactions of Kenyan Luo children aged 2 to 12 years. The data come from the corpus of naturalistic observations collected by anthropologist Carol Ember (see Ember 1973; Bookman and Ember in press).

Ember trained her observers (educated students from the local area) to record the children's speech to one another as exactly as possible. A reexamination of her observational protocols reveals much about the conversational routines of the children. In particular, the observations are rich in interpersonal "ethical discourse-in-action" that takes place when parents correct or sanction children or when children command one another, correct one another's misdemeanors, and negotiate about family responsibilities.

The reanalysis of Ember's observations suggests that Oyugis adults (and children) differ from their U.S. counterparts in two ways. First, they seem to include in the moral domain certain kinds of rules that Americans consider simply conventional, or nonmoral. In particular, they treat as moral matters the rules of etiquette and proper social presentation, and also the status obligations related to age and sex roles. This cultural difference suggests that children everywhere construct notions about what is "morally desirable or obligatory" (versus desirable for some other reason) not simply by exercising their own rational powers. Rather, they must look to cultural cues, to distinctions implicitly conveyed to children by means of powerful suggestions and corrections (D'Andrade 1981; Shweder 1982).

Second, the Oyugis observations present a contrast to the American materials in the typical patterns of adult and child response to transgression. This suggests that cultural communities may differ sharply in the way that they communicate information to children about the "reasons for doing right." For example, adults may organize their responses to children's transgressions in ways that focus attention upon one or more of the following aspects: the *rationale* underlying the rule; the *sanctions* attached to rule violation; the *affect* motivating obedience (empathy, guilt, shame, and so on). Rationales are highlighted by use of "inductive" disciplinary techniques that involve discussion of why an action is wrong. Sanctions are highlighted by use of "power-assertive" techniques, such as physical punishment and frightening threats. Affects are highlighted by use of guilt or shame-producing techniques, such as love withdrawal, ridicule, shaming, and so on (see Edwards in press; B. Whiting 1950; J. Whiting 1967).



In sum, the Oyugis, Kenyan findings point to the key role of *cultural authority* in defining "what is right" and "reasons for doing right." Nevertheless, the findings by no means suggest that *rational considerations* play a negligible role in moral and ethical decision making. Quite the contrary, the findings reveal that the Kenyan children resemble the American ones in one major way. In both cultural settings, the children, far from being robotic followers of cultural rules, seem like "little lawyers" as they negotiate their responsibilities and persuade one another of the proper or required course of action. Even children as young as 2 or 3 years of age have begun to engage in ethical discourse. The process of ethical discourse-in-action in the two cultural settings seems basically more similar than different. Here is an especially vivid observation from Oyugis of children negotiating moral rights and wrongs. It involves four children aged 5 to 10. One of them is a visitor to the homestead, while the other three are siblings.

> I. (Visitor Girl, age 10) calls O. (Boy, age 8) to come get the baby because he is crying. O. tries to come but on the way is deliberately blocked by his little brother, G. (age 5). The visitor girl canes G. to let O. go by.
>
> G. complains wittily to the visitor girl, "Can't you remember what I've done for you? I brought the baby from the other house for you, and now you're caning me!"
>
> N. (Sister of G., age 8) offers comfort to G., "If she can't remember what you did for her, then never help her anymore."
>
> I. (Visitor) leaves and withdraws into the house [Observation by Carol Ember, quoted in Edwards 1985a].

## CONCLUSION

What is the significance of the findings discussed in this paper for the problem of ethical relativism? First, most of the findings relate to the problem of "descriptive relativism," that is, whether moral values and ethical discourse can be "joined" across cultural bound-

aries—abstracted from their cultural context and validly compared. While the evidence is far from definitive, nevertheless the weight of recent findings on the psychology of ethical reasoning would seem to incline against any extreme doctrine of descriptive relativism. Far from indicating a radical "incommensurability" of ethical beliefs and ideas, the findings suggest that human beings from different cultural traditions can *quite easily* understand one another's ethical discourse. It appears that in all cultural communities, the discourse draws from a common human pool of modes of judging, choosing, justifying, and validating moral action.

Second, the findings also have a bearing on the related problem of "normative relativism," that is, whether ethical conflicts across cultural boundaries can be resolved. Can people from different traditions not only understand one another but also reach agreement on ethical conflicts? If, as some have asserted, most or all of morality is "socially transmitted," then we would have reason to doubt that any ethical conflicts between cultures could ever be resolved. In contrast, if some part of the core of morality is rationally constructed, then we have good reason to suppose that "ethically competent judges" from diverse cultural traditions might be able to find a common meeting ground and agree, if not on one system of moral principles, then on a limited universe of acceptable types of moral systems. Again, I conclude that the psychological research evidence inclines against an extreme doctrine of normative relativism. Though cultural groups do differ in how they order values in their hierarchy and how they define the parameters in their equations of "justice" (and these differences are not rationally resolvable), yet their differences concern only some, not all, questions (Wong 1984).Much can be agreed upon. The always thoughtful and often passionate struggle to resolve ethical problems-a process that is culturally shared, not specific-indicates that we must not underestimate or ignore the rationally constructed aspect of morality and ethics.

## NOTES

***Acknowledgments.*** An earlier version of this paper was presented at an A.E.S.- and S.P.A.-sponsored symposium on Ethical Relativism at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Denver, November 1984. I wish to thank Alan Page Fiske and the anonymous reviewers for *Ethos* for their helpful comments.



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