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The Moral Development in Childhood

Sergey V. Molchanov*,

Lomonosov Moscow State University, Faculty of Psychology, 11-5, Mokhovaya Str., Moscow, 125009, Russia

Abstract

Moral development in childhood can be regarded as one of the central aspects of socialization. School education plays an important role in acquisition of moral norms. Development of children's moral competence was in the focus of our attention. More than 650 children aged from 7 to 8 took part in the research. The result analysis allows defining several groups of pupils with different levels of moral competence. Definition of moral norms becomes a complicated task and can be regarded as the content of zone of proximal development. The level of moral orientation depends on the task content and the type of regarded situation.

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1. Introduction.

Childhood is the important time of human's socialization. One of the directions of socialization is the acquisition of moral norms and moral development at that age. The social-cognitive psychological development in middle childhood provides necessary conditions for moral development. The analysis of social situation of development allows defining factors and conditions that influence child's development [1]. The development of social relations and communication with peers in the middle childhood plays an important role in moral development. The intellectual development, particularly reflective thinking provides the person's sensitivity to moral development in the middle childhood.

There are 3 groups of theories of moral development in childhood. The first group comes from J.Piaget and L.Kohlberg's ideas and focuses on cognitive aspects of moral development where the justice principle becomes the foundation of moral reasoning [2], [3]. Turiel's theory of different domains presents one of the modern forms of cognitive approach to moral development [4]. The second group pays attention to the emotional factor and care principle as the bases of moral development (C.Gilligan, M.Hoffman) [5], [6]. The third group is presented by integrated theories that unite the cognitive and emotional components of moral behavior that orientates on justice and care principles depending on situation conditions [7], [8]. We suppose that these 3

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-910-468-84-75; fax: +7-495-959-99-84.
E-mail address: s-molch2001@mail.ru

directions in theories of moral development depict different lines of moral development and must be integrated [9]. Traditionally researchers focus more on adolescence as the crucial age period of moral development [10], [11]. Some programs of special formation procedures of moral development were realized for adolescents [12], [13]. Middle childhood seems to be not less important period for moral development [14]. Developing moral orientation and moral competence becomes an important preposition of future development, for example communicational competence [15]. The special analyses of cognitive and emotional development that influence on moral development in middle childhood must be done [16], [6], [1], [4].

Moral development can be regarded as the process of development of behavior regulation on the bases of interiorized system of norms. What helps to focus on the norm? In cognitive aspect it is the knowledge of norms and consequences of breaking the norms, in emotional aspect – the orientation on emotional feelings about people's behavior. Different theories focus on different aspects of moral development. The traditional normative cognitive approach beginning from J.Piaget's theory pays attention to cognitive and intellectual structures, moral judgments and moral reasoning [3]. These ideas were realized in the theory of development of moral consciousness proposed by L.Kohlberg [2]. Nevertheless the criticism of L.Kohlberg theory became very popular and was used as the basis for development of new approaches to moral development. For example, the domain theory presented in works of E.Turiel mainly based on L.Kohlberg's ideas. The domain theory of E.Turiel defines three main domains of human's life: the moral domain, the conventional domain and the individual domain [4]. The investigations of children's capability to define the content of life situation belonging to different domains shows that many children aged from 6 to 7 are able to define them properly. In middle childhood the hierarchy of norms develops. If at the beginning of middle childhood the conventional norms are more important, than to the end of middle childhood the moral norms become more important and begin to regulate the behavior. Behavior according to the norms in middle childhood very often is the realization the conventional norms because for the child it is the behavior prescribed by adults. This position can be interpreted due to the peculiarities of child's activity at that age when the adult is the organizer and leader in joint activity and his decisions become the basis for the child's activity. Parents and teachers in family and school want the child to behave according to moral norms but the content of these moral norms is uncertain for the child. That results in the increasing gap between moral verbal behavior and real moral behavior increases. That phenomenon can be described as pre-conventional level of moral development in Kohlbergian's terms. Modern Russian educational system and new Educational Standards of primary school and middle school education pay much attention to harmonic psychological development of pupil's personality [17], [18]. According to Educational Standard one of the components of harmonic psychological personal development is the development of moral orientation [14]. The specific and important role of middle childhood defined the aim of our research.

2. Research goals and methods

In our research we supposed that the knowledge about "behavior according to the norm" in middle childhood is connected with the peculiarities of united activity with the adult and habits in role distribution. The parent organizes the activity and the child realizes it. The moral norm is not necessary here. Only in relations with peers the objective necessity for cooperation appears and the bases for moral development arises (J.Piaget) [3]. The relations with peers can be regarded as the zone of proximate development in the sphere of moral development (L.S.Vygotskij) [12], [19].

The general aim of our study was to research the peculiarities of moral development in childhood among children attending 1 and 2 grade of school, aged from 6 to 8. Two main goals were defined:

- to define the peculiarities of moral orientation, firstly the ability to recognize human's motives of behavior and to define conventional and moral norms.
- to define the peculiarities of moral competence in middle childhood including age, sociocultural and gender differences in the level of moral competence;

More than 650 children aged from 6 to 8, attending schools, took part in the research. Children from different cultural and national groups in Russia are presented in the study. The data was collected in several

schools from different regions of Russia. The geography of study was very broad – from western regions of Russia in Kaliningrad to eastern parts of Russia including specific regions in the north and the south.

We used several questionnaires and moral dilemmas to complete the research. The diagnostic instruments for the first goal that is to define the peculiarities of moral orientation, firstly the ability to recognize human's motives of behavior and to define conventional and moral norms, were the following: moral dilemma and questionnaire. Moral dilemma modified from J.Piaget's works depicted situation where two boys broke several cups: one of them – his name was Sergey - has broken 5 cups trying to help his mother and the second boy – Peter - has broken 1 cup trying to get the cake without permission. The questions were focused on type of subject's orientation in the situation – the child orientates on real consequences or on motives of behavior. Children were asked who was more guilty and why, who must be punished and why. The questionnaire was aimed to reveal the ability to distinguish conventional and moral norms. 650 subjects participated in that part of investigation.

In order to achieve the second goal that is to define the peculiarities of moral competence in middle childhood including age, sociocultural and gender differences in the level of moral competence, we used 2 moral dilemmas. First dilemma was focused on the norm of mutual aid: mother asked her child to help her and to wash the dishes after dinner. When she came home she was disappointed because her child didn't wash anything. The second dilemma was modified from Piaget's studies and focused on the level of moral decentration. The family went for a walk and one the smallest children lost his cake. The question was what to do in the situation. Both dilemmas were modified taking into account the abilities of understanding and capabilities of 6-8 years old children. The approbation was done earlier. The criteria to estimate the level of moral competence in middle childhood were the following: the ability to mark out the content of situation with following or breaking moral norms (the orientation to the moral norm), the ability to differentiate conventional and moral norms, the moral dilemma decision making on the bases of decentration (to take into account the objective consequences of the action, motives and feelings, comparison of moral norms), the ability to argue why it is necessary to follow moral norms. 350 subjects participated in that part of investigation.

3. Results

The data analysis of moral orientation showed interesting results. The results reflecting levels of moral orientation development by moral dilemma solving are presented in the following tables. The first question was to define who of the boys must be regarded guiltier.

Table 1. Who is guilty in the situation with broken cups?

Who is guilty	Percent of answers
1. Heteronym moral level (Sergey dilemma)	25,1%
2. Autonomy moral level (Peter dilemma)	30,4%
3. Both are guilty properly	32,9%
4. No one is guilty	11,5%

As it is shown in Table 1 the often repeated answers are the answers that both boys are guilty and the fact that Peter is guilty. These results let us to suggest that for most of the children moral orientation is not yet formed (32,9% of the data) or autonomy moral level is reached (30,4% of the data). Table 2 presents the results about the necessity of punishment for the boys.

Table 2. Who must be punished?

Who must be punished	Percent of answers
1. Heteronomy moral level (Sergey dilemma)	35,7%
2. Autonomy moral level (Peter dilemma)	38,8%
3. Both are guilty properly	20,8%
4. No one is guilty	4,7%

As it is shown in Table 2 the often-repeated answers are that one of the heroes must be punished: Peter (38,8% of the data) or Sergey (35,7% of the data). It's worth to be mentioned that only 4,7% of the subjects reported that none of the boys must be punished. Comparing the answers "who is guilty" and "who must be punished" we can see the increasing recognition of Sergey's guilt (from 25,1% to 35,7%) and Peter's guilt (from 30,4% to 38,8%) and decreasing level of children who blames both boys (from 32,8% to 20,8%) and don't find guilty at all (from 11,5% to 4,7%). So we can make the conclusion that children begin to differentiate better the guilt of the concrete boy going from esteem of the guilt to esteem of the punishment. The analysis of reasons why the boy must be punished becomes crucial in that situation. The results of reasons of punishment are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Why the boy must be punished?

Why the hero must be punished	Percent of answers
1. The answer doesn't have orientation on circumstances of behaviour	23,3%
2. Heteronomy moral level (orientation on objective consequences of behaviour)	41,2%
3. Autonomy moral level (orientation on motives of hero's behavior)	35,5%

As it is shown in Table 3 the most popular answer reflects the orientation on objective consequences (heteronomy moral level) – 41.2%. The typical answer is "Sergey broke more cups than Peter that is why he must be punished more that Peter". The second popular answer shows the orientation on motives of boy's behavior – 35.5%. The typical answer is "Sergey wanted to help his mother and Peter made the action that was forbidden". The third group of answers doesn't have the orientation on circumstances of behavior and mostly consisted of emotional reactions on the situation.

The analysis of possibility to define conventional and moral norms as the part of moral orientation showed the following results presented in Table 4. The necessity to obey norms was measured in 5-point scale.

Table 4. The necessity of obeying to the norms of behavior

Norms	Average score	Standard deviation
1. Conventional norms	3,43	0.46
2. Moral norms	3,29	0.51
3. Individual norms	2,07	0.58

As it is shown in Table 4 the most popular norms are conventional norms, then go moral norms and after all – individual norms. The statistical analysis showed the significant differences in preference of conventional norms to moral norms and both conventional and moral norms to neutral norms (Wilcoxon criteria, $p=0.00$). The

analysis of distribution of subjects answers according to these norms proved that fact. The additional analysis of more important and less important situations was done. 2 among 3 most important situations were connected with moral norms in sphere of parent-child relations and only one – with conventional norms. At the same time among 4 less important situations 2 are connected with moral norms. That proves the fact that moral orientation doesn't always allow defining moral norms as the most important.

These results develop our interest in peculiarities of moral competence in middle childhood. Some additional data was collected on the group of 350 children aged from 6 to 8.

The result analysis of peculiarities of moral competence shows the following:

1. In the first dilemma children didn't focus on the norm of mutual help though most of them were sure that it is necessary to wash the dishes. At the same time there was no emotional orientation on mother that also proves the fact that there is focus on the norm of mutual help not as a moral norm but as a conventional norm.
2. The second dilemma with the lost cake was solved on the bases of ideas that needs and desires of children must be fulfilled and mother is the person who fulfill these needs. Only 30% of children talked about the norm of mutual help (idea of sharing the cakes) in that dilemma.
3. There is a gap between knowledge of correct prosocial behavior in problem situation and lack of orientation on moral content of the situation.
4. Low level of orientation on emotional factor in moral decision-making was revealed.
5. Sociocultural differences are connected with the type of socialization in the family. Children from regions where traditional models of families are presented (authoritarian parent position) were more strict and confident in the necessity to wash the dishes in first dilemma and in the idea that older children have to share cakes with smaller children.
6. Gender differences showed that girls more often report with emotional responses and are orientated more on emotional aspects of behavior than boys.
7. There is a difference in perception of adult and peer in moral situation. The helping behavior for the adult perceives not as moral norm but as a conventional norm. And in the situation of communication with peer the necessity of help is not so evident. The behavior choice seems to be more complicated.

4. Conclusions

The research on moral development in middle childhood clarified the relationship between the level of moral consciousness development and guidance in the domain of conventional morality. Children aged from 6 to 8 showed different levels of development of moral orientation and moral competence. We supposed that children that perceive conventional norms as more important than moral norms show lower level of judgments according to Kohlberg's conception. That assumption was proved by statistical analysis ($r=0.37$, $p=0.01$). Some specific peculiarities of moral orientation were revealed. The moral orientation depends on conditions of situation of moral choice – participation of adult or peer as the interactive partner in the moral dilemma situation influences the way of decision-making. Sociocultural differences are connected with the type of socialization in the family. Classic gender differences were found in the study – girls are more orientated on emotional aspects than boys.

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