

Morality Play

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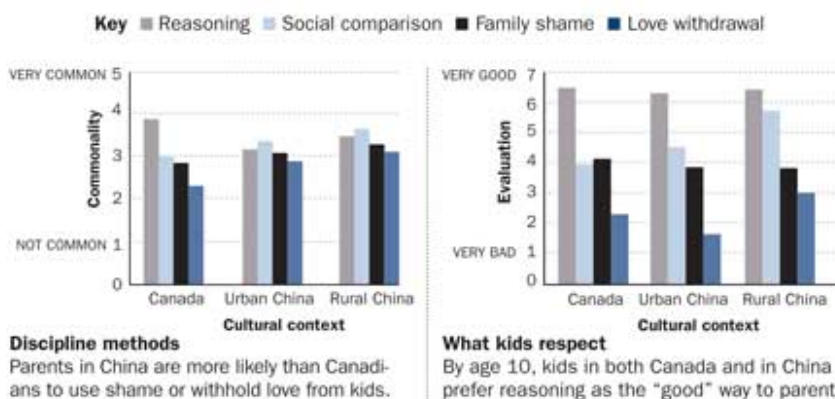
A 10-year-old Chinese boy listens intently as a visiting researcher tells him a story. It begins pleasantly enough: A boy named Xiaoming goes to a park and meets a child playing with a new ball. But after joining in the fun, Xiaoming decides that he wants to play with the ball alone. So he hits the other child, knocks him down and lunges for the ball. The victim hangs on to the ball and runs home crying.



MORALITY PLAY | A boy named Xiaoming goes to a park and meets a child playing with a new ball. But after joining in the fun, Xiaoming decides that he wants to play with the ball alone. So he hits the other child, knocks him down and lunges for the ball. The victim hangs on to the ball and runs home crying. Xiaoming’s mother witnesses the whole encounter. How will she handle this situation? Illustration by Lior Taylor

Cross-cultural values

Some of kids’ earliest moral judgments come from interactions with parents. Parents in different nations favor different means of discipline, but kids judge those means similarly.



CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES | Some of kids' earliest moral judgments comes from interaction with parents. Parents in different nations favor different means of discipline, but kids judge those means similarly. C. Helwig

Meanwhile, Xiaoming's mother witnesses the whole encounter.

Not surprisingly, she is horrified. The researcher describes four possible actions taken by Xiaoming's mother. In one, she reasons with the boy, telling him to remember how it felt to be hit by another child and to imagine how his playmate in the park now feels. In another, she says it's shameful to hit other children and asks why Xiaoming can't behave as well as his friends do. In a third, the mother says that Xiaoming's behavior embarrassed her and makes their family look bad.

For her final go-round, Xiaoming's mother says that she loves him less when he misbehaves. She's so upset about the park incident that she tells the boy to "just go away."

Some of these tactics hit close to home for the real-life Chinese boy. He lives in a mountain village with no computers and few televisions. Adults there teach traditional Chinese values of maintaining harmonious relationships and fulfilling duties to family members. Village parents often talk of the shame that children bring to their families by acting disruptively and of the difficulty in loving a bad son or daughter. Many urban Chinese have gravitated away from these traditional principles over the past 20 years, but not most rural folk.

So it comes as a surprise that the village boy ranks reasoning as the mother's best tactic for setting Xiaoming straight. His explanation: Someone who knocks down other children needs prodding from Mom to realize how it feels to be bullied. That insight will make Xiaoming a better person.

A parent who appeals to family shame, makes unfavorable comparisons with others or threatens to deny love can emotionally burden her child, the boy asserts. In the boy's opinion, Xiaoming "will weep painfully in a corner" after hearing that his mother loves him less for pushing another child. He'll suspect that his mother doesn't really care about him and will be sadder in the future even if he is better behaved.

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Culture wars

Other rural Chinese kids, as well as city children in China and Canada, generally agree with the village boy's opinions, says psychologist Charles Helwig of the University of Toronto. His new findings support the idea that universal concerns among children — such as a need to feel in control of one's behavior and disapproval of harming others — shape moral development far more than cultural values do.

“It's remarkable how little cultural variation we have found in developmental patterns of moral reasoning,” says Helwig, who presented his results in Park City, Utah, at the recent annual meeting of the Jean Piaget Society.

Helwig and like-minded researchers don't assume that kids' universal responses spring from a biologically innate moral-reasoning capacity. Instead, they say, children gradually devise ways of evaluating core family relationships in different situations. Kids judge the fairness and effectiveness of their parents' approaches to punishing misbehavior, for example. These kinds of relationship issues are much the same across all cultures, from Helwig's perspective.

Children everywhere stew in the same pot of family conflict, with different cultural seasonings added for flavor, in Helwig's view. When parents restrict behaviors that children regard as personal choices, such as what clothes to wear or which friends to hang out with, disputes inevitably arise. Parental restrictions on behavior that kids view as morally wrong or as a violation of conventional social rules are often accepted, even if grudgingly.

During the teen years, kids in Asian and Western cultures alike gravitate toward a broader class of moral imperatives, including rights to privacy, education and freedom of speech, Helwig and colleagues find in another new study published in the August *Social Development*. Adolescents also appeal to democratic notions, such as majority rule, to justify a preference for representative forms of government — even if they live in a communist or authoritarian society.

Helwig's conclusions trigger skepticism from some psychologists, including Shinobu Kitayama of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, who contend that moral reasoning fundamentally differs in Eastern and Western cultures. In Kitayama's view, only individualistic Westerners put a premium on personal freedoms and rights. Asians steeped in responsibilities to family and society guard the moral integrity of their assigned roles and duties.

As Helwig demonstrates in his studies, Chinese children know about autonomy — having a sense of personal control over one's acts — but collective values still dominate their lives, Kitayama contends. "Autonomy is a primary developmental goal in some societies but not others," he says. "It shouldn't be regarded as an inherently superior value."

Grading Mom's discipline

Cultures undeniably differ, Helwig acknowledges. But each culture inspires a mix of cooperation and conflict from its members, he says. Relationships and situations in which some people wield power over others — think parents and children — generate challenges to cultural values from the weaker parties.

"Young children critically evaluate culturally sanctioned parenting practices and sometimes disagree with those that they think have harmful effects," Helwig says.

He and his colleagues interviewed 384 children, teenagers and young adults who had grown up in Toronto, the Chinese city of Nanjing or a farming village in China's Shandong Province. Each participant listened to stories, such as that of Xiaoming and his mother, told in his or her native language.

In line with earlier studies of Chinese families, Chinese city and village children said that their parents most frequently disciplined them by making negative comparisons with someone else, such as “Even your baby brother knows what to do.” Reasoning and talk of family shame occurred slightly less often, as did parental threats of withdrawing love.

Canadian children cited reasoning as their parents’ number one disciplinary tactic. Negative comparisons and talk of family shame occurred somewhat less often than reasoning, followed by threats of love withdrawal.

Despite different levels of exposure to various forms of discipline, children in each setting evaluated parents’ practices similarly, Helwig says. Beginning between ages 7 and 10, participants ranked reasoning as a “very good” disciplinary technique and maintained that conviction until young adulthood. Children generally accepted shame-based discipline, but increasingly criticized it during adolescence.

Threats of love withdrawal often got panned, especially after age 10.

All children in the study offered detailed descriptions of psychological harms caused by shaming and love-withdrawal techniques. But participants added that the threat of losing a parent’s love would work as well as reasoning at changing a child’s behavior for the better.

“Children recognized that the threat of losing a parent’s love could effectively change their behavior, but they didn’t see it as morally acceptable for parents to use such methods,” Helwig says.

At this point, he doesn’t know whether kids who harshly evaluated certain parental discipline practices will reject or perpetuate those tactics as adults dealing with their own children.

Autonomously yours

Kids' widespread endorsement of reasoning techniques that make them active participants in behavioral change suggests to Helwig that children everywhere want control, or autonomy, over what they think of as their personal domains of behavior.

By late childhood, concerns about autonomy provide a framework for rating the fairness of parental rules and punishments, he proposes.

In line with that argument, two new studies find that Chinese and Japanese children believe strongly in resisting their parents when conflicts arise over personal preferences, such as clothes choices. Earlier studies have documented that this type of parent-child conflict frequently occurs in Western nations.

Min Chen, a University of California, Berkeley graduate student, interviewed 85 pairs of Chinese eighth-graders and their mothers. These boys and girls lived either in the city of Wenzhou or in rural farming villages. About half of the 57 city children had no siblings, a situation that some researchers view as promoting a selfish outlook at odds with traditional Chinese values of obedience.

In the two weeks before the interviews, many arguments had arisen over children wanting to hang out with friends versus parents wanting chores to be completed first, Chen found. Most children, not just those living in the city without siblings, felt that coordinating friend visits with household duties fell under their personal discretion. Parents lamented kids' lack of obedience and thought it would undermine school performance.

“Chinese adolescents showed desires for freedom, independence and individuality, much like teenagers of diverse ethnicities in the United States,” Chen says.

Similar concerns appeared among 95 Japanese children, ages 6 to 12, who heard hypothetical stories of parent-child conflicts presented by Berkeley education researcher Hiroyuki Yamada. Participants came from middle-class suburbs of Tokyo.

Children reasoned that a parent should respect a child's personal wishes, such as what shoes to buy or when to play with friends.

Most youngsters also accepted a parent's right to determine a son's or daughter's moral behavior, such as ordering a child to return money found on the street to the person who lost it.

Voting rights

Concepts of autonomy and personal rights expand during the teen years, wherever youngsters happen to live, Helwig theorizes. As they get older, both Western and Asian teens increasingly endorse the right of children to pursue their own desires and to make their own choices, whether or not parents and other authorities like it, Helwig and his colleagues report in the August *Social Development*.

The researchers asked 160 teens in China, half of them 13 years old and half 17 years old, to evaluate a series of family and school conflicts. Participants came either from a city or from rural villages.

Teens frequently supported a peer who wanted, say, to quit school in order to work for a local business against his parents' wishes or a girl who aspired to write a story critical of school rules in her school's newspaper despite a teacher's censorship efforts. Such responses were especially common among 17-year-olds. Chinese girls favored personal rights as much as Chinese boys.

Like their Canadian peers, Chinese teens from either villages or a city also prefer democratic over nondemocratic government, Helwig's team reported in 2007 in *Cognitive Development*. Adolescents assessed the fairness of various forms of government described briefly in writing.

Even in rural China, most 12- to 19-year-olds favored democratic decisions reached by a public vote or the consensus of elected representatives. In all settings, teens said that democratic systems ensure that the people have a "voice," let different segments of society contribute to decisions and give the public a chance to remove unpopular government officials.

Government rule by the wealthiest or most knowledgeable people was generally deemed to be unfair, especially by older adolescents.

Preferences for democratic rule develop everywhere, even if they are most obvious in Western societies, Helwig proposes. “Adolescents reflect on and evaluate forms of political organization in ways that go beyond official cultural ideologies,” he says.

Necessary lies

Simply put, from childhood on, many people critically appraise their cultural values, says psychologist Elliot Turiel of UC Berkeley.

Not every individual in a culture shares the same assumptions about what counts as good and bad values, how to act around parents and other key issues, as has traditionally been assumed by anthropologists and psychologists, in Turiel’s view. Instead, he argues, members of a culture try to balance sometimes-clashing beliefs about individual rights and social obligations.

Such tensions feed off each culture’s tendency to give some groups power over others. Individuals who have limited clout — children relative to parents, wives relative to husbands in many societies, citizens relative to authoritarian rulers — often follow certain cultural practices simply to avoid the dire consequences of dissent, Turiel asserts. Opposition gets expressed in hidden, underground ways.

“Individuals often take the initiative to go against, or attempt to change, existing social conditions on the basis of what they see as morally right and wrong,” Turiel says.

In an influential 1994 study, Turiel and a colleague interviewed husbands and wives in a Druze Arab community in Israel. In this male-dominated society, the large majority of wives regarded their unequal standing in marriages as unfair. Wives routinely said that they did their husbands’ bidding only to avoid becoming impoverished by abandonment or divorce.

Other investigators have documented undercurrents of resentment about culturally enforced second-class status among women living in Egypt, India and Colombia. Some women reported carrying out elaborate plots to avoid participating in cultural practices that they disapproved of, such as arranged marriages and polygamy.

Honesty may be the best policy in general, but as these women illustrate, people willfully lie to prevent what they perceive as greater harms or to resist injustice, Turiel asserts. In these situations, moral concerns validate dishonesty.

Studies directed by Turiel indicate that U.S. teenagers and married couples label honesty as “good” in principle but see certain types of deception as justified. Most teens said it was OK to lie to get around parents’ demands seen as morally unacceptable, such as staying away from peers of another race, or as invasions of a personal domain, such as directives not to date a certain person.

Husbands and wives generally judged it acceptable for either sex to lie in order to further personal welfare, such as a wife lying to her husband about attending an alcoholism support group because he thinks the sessions are useless. Lies about keeping a secret bank account and seeing friends on the sly were rated as more acceptable for wives than husbands, especially by women who worked outside the home. Those women may view such fabrications as necessary to preserve an equal status with their husbands, Turiel speculates.

Successful marriages from Beijing to Boise may thus maintain a delicate balance between morally inspired truth-telling and lying. As in parent-child relationships, spouses’ moral decisions about honesty, rights and harm could well vary more from one situation to another than from one culture to another, Turiel concludes.

When it comes to making moral judgments, it may be a small world after all.

Thinking about kids’ right and wrong

Jean Piaget looms over current theories of moral development. In 1932, the late Swiss psychologist proposed that children progress through three stages to construct mature concepts of right and wrong. He believed that kids achieve a sense of autonomy and a critical stance toward parenting practices by late childhood or early adolescence.

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg elaborated on Piaget's theory in 1969, arguing that children don't formulate moral concepts such as justice, rights and autonomy until late adolescence.

One alternative to Kohlberg's approach proposes that a morality of care and empathy develops alongside a morality of justice. Other researchers argued that children in non-Western cultures come to think about morality differently than the Western youngsters studied by Piaget and Kohlberg.

Today, a school of thought developed by University of California, Berkeley psychologist Elliot Turiel asserts that moral decisions based on fairness and welfare develop alongside those based on other concerns, such as social rules. He and other researchers posit that children in all cultures think critically about the morality of parents' and others' actions at earlier ages than assumed by Piaget and Kohlberg.

Piaget's suggestion that children form and revise moral concepts based on their social experiences remains influential. Most researchers, though, now reject his idea that moral development proceeds through one-size-fits-all stages.

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