

WHAT'S WRONG WITH SOCIALISATION? A DEFENSE FROM JOINT REMINISCING IN THE EARLY YEARS

1. Introduction

- Distinction between (i) The Prediction Question and the (ii) Moral Concern Question:
 - i. What predicts moral behaviour?
 - ii. How do children acquire a concern for morality?
- Research on early childhood moral development is partly motivated by the latter question.
- Audun Dahl's work aims to offer new answer to the Moral Concern Question.
- **Aim:** to critically assess Dahl's new answer by looking at its criticism of the Socialisation View.
- Specifically, by looking at notion of "co-construction".
- **Upshot:** how to understand claim that children co-construct their moral understanding in social interactions.

2. The Socialisation View

- Very broad umbrella that covers a number of different views about the role of social interaction in children's acquisition of moral understanding and moral motivation.
- At least two constraints:
 - Internalisation of moral values:
 - Internal vs. external motivation.

'Committed compliance is wholehearted, willing, self-regulated compliance in which the child appears to be eagerly embracing the mother's agenda and her values' (Kochanska 2002, 339).

- Internalisation as upshot of social interaction:
 - Bi-directionality.

'What determines the specific conditions parents might take into account when they opt for one method rather than another? We propose that the answer lies in formal recognition of the bidirectional nature of the parent-child interaction, with the parent's explicit understanding and acknowledgement of the child's active contribution or agency being an essential feature of parenting. Children respond to interactions differently depending on their intellectual level, their readiness to use external information, their temperament and mood, their sometimes rapidly changing emotions during interactions, and their interpretations of parental actions' (Grusec, Goodnow, Kucynski 2000, 206).

3. Dahl's Problem with the Socialisation View

- **Claim:** children don't necessarily acquire moral understanding from authorities.
 - What is moral understanding? Commitment to Social Domain Theory.
 - Categorical distinction between different domains of development in understanding the normative: (i) personal domain; (b) social conventional domain; (c) moral domain.
 - Moral domain:
 - Norms the understanding of which is expressed through judgements of welfare, rights and justice.
 - Obligatory nature is agent-neutral.
 - Norms do not depend on an authority to be true. Contrast with social conventional norms.
 - Studies show that children as young as four will disagree with perceived authorities when they believe a given moral norm has been violated (Yoo and Smetana 2022).
 - These norms typically involve questions of others' welfare and rights and are perceived as obligatory independently of authority.
 - Moral *understanding*: understanding why a given moral norm is true.
 - Dahl reasons as follows: if children understand that moral norms are not dependent on authority, then the Socialisation View is wrong to argue that children acquire moral understanding from parents/teachers.
- Dahl argues that the Socialisation View cannot capture the way in which children learn to care about morality -defined as the understanding of agent-neutral obligations for the welfare, rights and justice of others- because it is committed to the view that moral learning involves a dependency of the child on the person from whom it learns e.g. parent.

4. Dahl's Constructionist-Interactionist Alternative

- Key features:
'Its defining characteristics, described below, are:
 - (a) a conceptualization of morality as obligatory concerns with others' rights and welfare;
 - (b) an emphasis on the constant interactions between children and their environment; and
 - (c) an assumption that children play a constructive role in initiating, regulating, interpreting and evaluating their interactions with others.' (Dahl, Waltzer, and Gross 2017, 37)
- If Dahl is to offer a genuine alternative, then it can't be because of (b) since, if anything, the Socialisation View will agree with social interaction being at the heart of early childhood moral learning.

- **Claim:** If Dahl is to offer a genuine alternative, it must be because of the relationship between (a) and (c).

- What does Dahl mean by “constructivism”? Some quotes:

‘Two aspects [of constructivism]. First, children act as instigators, not just as recipients, in their everyday interactions. For instance, while infants may observe interactions in which others use force against each other, most infants in their second year also instigate such interactions by hitting, kicking, biting, or otherwise using force against others...Second, the development of moral concerns requires the construction of autonomous judgements and principles that sometimes conflict with the views of adults...a key feature of early moral development is the construction of judgements about right and wrong that are separable from, and sometimes in opposition to, the judgements of parents and others’ (Dahl, Waltzer, and Gross 2017, 3839).

‘In a constructivist view, the development of morality is neither the general acceptance of messages received from others nor the unfolding of a genetic blueprint. Children interpret and evaluate signals from parents, teachers, and peers, and do not passively accept commands from others’ (Dahl 2018, 237).

‘The current approach is constructivist in proposing that moral development involves children’s active efforts to interpret, scrutinize, and evaluate their social worlds’ (Dahl 2019, 6).

‘the constructivist view proposes that children acquire generalizable obligations about the fair and equal treatment of others through an active process, one that involves abstracting, interpreting, and evaluating social experiences, sometimes agreeing and sometimes challenging the norms held by one’s community’ (Dahl and Killen 2018, 3).

→ **Problem:** unclear what “constructivism” -and corollaries such as “active process”- means within the context of trying to understand how children in the early years acquire an understanding of moral wrongness and moral rightness that conforms to the Social Domain conception of moral judgment.

→ **Challenge:** If one wants to defend the Socialisation View against Dahl’s criticism, then one needs to show how paradigmatic cases of socialisation -and dependency- in fact allow children to acquire an understanding of agent-neutral obligations for the welfare, rights and justice of others.

5. Answering the Challenge: Joint Reminiscing and Narrative Perspective-Taking

Two steps:

- A. Explain connection between joint reminiscing and narrative perspective-taking.
- B. Argue that one way in which children acquire understanding of agent-neutral obligations for the welfare, rights and justice of others is via the ability to understand an event from different perspectives (necessary but not sufficient).

A. The Social Interactionist View of the Development of Autobiographical Memory

- Autobiographical memory refers to the ability to recollect events in one's past as part of one's personal history (Nelson and Fivush, 2004).
- According to social interactionists, the development of autobiographical memory is facilitated by joint reminiscing (Fivush & Nelson, 2006).
- Joint reminiscing refers to the kind of communicative exchanges that children engage in when sharing their past experiences with their caretakers who have experienced the same events with them.
- A paradigmatic example of joint reminiscing in childhood is a parent and their child reminiscing together about their trip to the park the preceding day.
- Children begin engaging in joint reminiscing at an early age, usually around 2 years old.
- Social interactionists argue that these kinds of communicative exchanges facilitate the acquisition of the ability to recollect past events as part of one's history. How so?

Two parts:

1. Social interactionists argue that learning how to narratively reconstruct an experienced event facilitates children's learning to understand the experienced event as an event they experienced from their own unique perspective, thus turning the memory from episodic to autobiographical (Fivush 2001).
 - the narrative reconstruction of an experienced event, as conceived by social interactionists, involves not only recounting referential information of the experienced event but also appealing to 'evaluative information, that is, information that conveys the meaning and significance of the event' (Nelson and Fivush 2004, 494).
 - Example at the zoo.
 - Social interactionists argue that it's the ability to articulate the evaluative information that is crucial for a child to represent the experienced event as experienced from their unique perspective and thus make the memory autobiographical. Narrative reconstruction allows

children to understand an experienced event as an event experienced from their own unique perspective because it allows them to articulate the way in which the experienced event was significant for them.

- Narrative reconstruction as conceived by social interactionists does not involve the ability to tell whether an experienced event was good or bad independently of how the event was experienced.
2. Social interactionists argue that children learn to narratively reconstruct experienced events in the communicative exchanges they enjoy during joint reminiscing with their caretakers.
- Empirical studies researching the impact of maternal reminiscing style on children's developing cognitive abilities.
 - Social interactionists argue that these empirical studies show that children who engage in conversations with mothers manifesting higher elaborative styles of conversation show higher abilities in articulating an understanding of their own and others emotions.
 - High: 'ask many open-ended questions, inviting their children to participate in reminiscing, and when their children provide some information, these mothers integrate the provided information into the emerging narrative of the event' (Fivush 2014, 571).
 - The mother with a highly elaborative reminiscing style is helping the child to learn how to occupy both the perspective of narrator and protagonist at the same time on the same experienced event.
 - Via her questions, the mother adds bits of information about how the child felt at the time of the experience thus prompting the child to think about how she felt at the time of the experience.
 - In this way, the mother motivates the child to occupy the perspective of narrator. This is why highly elaborative mothers ask open ended questions: they allow the child to fill in the description of the past experienced event from the perspective of narrator.
 - Low: mothers ask few questions and are not engaged with their children's answers.
 - Does not mean that children whose mothers exercise low reminiscing style do not acquire autobiographical memory! (But better at explaining one's emotions and emotion regulation).
- Children learn how to evaluate an event from different perspectives by engaging in conversational exchanges with interlocutor e.g. parent.

B. Moral understanding and Perspective-Taking

Argument:

- i. One way to understanding agent-neutrality is that a given moral norm is true from any perspective on the given situation.
- ii. Corollary: truth of moral norms is not dependent on any one perspective e.g. authority.
- iii. A necessary ability to understand agent-neutral obligations for the welfare, rights and justice of others is to evaluate an event from different perspectives.
- iv. Children learn to evaluate an event from different perspectives via social interactions of the kind focused on by the Socialisation View: dependency of child on parent.
- v. Therefore, social interactions of the kind focused on by the Socialisation View play a key part in acquiring an understanding of agent-neutral obligations for the welfare, rights and justice of others.

Upshot: Constructivism refers to the child's ability to take on different perspectives when evaluating a given event and doing so spontaneously.

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