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**Youth  
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# **FOCUS**

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## *Understanding Adolescents' Ethical Behavior*

**RAMONA CARLOS**

*Research Associate, 4-H Center for Youth Development*

### *Introduction*

Recurrent incidents of uncaring, harmful and, often, violent behavior have caused many to wonder about a decline in morality in society (Zuckerman, 1994). Reports of unethical behavior are not limited to any one group. People from all levels of socioeconomic classes, ages and prominence have been found to be involved in unlawful behavior (Beach, 1991; Halman, 1995; Stevens, 1984). However, the concern over the increase in violence between youth, and the general decline in ethical behavior has forced people to question the moral development of youth and to try to find ways to discourage negative behaviors and encourage ethical, positive behavior from youth. In this paper I will focus on the moral development and ethical behavior of adolescents by addressing the following questions:

- What are the prevailing models of adolescent moral development?

- How are adolescents' interpretation of moral knowledge reflected in their behavior?
- What are the moral dilemmas adolescents face? What are some of the factors that influence their interpretation of situations that involve moral issues?
- How can adolescents be encouraged to act ethically? What can educators do to promote ethical behavior in adolescents?

### **Defining terms**

Prior to addressing the above questions, however, the distinction between ethics and morality will be clarified, as people tend to use the words interchangeably. For example, psychologists tend to study moral behavior and the literature reflects this. Quite often, the word "ethics" is not even mentioned in research articles describing "moral behavior." Popular media, however, use the term "ethics" when talking about behavior and standards of behavior, and "ethical behavior" is generally perceived as "good" or "right" behavior. "Ethics" and

"ethical" are terms often used in place of "morality" and "morals." This is in contrast with the philosophical, classical view, in which "ethics" refers to the study of *conduct*, where conduct, as opposed to behavior, refers to *how* a person chooses a particular course of action when he has a moral choice. "Morals" refers to behavior, either good or bad, right or wrong. It reflects the behavioral *choice* someone has made in his or her actions. Therefore, one could say ethics is the theoretical study of morality (Johnson, 1958).

### **What are the prevailing models of moral development?**

Psychologists have believed that development or growth in cognitive abilities and an understanding of others will lead to higher levels of moral behavior (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy & Van Court, 1995). Therefore, a large focus of the study of moral behavior is on moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is defined as the cognitive processes involved in the understanding of behavior as it involves others. For example, how one thinks about his own behavior with others. In order to understand the behavioral choices adolescents make, we need to recognize that the choices people make for behavior partly reflect how they individually reason about their behavior.

Therefore, the prevailing model of moral development is cognitive, following works of Piaget (1965). For Piaget, moral thinking shifts through successive stages, from blind acceptance of rules and authority (moral realism) to an understanding of others' rights and needs (moral relativism). Piaget felt that from ages 5-10 years, children were guided by a moral realism and that in adolescence and later, with developing cognitive abilities and an understanding of

social conventions and rules, begin a shift into moral relativism.

Kohlberg (1969) extended the work of Piaget by studying older adolescents and adults. His basic method was to present moral dilemmas and have people decide on the best ("most moral") course of action. According to Kohlberg's (1969) model, moral development coincides with cognitive development. As individuals develop higher levels of cognitive ability, they replace conventional social rules, which have been learned from parents and other interactions in their environment, with their own constructed principles of justice. Kohlberg outlined six progressive stages. He believed most young children begin with a primitive morality, where behavior is guided by fear of punishment or desire for gain. In successive stages, right or wrong behavior is defined by convention or by what people will say. In the highest stage, behavior is guided by internalized moral principles that one has developed through social influence and increasing cognitive abilities to reason and organize thought. However, there have been strong criticisms of Kohlberg's model. Specifically his work has been criticized for not considering the *context* involved in reasoning (Johnston, Brown, & Christopherson, 1990; Leming, 1978), for not studying the content of *actual* moral dilemmas of children and adolescents, and for creating moral dilemmas which favor what have been traditionally male experiences (see Gilligan, 1982, for a complete review). Also, current research indicates that even very young children can differentiate moral interactions from social-conventional interactions (Nucci, 1981; Turiel, 1978; Turiel, Smetana, & Killen, 1991).

In a third model of moral development, the focus is on the development of social

cognitions (Turiel, 1978a). The social cognitive model suggests that social interactions contribute to an understanding and development of social rules, which are then applied to behavior. According to the social cognitive approach, there are three distinct domains of social knowledge, or what we know about behavior between people, that account for qualitatively different aspects of an individual's social interactions: moral knowledge, social conventional knowledge and psychological (personal) knowledge. Knowledge about morality and social conventions do not appear to be aspects of a single developmental system of morality, where increased understanding of one will replace previous knowledge of the other. Therefore, in this view, understanding about morality and social conventions are parts of separate, distinct developmental domains and an adolescent's understanding of one area may be at a different level than for another. This perspective is in contrast with the Piaget and Kohlberg models, which view the shifts in moral development as hierarchical and irreversible and coincide with shifts in cognitive development. The social cognitive approach is based on the premise that social knowledge occurs in three domains and shifts in the level of knowledge in one domain do not necessarily coincide with similar shifts in the other two domains. The social cognitive approach describes the complexity in understanding the motives behind adolescents' ethical behavior.

*Moral* knowledge pertains to our understanding of how we treat others. Specific moral rules (i.e., it is wrong to hit another) are based on concepts of rights, justice, and the welfare of others. Moral rules are judged to be obligatory, unchangeable, and generalizable. *Social conventional* knowledge refers to the way we address others, manners, how to dress,

mores regarding sexuality, and so on. These are based on social expectations regarding behavior in social situations.

Social conventional rules are judged to be alterable, contingent on authority, relative to the social context and have a function of maintaining a social order (Nucci & Weber, 1991; Tisak & Turiel, 1984).

*Psychological* knowledge refers to the developing understanding of *personal issues*, which are formed within the third domain, the psychological, or what Nucci (1981) has termed the personal domain. The personal domain is defined by actions considered to be outside the realm of societal regulation and moral concern. Personal issues are considered to be important to and primarily affect the actor, rather than other individuals or society. Therefore one's understanding of self, identity, and personality, and the attributions regarding one's own and others' thoughts and behaviors are all part of the personal domain (Smetana, 1988). Other actions viewed as personal include one's choice of friends, one's correspondence or creative works, one's recreational activities, and those which focus on the state of one's own body (Nucci, 1981).

Generally, when studying changes in moral reasoning, researchers have focused on the reasoning which falls within the domains of moral and social conventional knowledge because it concerns reasoning about behavior which is interpersonal (i.e., includes others) and involves social rules. Researchers have found that development within these domains follows distinct patterns. Development in moral knowledge leads to an increasing understanding of equality and reciprocity. Individuals construct moral judgments out of their experiences with the range of social actions

which have an intrinsic effect on the rights or well-being of others. Development in social conventional knowledge indicates an understanding of social rules as necessary for the functioning of social systems and important organizers of social interactions (i.e., behavior which reflects the social norms of the society; Turiel, 1983).

### **How are adolescents' interpretations of moral knowledge reflected in their behavior?**

At the time of early adolescence, children begin to develop concepts of fairness and consistently balance competing welfare claims of concerns for just reciprocity. Children begin to demand respect for their rights as persons. With a developing understanding of personal rights and selfhood, adolescents begin to fully understand that not only do they have rights, but that others do as well. Adolescents begin to recognize that moral restrictions on behavior are placed because of the need to respect the personal rights of others. Moral development necessitates the understanding of the rights of others. Adolescents learn to recognize that along with balancing our own individual needs, personal issues are tied to societal and moral issues (Nucci & Lee, 1993).

One of the challenges adolescents face is the coordination of personal issues with those of social and moral issues (Nucci & Lee, 1993). Adolescents may interpret their behavior as being strictly personal, involving only themselves, and not being a moral issue. However, conflict will likely occur if parents or schools don't agree with their interpretation, and feel the behavior falls within *their* jurisdiction. Smetana & Asquith (1994), when looking at adolescents' and parents' conceptions of parental authority and personal autonomy,

found that adolescents and parents often conflicted over the interpretation of issues. For example, adolescents treated friendships as issues of personal choice. Parents, however, felt they had a legitimate right to have some authority over friendship choices, out of concern for the friends' possible effects on their child, which would reflect psychological concerns and social conventional concerns if they felt their child might become involved in illegal behavior. Parents therefore viewed their adolescents' friendships as a multifaceted issue, with aspects of both personal and conventional concerns, which was within their boundary of jurisdiction. The results of this study suggest that most adolescent-parent conflict occurs over adolescents' and parents' different interpretation of issues.

### **What are the moral dilemmas adolescents face? What are some of the factors that influence their interpretation of situations that involve moral issues?**

Youth are influenced by context and by those with whom they're interacting (Turiel et al., 1991). Social interactions and behaviors may well contain more than one component of social knowledge. Individuals may have more than one goal, or conflicting goals in social situations. In multifaceted situations, youth may often find themselves faced with conflicts which oppose moral considerations (e.g., Is it right or wrong? Will this hurt another person?), against conventional (What have others done in this situation?) or personal ones (It's only going to affect me) (Smetana, 1988).

When asked to describe the moral dilemmas they face, students have mentioned issues involving peers and family, conflicts regarding honesty, cheating, stealing and lying, problems such as alcohol, tobacco and marijuana, decisions to intervene or report,

issues of civil rights, duty to country, career choices and financial decisions (Breen & Crosbie-Burnett, 1993, as cited in Colangelo & Dettmann, 1985).

Gender differences have been found when adolescents have been asked to describe their own moral dilemmas. For example, boys wrote more about other boys, and girls wrote more about girls. They both talked about their friends, but girls tended to distinguish between "best" and "casual" friends. Boys wrote more often about drugs and mentioned themselves outside the context of relationships more often than did girls. Girls wrote more about relationships between themselves and either friends or parents (Breen, Crosbie-Burnett, 1993; Johnston et al., 1990). Gender differences support Gilligan's (1982) observations that girls are more attentive to the particularities of relationships and make qualitative distinctions based on the nature of specific relationships more often than do boys. However, research does not always show these gender effects, thus suggesting that social pressures could produce these differences in the behaviors of boys and girls.

Students have been found to score lower on moral reasoning when considering situations involving practical dilemmas (i.e., when students are asked to think of real situations with which they are struggling), than when describing behavior they would use when considering classical (i.e., less realistic and not involving themselves) dilemmas. For adolescents, ethical issues are primarily embedded in relationships, primarily those which involve peers. Indeed, they have acknowledged peers as being more influential than parents when making decisions regarding ethical behavior in social conventions and personal issues (Smetana & Asquith, 1994). These

relationships influence not only how they will report a conflict but also what is at issue for them as they think about a dilemma (Breen & Crosbie-Burnett, 1993; Johnston et al., 1990).

Thus, adolescents' decisions about behavior appear to be influenced by the context of a situation, the content of the issue (i.e., what it is about the issue that is really important), and their perception of how the action will reflect on them personally (Leming, 1978; Nucci & Lee, 1993). All of these factors are relevant to the ethical behavior of youth and indicate the complexity behind the motives for behavior.

### **How can adolescents be encouraged to act ethically? What can educators do to promote ethical behavior in youth?**

Overall, psychological research has been consistent in stressing that for adolescents, the development of autonomy and individuation is crucial for psychological growth (Erikson, 1963). Nucci & Lee (1993) describe a series of major changes in conceptions of these personal issues in order to develop as a moral person. Critical to their position is the notion that higher levels of morality result from an increased understanding of personal autonomy and rights. A deeper understanding of personal rights and freedoms, for self and other, would then lead to making the right choices in conduct out of consideration for what is fair.

However, the encouragement of personal autonomy in children might be seen as going head to head with concerns that an increased emphasis on personal rights and individuality has been detrimental to moral behavior in society. Individualization, or the process of increasing levels of personal autonomy and self-reliance, along with an

emphasis on individual development, has been regarded as a major contributor to a decline in morality (Halman, 1995). However, in his exploratory, cross-national study, Halman found that morality has changed rather than declined. No longer is morality dominated by institutions and churches, but a *personal* morality appears to be emerging. A moral change appears to be taking place as people become less reliant on institutions, and more personally responsible for their acts. Halman stresses that people are basing their morality on personal convictions more than on predetermined guidelines (Halman, 1995).

Educators who have been successful in encouraging ethical behavior in adolescents have recognized the importance of encouraging a sense of autonomy along with respect for others.

Curricular programs that were designed to influence positive (i.e., ethical) social development of adolescents have found that successful programs have some consistent features and goals:

- Learning environments that are *democratic* and *open* may positively influence youths' feelings of social integration, respect for agreed-upon norms and political attitudes. Environments which are undemocratic and authoritarian may result in feelings of alienation and powerlessness.
- *Cooperative learning* opportunities have also been found to result in desirable social attitudes and behaviors (Leming, 1985; Wolfgramm, 1995). Through cooperative learning experiences youth learn how to work with each other. Teachers play a central role as "values advocates," as they stress the importance of such values as fair play, responsibility, and concern for others.

Self-discipline and responsibility are enhanced if the students are involved in the development of classroom rules and if they are learning for learning's sake, rather than for some extrinsic reward.

- The development of moral and social concepts can be addressed by structuring student activities to correspond with the underlying conventional or moral features of a given values lesson or activity. Nucci & Weber (1991), in an exploratory study, found that social and moral development were promoted by coordinating values instruction with the issues addressed in an American history class. Recognizing the social and moral issues in a particular subject, and encouraging the discussion of those issues as part of the class enhanced the positive social development of these adolescents.

Schools have been found to have a major influence in empowering youth to "resist the destructive impulses in society" (Wolfgramm, 1995). Personalized, humane environments, which use cooperative learning methods, recognize student achievement, encourage student autonomy, responsibility, and involvement with the community, are characteristics of these schools. Several school districts, in both semi-rural and urban locations, have employed a caring community approach to education (Wolfgramm, 1995). These schools have been very successful in lowering drop-out rates, substance abuse usage, and increasing SAT scores. Students score higher than students from other schools on questions dealing with caring about classmates and decision making. If learning environments are created in which students are encouraged to act responsibly, are treated with respect and recognized for their contributions in noncompetitive ways, youth may respond in a mutually respectful

way and want to succeed academically while developing positive feelings about themselves and reflect this in their behavior.

### ***Conclusion***

Educators in both formal and nonformal settings have a key opportunity to encourage ethical behavior in youth. Adolescents are in a time of life when the desire to meet their personal needs may appear to conflict with the expectation to act in socially accepted ways. The challenge for educators is to assist adolescents in recognizing that these two goals do not necessarily conflict. Learning environments which have chosen to become caring communities offer the best possibility for achieving this goal.

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The reader is referred to **Nurturing Positive Values in Children and Adolescents**, which appears on the final pages of this issue of the *Center Update*. The information is very relevant to the topic of this Monograph.—RC

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