BEHAVIORAL SIDE OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

PGDCP, semester- ii

COURSE: Social and community psychology

Paper VI; unit IV

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BEHAVIOR SIDE OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

- Social-learning theorists such as Albert Bandura (1986, 1991) and Walter Mischel (1974) have been primarily interested in the behavioral component of morality—what we actually do when faced with temptation. They claim that moral behaviors are learned in the same way that other social behaviours are: through the operation of reinforcement and punishment and through observational learning. They also consider moral behavior to be strongly influenced by the specific situations in which people find themselves. It is not at all surprising, they say, to see a person behave morally in one situation but transgress in another situation, or to proclaim that nothing is more important than honesty but then lie or cheat.

1. **How Consistent Are Moral Conduct and Moral Character?**

   Hartshorne and May's **doctrine of specificity** a viewpoint shared by many social learning theorists that holds that moral affect, moral reasoning, and moral behavior may depend as much or more on the situation one faces than on an internalized set of moral principles.

- Studies showed that children tended *not to be consistent* in their moral behavior; a child's willingness to cheat in one situation did not predict his willingness to lie, cheat, or steal in other situations. Of particular interest was the finding that children who cheated in a particular setting were just as likely as those who did not to state that cheating is wrong. Hartshorne and May concluded that "honesty" is largely specific to the situation rather than a stable character trait.

1. How Consistent Are Moral Conduct and Moral Character?

- Finding of other studies showed that moral behaviors of a particular kind (e.g., a child's willingness to cheat or not cheat on tests or to share or not share toys with playmates) are reasonably consistent over time and across situations. What's more, the correlations among measures of children's moral conduct, moral reasoning, and moral behavior become progressively stronger with age (Blasi, 1990; Kochanska et al., 2002). So there is some consistency or coherence to moral character after all, especially as we become more morally mature. Yet, we should never expect even the most morally mature individuals to be perfectly consistent across all situations, for one's willingness to lie, cheat, or violate other moral norms (or one's feelings and thoughts about doing so) may always depend to some extent on important contextual factors such as the importance of the goal that might be achieved by breaking a rule or the amount of encouragement from peers for deviant conduct (Burton, 1976).

2. Learning to Resist Temptation

- From society's standpoint, one of the more important indexes of morality is the extent to which an individual is able to resist pressures to violate moral norms, even when the possibility of detection and punishment is remote (Hoffman, 1970; Kochanska, Aksan, & Joy, 2007). A person who resists temptation in the absence of external surveillance not only has learned a moral rule but is *internally motivated* to abide by that rule. How do children acquire moral standards, and what motivates them to obey these learned codes of conduct? Social-learning theorists have attempted to answer these questions by studying the effects of reinforcement, punishment, and social modelling on children's moral behavior

A. Reinforcement as a Determinant of Moral Conduct

- We have seen on several occasions that the frequency of many behaviors can be increased if these acts are reinforced. Moral behaviors are certainly no exception. When warm, accepting parents set clear and reasonable standards for their children and often praise them for behaving well, even toddlers are likely to meet their expectations and to display strong evidence of an internalized conscience by age 4 to 5 (Kochanska et al., 2002, 2007; Kochanska & Murray, 2000). Children are generally motivated to comply with the wishes of a warm, socially reinforcing adult, and the praise that accompanies their desirable conduct tells them that they are accomplishing that objective.

B. The Role of Punishment in Establishing Moral Prohibitions

- Although reinforcing acceptable behaviors is an effective way to promote desirable conduct, adults often fail to recognize that a child has *resisted a temptation and is deserving* of praise. Yet, many adults are quick to punish moral transgressions. Is punishment an effective way to foster the development of **inhibitory controls?**(an ability to display acceptable conduct by resisting the temptation to commit a forbidden act.) **The answer depends** critically on the child's *interpretation of these aversive experiences.*

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INVESTIGATING RESISTANCE TO TEMPTATION.

- **Ross Parke (1977) used the *forbidden toy paradigm*** to study the effects of punishment on children's resistance to temptation. During the first phase of a typical experiment, participants are punished (by hearing a noxious buzzer) whenever they touch an attractive toy; however, nothing happens when they play with unattractive toys. Once the child has learned the prohibition, the experimenter leaves and the child is surreptitiously observed to determine whether he or she plays with the forbidden toys. In general, research suggests that firm (rather than mild) punishments, administered immediately (rather than later) and consistently by a warm (rather than an aloof) disciplinarian, are most effective at inhibiting a child's undesirable conduct. Yet, Parke's most important discovery was that all forms of punishment became more effective if accompanied by a cognitive rationale that provides the transgressor with reasons for not performing a forbidden act.

EXPLAINING THE EFFECTS OF COGNITIVE RATIONALES.

- Why do rationales increase the effectiveness of punishment, even mild or delayed punishments that produce little moral restraint by themselves? Probably because rationales provide children with information specifying why the punished act is wrong and why they should feel guilty or shameful for repeating it. So when these children think about committing the forbidden act in the future, they should experience a general uneasiness , should be inclined to make an *internal attribution for this arousal (e.g.,* "I'd feel guilty if I caused others harm"; "I'd violate my positive self-image"), and should eventually become more likely to inhibit the forbidden act and to feel rather good about their "mature and responsible" conduct. Children who receive no rationales or who have heard reasoning that focuses their attention on the negative consequences that they can expect for future transgressions (e.g., "You'll be spanked again if you do it") will experience just as much uneasiness when they think about committing the forbidden act. However, these children should tend to make *external attributions for their emotional arousal* (e.g., "I'm worried about getting caught and punished") that might make them comply with moral norms in the presence of authority figures but probably won't inhibit deviant conduct if there is no one around to detect their transgressions. So fear of detection and punishment is not enough to persuade children to resist temptation in the absence of external surveillance. In order to establish truly internalized self-controls, adults must structure disciplinary encounters to include an appropriate rationale—one that informs the child why the prohibited act is wrong and why she should feel guilty or shameful about repeating it (Hoffman, 1988). Clearly, true self-restraint is largely under cognitive control; it depends more on what's in children's heads rather than on the amount of fear or uneasiness in their gut

MORAL SELF-CONCEPT TRAINING.

- If making internal attributions about one's conduct truly promotes moral self-restraint, we should be able to convince children that they can resist temptations to violate moral norms because they are "good," "honest," or otherwise "responsible" persons (an internal attribution). This kind of moral self-concept training really does work. William Casey and Roger Burton (1982) found that 7- to 10-yearolds became much more honest while playing games if "honesty" was stressed and the players learned to remind themselves to follow the rules. Yet when honesty was not stressed, players often cheated. Furthermore, David Perry and his colleagues (1980) found that 9- to 10-year-olds who had been told that they were especially good at carrying out instructions and following rules (moral self-concept training) behaved very differently after succumbing to a nearly irresistible temptation (leaving a boring task to watch an exciting TV show) than did peers who had not been told they were especially good. Specifically, children who had heard positive attributions about themselves were more inclined than control participants to punish their own transgressions by giving back many of the valuable prize tokens they had been paid for working at the boring task. So it seems that labeling children as "good" or "honest" may not only increase the likelihood that they will resist temptations, but also contributes to children's feelings of guilt or remorse should they behave inappropriately and violate their positive self-images. In sum, moral self-concept training, particularly when combined with praise for desirable conduct, can be a most effective alternative to punishment as a means of establishing inhibitory controls—one that should help convince the child that "I'm resisting temptation because *I want to," and lead to the development of truly internalized controls* rather than a response inhibition based on a fear of detection and punishment. Furthermore, this positive, non punitive approach should produce none of the undesirable side effects (e.g., resentment) that often accompany punishment.

C. Social Modeling Influences on Moral Behavior

- Might children be influenced by rule-following models who exhibit moral behaviors in a "passive" way by failing to commit forbidden acts? Indeed they may, as long as they are aware that the "passive" model is resisting the temptation to violate a rule. Joan Grusec and her colleagues (1979) found that a rule-following model can be particularly effective at inspiring children to behave in kind if the model clearly verbalizes that he is following a rule and states a rationale for not committing the deviant act. Furthermore, rule following models whose rationales match the child's customary level of moral reasoning are more influential than models whose rationales are well beyond that level (Toner & Potts, 1981). Finally, consider what Nace Toner and his colleagues (1978) found: 6- to 8-year-olds who were persuaded to serve as models of moral restraint for other children became more likely than age-mates who had not served as rule-following models to obey other rules during later tests of resistance to temptation. It was almost as if serving as a model produced a change in children's self-concepts so that they now defined themselves as "people who follow rules." The implications for child-rearing are clear: perhaps parents could succeed in establishing inhibitory controls in their older children by appealing to their maturity and persuading them to serve as models of self-restraint for their younger brothers and sisters.

3. Who Raises Children Who Are Morally Mature?

- Many years ago, Martin Hoffman (1970) reviewed the child-rearing literature to see whether the disciplinary techniques that parents actually use have any effect on the moral development of their children. Three major approaches were compared:

- ■ **Love withdrawal:** a form of discipline in which an adult withholds attention, affection, or approval in order to modify or control a child's behavior creating anxiety over a loss of love.

- ■ **Power assertion:** a form of discipline in which an adult relies on his or her superior power (e.g., by administering spankings or withholding privileges) to modify or control a child's behavior **(including** techniques, such as forceful commands, physical restraint, spankings, and withdrawal of privileges, that may generate fear, anger, or resentment.

- ■ **Induction:** a non punitive form of discipline in which an adult explains why a child's behavior is wrong and should be changed by emphasizing its effects on others, often suggesting how the child might repair any harm done.

A Child's-Eye View of Discipline

- What do children think about various disciplinary strategies? Do they feel (as many developmentalists do) that physical punishment and love withdrawal are ineffective methods of promoting moral restraint? Would they favor inductive techniques or perhaps prefer that their parents adopt more permissive attitudes about transgressions? Michael Siegal and Jan Cowen (1984) addressed these issues by asking children and adolescents between the ages of 4 and 18 to listen to stories describing different kinds of misdeeds and to evaluate strategies that mothers had used to discipline these antics. Five kinds of transgressions were described: (1) simple disobedience (the child refusing to clean his room), (2) causing physical harm to others (the child punching a playmate), (3) causing physical harm to oneself (ignoring an order not to touch a hot stove), (4) causing psychological harm to others (making fun of a physically disabled person), and (5) causing physical damage (breaking a lamp while roughhousing). The four disciplinary techniques on which parents were said to have relied were induction (reasoning with the culprit by pointing out the harmful consequences of his or her actions), *physical punishment* (striking the child), *love withdrawal (telling the child to stay away), and permissive non intervention* (ignoring the incident and assuming that the child would learn important lessons on his or her own). Each participant heard 20 stories that resulted from pairing each of the four disciplinary strategies with each of the five transgressions. After listening to orreading each story, the participant indicated whether the parent's approach to the problem was "very wrong," "wrong," "half right–half wrong," "right," or "very right."

IN CONCLUSION

- The results were clear: Induction was the most preferred disciplinary strategy for participants of all ages (even preschoolers), and physical punishment was the next most favorably evaluated technique. So all participants seemed to favor a rational disciplinarian who relies heavily on reasoning that is occasionally backed by power assertion. Love withdrawal and permissiveness were favorably evaluated by no age group. However, the 4- to 9-year-olds in the sample favored *any form of discipline, even love withdrawal,* over a permissive attitude on the parent's part (which they viewed as "wrong" or "very wrong"). Apparently young children see the need for adults to step in and restrain their inappropriate conduct, for they were disturbed by stories in which children were completely free to do their own thing. In sum, the disciplinary style that children favor (induction backed by occasional use of power assertion) is the one most closely associated with measures of moral maturity in child-rearing studies and with resistance to temptation in the laboratory. Perhaps another reason that inductive discipline often promotes moral maturity is simply that many children view this approach as the "right" way to deal with transgressions, and they may be highly motivated to accept influence from a disciplinarian whose "worldview" matches their own. Children who favor induction but are usually disciplined in other ways may see little justification for internalizing the values and exhortations of a disciplinarian whose very methods of inducing compliance seem unwise, unjust, and hardly worthy of their respect.

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