The moral understandings of urban children in sub-Saharan Africa. Some preliminary observations

Contemporary research regarding children's moral development has consistently cited the influential role of social experience and interaction. It is hypothesised that the child's environment will provide social experiences which once processed and catalogued, lead to the formation of moral concepts. Accepting the diversity of childhood experience globally, one might conclude that there will be similar diversity in children's moral understanding. In order to further our understanding of moral development, it is important to gain as much context-specific data from the child's perspective as possible. Research has often failed to recognise the extent to which the child exists in an environment entirely unique to the individual. This is particularly the case in many metropolitan areas where rapid urbanization has created extreme challenges and experiences for many children. The authors of this paper propose an analytical framework employing five scales of data collection. Applied to sub-Saharan Africa, the approach aims to show the importance of allowing for the diversity of children's experience and amplifying the child's perspective if the boundaries of research in this field are to be expanded.

Introduction

Studies of the moral ideas of children, rather more than their practices, have been carried out in many forms over the last fifty years. The doyen of such studies has been Jean Piaget, whose work on the moral development of European children (Piaget, 1932) was followed by Kohlberg's theory on the stages of moral development (Kohlberg, 1976), Turiel's social interactional theory (Turiel, 1983), and Eisenberg's work on levels of prosocial reasoning (Eisenberg, 1986).

Such theorists, whether subscribing to the idea that early moral knowledge is self constructed by each child independently on the basis of universal social experiences, or, stressing the role of culture in shaping early moral development, may have failed to take into account multiple aspects of cultural specificity. Moreover, moral theorists are unlikely to view universal social experience and cultural influence as co-existing.

In addition, the rapid urbanization of many areas of the world has created metropolitan cultures so culturally and ethnically diverse, that any attempt to find a universally applicable theory for the development of children's moral reasoning has become problematic. If social scientists are to theorise on children's moral development, the child's experiences and resulting moral understanding must be examined cross-culturally.
Many previous studies all seem to imply that there is a steady stage development of the moral ideas of children. Whilst theorists have adopted differing stances regarding this development, they agree that it is facilitated by the child’s understanding of the differences between various social rules. The child’s moral reasoning relies on an understanding that conventional rules, characterised in nature as arbitrary through consensus, differ conceptually to moral rules, which are not arbitrary by nature, e.g. it is always wrong to steal.

It would seem pragmatically reasonable that any such steady stage development must be rare indeed. There may well be no children who have not suffered in their opinion, or in the opinion of outsiders, from personal and personalised traumatic events. These events are, in some way, likely to impact upon development. African and Asian cultures have often undergone a long series of traumatic events in which the traditional environments where these children might have been expected to develop, have been permanently destroyed. The children and societies of Western Europe and the United States have not experienced any such national trauma since World War Two and the Great Depression of the 1920’s and 1930’s.

The aforementioned process of rapid urbanization has resulted in extremes of childhood experience for many. The experiences of children in metropolitan ethnic cultures have often been addressed from traditional, adult perspectives. These fail to appreciate not only children’s perspectives on their experiences, but also the extent to which each child exists in an environment of experiences and challenges unique to that child, and so far removed from those of parents and policy makers.

As a consequence, the authors of this paper conclude that not only have the children of these cultures been marginalized in their communities, but also in the field of sociological research. This paper discusses the potential variables of childhood experience, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa. However, it is hoped that this approach, concentrating on the child’s experience, should serve as the basis for general, future research. The diversity of children’s experience must be carefully scrutinised and their perspectives amplified rather than muted.

There is also the overwhelming fact that child development is usually seen in relation to some hypothetical benign social situation — for example, the frequent assumptions that children should, and do, grow up in an environment containing a permanent father and mother (Nsamenang and Dawes, 1998). A high proportion of studies describe the behaviour and situation of children who have been found to have social and psychological difficulties to be correlated with the absence of permanent nuclear families. This often implies, if not concludes, that these children are delinquent and their social environment is deviant. We conclude that statistically, it is permanent nuclear families that should be regarded as deviant.

In addition, the authors of the present paper doubt that a European analytical framework so heavily reliant on distinguishing various social rules, and the child’s ability to make these distinctions, can be translated to other cultures. Researchers have noted that the ability to distinguish morality and convention is not a developmental universal (Edwards, 1980). The criteria of justice, welfare, and harm that Western culture adopts in characterising morals, may not be sufficient to provide a western researcher with an understanding of the moral reasoning of other cultures.