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Negotiating Power Relations – The Self and Others

As the last chapter showed, morality is used by children as a means of filtering and understanding the social world around them. However, this chapter will move on from the five fictional characters and explore more directly the way in which children’s moral understanding forms part of their everyday lives, as an expression of individual agency. It will continue to contextualise earlier discussions around the nature of morality and develop further the extent to which moral meaning must be seen as fluid, and tied to individual reflections on the self in the presence of others. It will continue to demonstrate the extent to which the process of self-identity is relevant in the shaping of moral codes through a closer consideration of belonging, and the way in which it is used by the children to help with reinforcing similarity, as well as to identify and avoid difference. However, to really develop this discussion and to further our understanding of children as social agents, it is important to recognise the role of power as an added dimension within children’s perceptions of themselves in the context of others. Consequently it must be seen as a central feature of the way in which children develop moral attitudes and opinions as expressed in their daily lives. The chapter therefore looks at this issue by considering the self and others in the context of three different sets of power relations: mutuality, powerlessness and powerfulness.

The inclusion of power

Discussions of power amongst children are limited. Much of the work emanating from the social studies of childhood has focused more on the downward application of power by adults on to children (de Castro 2004). This can be seen in work on child abuse (Kirtzinger 1997;
Christensen 2000) as well as children in schools (Wood 1998b) and in the home (Hendrick 1997). These studies have engaged with the structural processes impacting on these constructions of power (Kirtzinger 1997), but have seemed more hesitant to recognise power as a definitive part of the internal-external dialectic at the centre of the individual’s sense of self. Part of the reason for this limited investigation has been that the main focus of many of the studies within this area relates to the contrast between adulthood and childhood (Mayall 2002). This has seen a particular focus on the way in which adults may use their power over children, rather than allowing an opportunity to consider power from the child’s perspective, particularly between children themselves. Not acknowledging this aspect of social relationships has a fundamental impact on the way in which we understand children and childhood.

The work of Lukes, which is not written with direct reference to children, does however acknowledge the centrality of power to any consideration of individual interaction within the social world. As he writes:

> Social life can only properly be understood as an interplay of power and structure, a web of possibilities for agents, whose nature is both active and structured, to make choices and pursue strategies within given limits, which in consequence expand and contract over time (Lukes 2005: 68).

If power is such a central aspect of social agency, then it needs to be looked at as a horizontal process as well as a vertical one. This then demands that power must also be seen as one of those filters that shape and form perceptions of self. Fingerson reflects on this as she draws from Foucault (1977) the suggestion that the body is the primary site for negotiated power:

> Power is negotiated through relationships, language and disciplinary practices rather than being an essential element that a person, group or gender does or does not possess. Power is a fundamental aspect of all social interaction (Fingerson 2005: 92).

Indeed, as this extract firmly suggests, power is not something that is the preserve of a few but something that pervades all social interaction. Fingerson (2005) demonstrated the horizontal realities of power in the everyday lives of young people aged between 10 and 18 years,