IMPACT OF PROMISE ON THE MORAL JUDGEMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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Recent claims that very young children have at least an intuitive understanding of morality has been subjected to an empirical test. 42 children ranging in age from 4 years and 8 months to 6 years and 6 months were taken from a local nursery school. Each subject was presented two short stories, one involving "Promise" in an interpersonal situation and the other not involving any Promise ("No-promise") in a similar situation. The subject's judgement was invited on the happening of the stories in such a way that it could be seen whether S differentiates between Promise and No-promise stories. The findings reveal that 5—6 years old children understand the concept of "Promise" and their judgement of social events is affected by this understanding. The failure of 4-year-old in the task was attributed to the difficulty in comprehending the content of the story material. Some culture-specific reasons have been brought forward to explain unexpected responses.

In previous studies on moral judgement it was suggested that true moral judgement develops quite late (7—8 years and above). For example, both Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1963, 1969, 1971a) believed that physical and logical concepts develop first and then later serve the basis for the development of social concepts including morality. Their suggestion was based on globally defined stages of cognitive development in which organisation of thought was considered to be a unity or wholeness of cognitive activities.

Furthermore, the conceptual distinction between social convention and morality, suggested by some researchers (e. g., Turiel, 1977) was previously considered to be a developmental phenomenon, i. e., children gradually become able to differentiate between social conventional rules and moral prescriptions. Piaget (1932), thus, seems to have assumed that findings from his studies on children's concepts of game rules could be generalised to their moral judgements. According to him and those who followed his line of exploration, moral reasoning was considered to emerge through its differentiations from non-moral (social conventional) processes. In other words, at lower developmental level, convention

and morality are presumed to be undifferentiated, while at higher levels the two are differentiated in such a way that morality displaces convention. The basis for viewing such a differentiation process as a developmental sequence seems to be that societal rules are deemed as simpler than more complex moral ideals. Moreover, the differential model of the development of the social convention and moral rules assumes that children conform to social convention rather than comprehending their functions in interpersonal relations and social organisation.

Turiel (1978), on the contrary, has postulated a partial-structure explanation of cognitive development suggesting that thought is organised, and changes sequentially, within a domain and not necessarily across the domains. The core of this argument is that child's interaction with his environment (e. g., objects, physical events, persons, and social events) enable him to develop different conceptual domains which may somewhat influence each other but are not necessarily interrelated or interdependent. In short, where children develop physical and logical concepts, they also develop, at the same time, mental representations of their social world. This enables them to understand many social concepts. For example, very young children have at least an intuitive understanding of morality (Shweder, Turiel, & Much, 1981); they are capable of discriminating moral from non-moral forms of appraisal (Nucci, 1977; Nucci & Turiel, 1979); they understand that moral rules are not changeable whereas social rules are (Shweder et al., 1981; Weston & Turiel, 1979); they also discriminate moral versus conventional versus prudential rules and modulate their speech accordingly (Much & Shweder, 1978).

Understanding moral principles thus seems to be a different thing from the ability to explain those principles. In the previous studies on moral judgement, this difference was not kept in mind. Shweder et al. (1981) remark: "It appears that some (e. g., Piaget & Kohlberg) have traced the ontogenesis of reflective understanding and the ability to articulate the formal principles that define morality" (p.289). The same authors have shown that even a 4-year-old is an intuitive moralist. Later, Yuill (1984) reported that 5-year-old children were able to make moral judgements as they judged foreseeable accidents as more 'reprimandable' than unforeseeable accidents. Similarly, Yuill and Perner (1987)

demonstrated that children of 7—8 years could make use of knowledge of rules in attributing responsibility to violators and thus could discriminate between those who were to be blamed more from those who were to be blamed less.

In the present study, the claim that very young children have at least an intuitive understanding of morality has been subjected to an empirical test. Specifically, interpersonal trust situations were constructed in short story form. These stories involved the moral concept of "Promise" and were presented to the subjects to see whether or not they can discriminate "Promise" situations from those which involved "No-promise" situations. This was done by inviting their judgement on the happenings of the stories. The hypothesis was that children would differentially react to Promise and No-promise situations. Specifically, they would judge the "X" character in Promise situations to be more angry with the "Y" character than in No-promise situations.

METHOD

Instrument

Four short stories each of about one minute duration were constructed and recorded on cassettes. All the four stories depicted interpersonal situations. Two themes, 'Bicycle' and 'School' were used in the four stories. In two of the four stories, a 'Promise' took place between the characters of the stories. In the other two stories, 'No-promise' took place. Thus, the stories were titled as following: (a) "Bicycle Promise" (BP); (b) "Bicycle No-promise" (BNP); (c) "School Promise" (SP); (d) "School No-promise" (SNP). The full stories are given in Appendix A. It may be noted that stories belonging to one particular theme have the same beginning and ending and differed from each other only on Promise element which was present in one, but not in the other.

For better experimental control, the stories belonging to one theme were recorded at one time. For that, first the lengthier story with the Promise element was recorded. Then this recorded story was transferred on another cassette editing out the Promise element. This was done to avoid any difference of accentuation, etc., which

could have occurred if the two stories belonging to the same theme were recorded separately.

Subjects

42 children, all from a local nursery school, were taken. Their ages ranged from 4 years and 8 months to 6 years and 6 months.

Procedure

Before the actual testing could commence, an interaction between the experimenter and the children was attempted at to build rapport with the subjects. The children were familiarised with the listening to recorded stories. They were given practice in answering to a few questions asked by the experimenter at the end of each story.

In the initial rapport building sessions with the children, they were divided in three age groups, namely, 4 to 5, 5 to 6, and 6 to 7 years old children. The experimenter met these groups regularly (thrice a week) for a couple of weeks.

The actual testing was carried out individually using the test stories. Two stories, one from the Bicycle theme and the other from School theme were presented to each subject in such a combination that he received one story with Promise element and the other without the Promise element. The order of presentation of the stories was counterbalanced.

At the end of each story, the child was verbally asked one test question and two check questions. The one test and two check questions were identical in both the stories presented to the child except the relevant content of each story.

The test question was aimed at knowing whether or not the Promise makes an impact on the judgement of children. Specifically, each subject reported whether or not the "X" character was angry with the "Y" character, and if yes how much angry the subject would show him to be on a four- point scale of facial outlines of anger (see bottom of Appendix A). The expectations

were that subjects would show greater amount of anger on Promise situations than on No-promise situations.

Check questions were aimed at knowing whether or not the subject understood the stories. Check question I was a check on the successful recall of the story event and the basis of differences between the two, namely, a Promise taking place or not taking place between "X" and "Y" characters. Check question II tested child's understanding of causal relationships of happenings in the stories.

The order of asking one test and two check questions was counterbalanced.

Scoring

All 'yes' responses to the test questions were followed by subject showing, on a four-point scale of facial outlines of anger, how much angry the subject thinks "X" would feel. If the larger facial outline was pointed out, a score of four was given as the amount of anger shown. Similarly, if the smaller outline was pointed to, a score of one was given. A 'No' response was interpreted as "X" being not angry and was given a score of '0'. Thus the amount of anger shown could range from 0—4.

The responses on check questions were scored as correct if these clearly showed that the subject understood the stories and the point on which both differ from each other. The criterion for scoring thus remained fairly objective.

RESULTS

Data were grouped into three categories. One, the subjects who responded correctly on both the check questions. Two, subjects who responded correctly at least on check question No. I. Third, all the subjects whether or not they responded correctly on one or both the check questions.

If responding correctly to check questions could be taken as an indication of child's understanding of the stories, there were only

22 subjects who understood the story events and the relationship between them (see table 1).

Table 1

Number of Correct Responses to Check Questions I, II, and Both (Percentages in parenthesis; n=42).

		Number of Correct Responses on Check Questions		
Age Groups	*n*	I	II	Both
4.1-5.0	12	9(75)	4(33)	4(33)
5.1-6.0	16	15(93)	9(56)	9(56)
6.1-7.0	14	12(85)	10(71)	9(64)
Total Groups	42	36(85)	23(54)	22(52)

Table 2 gives the amount of anger shown on Promise and No-promise stories by those subjects who responded to both check questions correctly.

Table 2

Amount of Anger Shown on Promise and No-promise Stories when Responses to both Check Questions were Correct (n=22).

		Mean & Standard Deviation			
Age Groups	*n*	Promise	No-promise	*t(df)*	*p*
4.1-5.0	4	2.75(2.00)	2.00(2.00)	0.99(3)	n.s.
5.1-6.0	9	2.44(1.83)	0.66(1.25)	2.98(8)	*p*<.01
6.1-7.0	9	4.00(0.00)	1.66(1.25)	5.29(8)	*p*<.0005
Total Groups	22	3.14(1.55)	1.32(1.52)	5.35(21)	*p*<.0005

From among these, the youngest group did not differentiate between two situations, i.e., Promise and No-promise situations. The older two groups could make this differentiation quite well. Same is the case when subjects understood only the story events but did not grasp fully the relationship between the events as they responded to check question No. I correctly, but incorrectly to the check question No. II (see Table 3).

Table 3

Amount of Anger Shown on Promise and No-promise Stories when Responses to Check Question I are Correct (n=36).

| Age Groups | n | Mean & Standard Deviation | | t(df) | p |
		Promise	No-promise		
4.1-5.0	9	2.55(1.83)	1.77(1.68)	1.14(8)	n.s.
5.1-6.0	15	2.66(1.88)	0.73(1.23)	4.28(14)	p<.0005
6.1-7.0	12	3.33(1.33)	1.33(1.25)	4.69(11)	p<.0005
Total Groups	36	2.85(1.78)	1.19(1.39)	5.64(35)	p<.0005

The findings tell the same story when the condition of responding to both the check questions is removed altogether and the responses of all the subjects regarding the amount of anger shown were recorded (see table 4).

Table 4

Amount of Anger Shown on Promise and No-promise Stories (n=42).

| Age Groups | n | Mean & Standard Deviation | | t(df) | p |
		Promise	No-promise		
4.1-5.0	11	2.82(1.75)	2.09(1.68)	1.30(10)	n.s.
5.1-6.0	17	2.29(1.93)	0.88(1.32)	3.29(16)	p<.005
6.1-7.0	14	3.14(1.64)	1.35(1.29)	4.52(13)	p<.0005
Total Groups	42	2.71(1.83)	1.35(1.49)	5.15(41)	p<.0005

The results of the study thus indicate that 4-5-year-olds failed to discriminate between the two situations whereas children as young as 5-6, and 6-7-year-old can make this discrimination quite well.

Notwithstanding the above results, some children from all the three ages seem to be affected by the outcome of the situations. For example, a total of 21 subjects (6 from 4 to 5, 6 from 5 to 6, and 9

from 6 to 7 years age groups, respectively) responded "Yes-Yes" to the test question (see table 5).

Table 5

Number of "Yes-No" (expected), "Yes-Yes", "No-No" and "No-Yes" Responses to Promise and No-promise Situations (n=42).

| Age Groups | *n* | R e s p o n s e s | | | |
		Yes-No	Yes-Yes	No-No	No-Yes
4.1-5.0	11	2	6	2	1
5.1-6.0	17	4	6	7	0
6.1-7.0	14	2	9	3	0
Total Groups	42	8	21	12	1

DISCUSSION

The study reveals that 5-6-year-old children understand the concept of morality and their judgement of social events is affected by this understanding. The results, thus, confirm earlier findings that children as young as four and a half years of age are intuitive moralists (Shweder et al., 1981). The present study, having been conducted in an almost completely different cultural setting, provides a cross-cultural comparison with a conclusion that young children (5+) manifest an intuitive understanding of moral concepts like 'Promise', etc.

In the present study, however, younger children (4+) seem to be failing to make use of their understanding of morality in their moral judgements. Their failing could be because of the problems of concentrating on the story material used to test their judgement or/and the contents of the story material being somewhat above the comprehension level of the children at that age level.

The results of the study were in expected direction generally, i.e., children showed more amount of anger on situation in which a Promise took place and was not kept. However, it is important to note that the outcome of the situation remains quite a strong factor

affecting the judgement. In the present study some subjects imagined the "X" character being angry with "Y" whether there was any reason (Promise situation) or not (No-promise situation) to be angry. This could perhaps be because of the reason that in both the situations "X" met an unpleasant outcome.

Paradoxically, "No-No" responses to both Promise and No-promise situations : 2 in 4-5; 7 in 5-6; and 3 in 6-7 year age groups, respectively(in table 5) are somewhat difficult to explain. It could be because of the specific cultural child-rearing practices in Pakistan. In this society children are generally expected not to be angry or at cross. The value of forgiveness and sacrifice is highly emphasised and in particular children are instructed to be nice to others even if others are at fault or have done something wrong. Further research is needed to answer these questions conclusively.

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Appendix "A"

TEST MATERIAL: STORIES

BICYCLE THEME

["Bicycle Promise" (BP) and "Bicycle No-promise" (BNP)]

Amana and her brother Zahid were riding their bicycles in front of their house. Amana found one rupee lying on the ground. She said to her brother, "look, what I have found? Zahid said, "If you give this to me, I'll go and get some toffees from the shop. We will eat them together". Zahid took the rupee and left his bike there.

Deleted in "BNP"	Before going to get the toffees, Zahid said to his sister, 'Father is about to come. If he finds my bike here, he will be angry with me. Will you take my bike in? Amana said, "Don't worry, I'll take your bike inside".

While Zahid had gone to get the toffees, his sister took her own bike inside the house. Zahid's bike kept on lying there. In the meanwhile, their father came home. He was angry to see Zahid's bike lying outside the house. When Zahid came, he told him off.

Test Question: Was Zahid angry with his sister? If yes, how much?

Check Question I: Did Zahid ask his sister to put his bike in before going to get the toffees? If yes, what did his sister say in reply?

Check Question II: What would have happened if Zahid's sister had put his bike inside the house?

SCHOOL THEME

["School Promise" (SP) and "School No-promise" (SNP)]

Arshad and Akbar are brothers. They go to school together. But today Arshad is not going to school because he has a bad cold. Arshad says to his brother, "I am not going to school today as I have a bad cold".

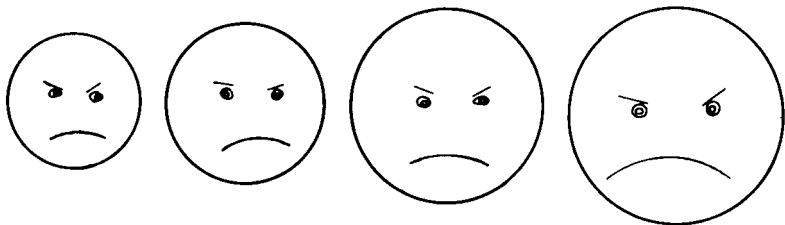| Deleted in "SNP"	Before Akbar could leave, Arshad said, "If teacher is not informed, she will be angry. Will you tell my teacher"? His brother says, Don't worry, I'll tell your teacher".

Akbar goes to school alone. He does not tell Arshad's teacher about his sickness. The next day Arshad goes to school. His teacher scolds him.

Test Question: Was Arshad angry with his brother? If yes, how much?

Check Question I: Did Arshad ask his brother to tell Arshad's teacher about his sickness? If yes, what did Akbar say in reply?

Check Question II: What would have happened if Arshad's brother had told Arshad's teacher about his sickness?

FACE OUTLINES SHOWING AMOUNT OF ANGER

(Redrawn)