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Conflict Resolution and Moral Development in Early Childhood: An Observational Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to characterize and explore many different properties of conflict resolution and moral development as possible using qualitative empirical approaches which explored childrens' concepts of problem solving and reasoning. The objective of the study was to address how children cheat in games, and the efficacy of Rock-Paper-Scissors in conflict resolution. This study built upon Jean Piaget's theory of moral development in children, extending his concepts into the sphere of rules and transgressions. The study was designed to analyze the stages in Piaget's theory pertaining to the levels of moral development and how children interact in successful conflict resolutions with regard to the stages of development. The study also incorporates an analysis of the game Rochambeau, or Rock-paper-Scissors, which is often used to solve small disputes between people. The research technique, naturalistic observation, was based on observing subjects in their natural environment. This type of research is well suited for situations where conducting lab research is unrealistic, cost prohibitive, or would unduly affect the subject's behavior. The experiment was carried out during a daytime program provided by Child and Family Services of the Upper Peninsula, Inc., in the summer of 2014.

Introduction

Evidence of prosocial behavior among humans' dates back to our earliest ancestors. As creatures with highly developed social skills, we are in constant contact with others, which sometimes leads to confrontation. Some people learn how to deal with conflict through gentle play and simulation, others learn through rough-and-tumble rowdiness of everyday life, and some through carefully mediated discussions and mentoring while others don't seem to have a positive mechanism for learning conflict resolution. Lloyd (2014) explains that some schools report conflicts among children, between children and teachers, and sometimes between parents and teachers. A series of studies in Great Britain demonstrated that the conflict resolution techniques of 10-12 year olds can have a significant correlation on the techniques that are used by 7 and 8 year olds. This age, noted by Lloyd, is a time for kids to learn from experimentation and to understand relationships. However, without a proper context to learn about conflict resolution, friction within the group of kids can escalate into aggression. The purpose of this study is to review the impact of children's knowledge that are two of these skills and behavior or conflict and conflict resolution.

Methods

Observational methods used in social science involve the systematic, detailed observation of behavior and talk: watching and recording what people do and say. Studying subjects in a familiar setting does not require manipulation of behavior, which is often done in a laboratory and can be unethical. In order to capture and learn about a social group, Goffman (1961)

recommended, “Submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject”. Commonly, psychologists and the social scientists develop observational studies in their research for purposes of efficiency, convenience, and validity. The method of direct observation plays a curious and unique role in the behavioral sciences. It is the necessary link between laboratory research and “real-world” behavior, and the bane of our aspirations to accrue more objective information about behavior (Altmann, 1974).

In the current study, children between the ages of 5 and 9 were observed playing Ultimate Tag during a summer program. It was hypothesized that if a conflict arose during game play, children who were younger were less morally developed and were more likely to cheat during a conflict. The game already provided a conflict resolution strategy, Rock-Paper-Scissors, within the rules. Rock-Paper-Scissors is widely known as a popular settlement to resolve minor disputes. The study was set up to see if children would eventually seek resolution independently, in lieu of seeking adult intervention. The design of this study allowed for the systematic observation of people and events to find out about behaviors and interactions in natural settings. Observing in a naturalistic play setting allowed the children to feel comfortable and not manipulated as they would in a laboratory setting.

Results

During the observational stages, it was noticed that children from the ages of 5-7 consistently sought out adult intervention when a conflict emerged. More often, 6-7 year old boys would have a disagreement about the rules, who cheated and who was telling the truth. In one particular situation, two children (ages 8 and 9) tagged each other at the same time. Instantly, one of the children (8 year old) said the other had to sit down because they had been tagged first. The 9 year old respected the other child’s allegation and sat down. This supports Piaget’s theory

in which an older child makes moral judgments on the basis of respect for the opinions and rights of others. In another situation, a 9 year old girl told a 7 year old boy to sit down because she tagged him first. This boy usually argued with his opponent, but he listened to the older girl and sat down. It seemed as though there was no conflict and Rock-Paper-Scissors was not suggested.

A notable aspect of Piaget's analysis is the importance he attributes to playing and peer influence in the development of moral judgment. Children develop moral judgment and a valid understanding of the opinions and rights of others as a result of playing and peer influence. Despite the short observational period, it was noted that children (5-7) began to resolve the issue on their own on the last of my observations, in lieu of seeking adult guidance. During the beginning sessions, when a child made inquiries regarding a dispute they were prompted with the question, "What do you think should happen?" Or, "What would you like to do to fix this?" Always, they responded with Rock-Paper-Scissors as the conflict resolution. Towards the end of the observational period, they slowly started to take matters into their own hands and compromised in a mature way that showed an understanding of others.

Discussion

Developmental and cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget conducted many famous studies investigating child developmental patterns. In a particular observational study of children's games that comprised a complex system of rules, game play, as a social institution, allowed Piaget to investigate child developmental patterns of concepts, and later ruminations about the rules of justice, law, and society's political codes. Also, his interests delved not only in whether children respect social rules but how and why they respect them. As a developmentalist, he

wanted to find the respect for rules early in life. Piaget wrote, “All morality consists in a system of rules, and the essence of all morality is to be sought for in the respect which the individual acquires for these rules” (Piaget, 1934). A major concern of Piaget’s was the extent to which moral judgments of children derive from adult constraint or from individual’s autonomous respect for the opinions and rights of others (Sylvia, Mustafa, & Hamilton, 1981). Children are more than likely to attach their thoughts and opinions to what adults have taught them, making rules a concept that is irrevocable and concrete. Piaget implies that this general development theory is applicable to the ways children make specifically moral judgments based on their age and levels of heteronomy and autonomy.

Piaget found that until about the age of 10 a child’s judgment stem’s overwhelmingly from adult prescriptions and constraints and the influence of older children; thereafter a child begins to make moral judgments on the basis of respect for the opinions and rights of others (Sylvia, Mustafa, & Hamilton, 1981). In reference to Piaget’s important aspects of children’s play and peer influence, children acquire a knowledge of democratic practices, and increased sophistication in making moral judgments principally through cooperative interaction with peers rather than adult tutelage (Sylvia, Mustafa, & Hamilton, 1981). The children in the presented study had become accustomed to making autonomous decisions with their peers.

Piaget’s Moral Development Paradigm

According to Piaget’s moral development paradigm, age 6 makes the first stage of rules of consciousness. This means the child is intensely subservient to rules, which they perceived as emitted from adults, as being external and coercive, eternal and unalterable. Children are fully heteronomous, subject to law and authority and governed by rules imposed by a gerontocracy (Sylvia, Mustafa, & Hamilton, 1981). It was interesting to see in the observational data how

strongly the children felt about the rules of the game. They voiced their opinions loudly and strongly when someone did not oblige with the rules. Even more interesting was when a child blatantly cheated or lied, they were persistent enough to let the other person give up and carry on with the game. The children would believe that they truly did not cheat. When a conflict first arose, the children's first instinct was to seek an adult.

By age 10 (on average), rules of consciousness begin to undergo a transformation during which autonomy supplants heteronomy and independence supersedes heteronomy. From their play experience, they come to view rules as law due to mutual consent, the product of group decisions, which must be observed out of loyalty to the peer group. Rules are not unchangeable; they may be enforced by group consent. Different opinions about rules are not transgressions (not misbehaviors or violent infractions), they are tolerated as long as their protagonists urge them by legal methods (Sylvia, Mustafa, & Hamilton, 1981).

In one particular conflict, the whole group was involved in seeking justice to be served for the antagonist. Two children were in a disagreement about one of them switching their hand position in Rock-Paper-Scissors at the last second with intentions to win against the other. Like Piaget discussed, children view rules as law due to mutual consent and the product of group decisions. Other children surrounding them who saw the dishonesty joined in by ridiculing the child who cheated, who eventually sat down. The new type of rules consciousness Piaget explained evokes increased and more complex cooperation in children's play, a heightened interest in knowing, codifying and observing rules (Sylvia, Mustafa, & Hamilton, 1981).

Piaget's theory was originally developed in the 1930's, however his findings still hold true, as demonstrated by current research. Concepts such as justice, social acceptance, and jealousy are part of human nature and the observations and analysis are consistent with Piaget's

findings. It is a valid model of the evolution of judgments regarding honesty, justice and morality. The limited amount of available time and resources for this study limits its generalizability and the extent to which conclusions can be drawn. However, it seems that observations from the current study are consistent with Piaget's theory of moral development.

Further research

Further research on the role of gender bias, age, and game theory as an indication of moral development in conflict resolutions could be quite productive. When looking at gender as a factor in the presented study there was little gender bias. Direction for further research in this area can come from the extensive body of work on gender differences in the development of moral reasoning, especially involving studies comparing the development of moral reasoning between children and adolescents, as well as through adulthood (Walker, 1984).

Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning has been widely criticized and expressed as bias due to his sole reliance on data from his longitudinal sample of males to derive and validate his description of moral development. Additional studies (Haan, Langer, & Kohlberg, 1976) indicate that males in adulthood have higher moral development than females. However, these studies are confounded with differences in level of education and occupation. Walker wrote a critical review pertaining to various research studies that investigated sex differences in moral reasoning in childhood through adulthood. For the child and adolescent age group there were 31 studies, with a total of 2,879 subjects ranging in age from 5 years to 17 years. The results demonstrated the patterns of sex differences in moral reasoning were infrequent; for the 41 samples, only six significant differences were noted. Walker summarized that sex differences in moral reasoning

are rare early in the life span. Overall, there were 108 samples from childhood through adulthood with only eight samples clearly indicating significant differences favoring males. Although the infrequent differences are relatively small, when they do occur, they indicate more mature development for females.

Furthermore, many variations of these procedures are possible and could generate a thematic line of research that would be of great value in developing and facilitating strategies regarding moral development and the relationship of moral reasoning to moral emotions and behaviors.

As an interesting side note, it should be mentioned that studying game strategies to learn about behavior and morality is now very much an accepted part of research in psychology and economics. Game theory can be used to simulate competitive or cooperative conditions in which either selfish strategies benefit only the individual, or cooperative strategies can mutually benefit all parties, as in Robert Trivers (1971) studies of reciprocal altruism.

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