Parent and Peer Contexts for Children’s Moral Reasoning Development

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This study addressed the polarization among theoretical perspectives in moral psychology regarding the relative significance of parents and peers in children’s developing moral maturity. The sample was composed of 60 target children from late childhood and midadolescence, 60 parents, and 60 friends who participated in parent/child and friend/child dyadic discussions of a series of moral conflicts. The quality of parents’ and friends’ verbal interactions, ego functioning, and level of moral reasoning in these discussions was used to predict the rate of children’s moral reasoning development over a 4-year longitudinal interval. Results revealed that interactions with both parents and peers were predictive of children’s development but that these two types of relationships influence development in rather different ways. Implications of the findings for the understanding of these socialization agents’ roles in moral development are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

What in children’s lives stimulates them to moral maturity? Why do some children eventually develop into paragons of moral virtue and behavior as evidenced by their commitment, integrity, compassion, and sense of justice, whereas others develop into the misfits of society as evidenced by their violence, overwhelming self-interest, hypocrisy, and cruelty? What is it about children’s socialization contexts that contributes to such different developmental trajectories and outcomes?

Competing theoretical perspectives in moral psychology have traditionally focused on different socialization experiences in explaining children’s moral development. For example, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes early parent/child relationships in the development of conscience through the mechanism of identification and consequent internalization of values. Social-learning theory, although less dogmatic about the relative influence of peers versus parents, emphasizes the power of models and so has also focused on parents’ role in displaying and reinforcing appropriate behaviors. Cognitive-developmental theory—a model dominating the field more recently—posits a contrasting viewpoint. It holds that interactions with peers are more potent and significant in stimulating moral growth than interactions with parents. Theorists such as Piaget (1932/1977) and Kohlberg (1969) explicitly argued that parents have a minimal and nonspecific role in their children’s moral development, primarily because of their position of unilateral authority. They contended that family participation, identification with parents, and parental nurturance, although not unimportant, are not critically necessary for children’s development. Instead, they held that peers are better able to provide the appropriate interactions to stimulate moral growth, a view premised on peers’ relatively equal developmental status, and the mutual and cooperative nature of their relationships. As a consequence, research within the cognitive-developmental paradigm has given short shrift to the family context, focusing instead on peer environments, such as the school, to explain rate of moral development and outcomes.

Thus, there has been considerable polarization within moral psychology regarding effective contexts for development, with some theories emphasizing vertical parent/child relationships and others emphasizing horizontal peer relationships. Research bounded by each tradition has focused on one socialization context or the other, often using different constructs and measures. Consequently, insufficient attention has been devoted to a systematic comparison of their influence. Thus, the primary objective of the present research was to compare the nature of family and peer contexts in children’s lives and to examine their relative impact on children’s moral reasoning development. Given the obvious significance and moral quality of interactions in both family and peer contexts, our basic hypothesis was that both types of relationships would be predictive of children’s developing moral maturity—challenging the polarized view that characterizes the field; but we further hypothesized that the specific processes underlying development would operate differently in these contexts. Thus, this project will begin to delineate the differing roles that peers and parents have in the moral development process.

An overview of previous research may help to set the context for the present study and to derive more specific hypotheses. Research on global parenting style, for example, has indicated that inductive disci-
pline, authoritative parenting, responsiveness, and involvement are associated with children’s moral maturity (Boyce & Allen, 1993; Dunton, 1989; Hart, 1988; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967; Holstein, 1972; Parikh, 1980; Speicher, 1992). This research, however, did not assess specific aspects of parent/child interactions and did not directly tap the cognitive-developmental mechanism held to underlie moral development: cognitive disequilibrium. Disequilibrium refers to a state of cognitive conflict that challenges current ways of thinking and stimulates development toward more equilibrated (i.e., higher level) reasoning.

Berkowitz and Gibbs (1983) operationalized cognitive disequilibrium in terms of two types of transactional dialogue in moral dilemma discussions: representational and operational. The representational type involves eliciting or re-presenting another person’s reasoning (e.g., paraphrase), whereas the operational type is more challenging because it involves operating on or transforming another’s reasoning (e.g., critique). The relevant finding of their study was that college students who evidenced moral development over the course of the intervention were involved in more highly operational discussions than were students who did not develop. Somewhat similarly, Kruger and Tomasello (1986) had a sample of girls discuss dilemmas with either a peer or her mother and found that peer discussions were more transactional than mother/child ones. In a subsequent study using an experimental design, Kruger (1992) found that girls in peer dyads evidenced higher moral reasoning on the posttest than girls in mother/child dyads. These findings, of course, support the cognitive-developmental view regarding the significance of peers and provide the rationale for the hypothesis that the challenging, operational type of interactions between peers will foster moral maturity. Somewhat in contrast, Pratt, Arnold, Pratt, and Diessner’s (1999) study of parent/adolescent discussions of hypothetical and real-life moral conflicts indicated that fathers’ operational discussion behavior was predictive of adolescents’ moral reasoning development 2 years later; whereas it was mothers’ ability to represent their adolescents’ perspectives in stories about socialization incidents that was predictive. Pratt et al.’s study suggests the relevance of parental gender in processes of moral development and points to the need for clarification of how parents and peers engender disequilibrium in moral discussions. Note that these studies, however, did not examine interactions other than cognitively stimulating ones and did not examine the moral reasoning used by participants in the discussion sessions.

In the cognitive-developmental view, disequilibrium is also engendered by exposure to higher stage moral reasoning, which presumably challenges one’s current thinking. A critical issue here concerns the optimal stage disparity between discussants. The Kohlbergian view is that a +1 stage mismatch is optimal, but Berkowitz, Gibbs, and Broughton (1980) reported that in discussions between college students, a +1 stage disparity was most effective in facilitating development. Taylor and Walker (1997) found that in discussions between young offenders, a similarly small stage mismatch also predicted moral development but only if the discussion partner was of higher sociometric status, a finding implicating the significance of social factors, as well as cognitive ones, in the moral development process. This research supports the specific hypothesis that a small moral stage mismatch in a peer context will foster moral development.

The previously noted studies focused either on cognitively stimulating behaviors or level of moral reasoning. This focus reflects the cognitive-developmental emphasis on cognition and neglect of affect (for a discussion see Walker & Hennig, 1997). The affective domain is surely significant when considering moral development within either family or peer context given the significance of these relationships, the richness of the emotional dimension within families and between friends, and the frequency of often difficult moral issues that are encountered.

To overcome this limitation in the assessment of moral discussions, Powers (1983, 1988) devised the Developmental Environments Coding System (DECS), which codes every conversational turn in the discussion, thereby tapping not only cognitively stimulating interactions but also those that are affective in tone, either supportive or interfering. In Powers’ study, adolescents and their parents discussed a hypothetical moral dilemma. Cluster analyses of parents’ discussion styles were conducted (on the basis of the eight DECS categories of interactions) to provide holistic representations of the family context. These representations were then related to adolescents’ level of moral development. It was found that affective support when combined with the noncompetitive sharing of perspectives was predictive of high levels of adolescent moral reasoning, whereas rejection, distortion, and affective conflict were associated with low levels. These findings suggest the hypothesis that, within a parent/child context at least, affectively supportive interactions will foster moral development whereas conflictual ones will interfere.

Finally, in a study that provides the groundwork for the present research, Walker and Taylor (1991) examined the nature of parent/child discussions in relation to children’s moral development over a 2-year
longitudinal interval. The quality of parents’ interactions with their child (as tapped by the DECS) and their level of moral reasoning when in dialogue with their child were both assessed in the context of discussing a hypothetical and a real-life dilemma. The use of real-life moral problems was an attempt to better tap both everyday family interactions and affective mechanisms.

Briefly, Walker and Taylor (1991) found that children’s moral development was not predicted by parents’ discussion of the hypothetical dilemma (confirming concerns regarding their lack of relevance) but was predicted by the discussion of the real-life one. Here, children’s development was negatively predicted by a parental style that entailed operational interactions, lecturing, and affective conflict. In discussing the child’s real-life dilemma, such direct challenges and opinionated lecturing may be perceived as antagonistic criticism and arouse defensiveness. On the other hand, children’s development was positively predicted by a parental style that involved gentler representational interactions and affective support, combined with the stimulation of higher level moral reasoning (about +1 stage). In other words, effective parents engaged in supportive Socratic dialogue and Kohlbergian higher stage reasoning.

Some important implications arise from these findings. First, it is significant that, in contradistinction to the cognitive-developmental emphasis on cognition, the parenting behaviors that differentially predicted children’s development entailed the affective domain, thereby reinforcing Powers’ (1983) findings. Also, the context that predicted moral growth was the discussion of the child’s real-life moral dilemma (not a hypothetical one), where the issue was of direct relevance to the family and explicitly focused on the child. Finally, these data demonstrate that parents are influential in their children’s moral development, in contradistinction to the minimal role accorded them by Piaget, Kohlberg, and others. Interestingly, the nature of family interactions predicting development is seemingly different from that provided by peer contexts, where high levels of cognitive conflict have been associated with moral development. This suggests that the nature of effective interactions may differ between these socialization contexts and reinforces the call for a systematic comparison of parental and peer interactions.

Several specific hypotheses are implied by the findings of the studies just reviewed. Evidence is sufficient to justify the hypothesis that both parent and peer interactions will be predictive of children’s moral reasoning development; however, the nature of effective interactions will differ between these two contexts because egalitarian peer relationships allow challenging interactions whereas hierarchical parent/child relationships require gentler interactions. Thus, effective peer relationships should entail the operational style of interactions, whereas effective parental interactions should entail the representational and supportive style of interactions. In regards to moral stage disparity, a relatively high disparity between parent and child should promote development, whereas between peers who are of relatively equal developmental levels, a low disparity should be effective.

Some limitations of Walker and Taylor’s (1991) study should also be noted. First, because family triads (both parents and child) participated, determining the extent to which parents’ behavior was directed at their child versus their spouse was impossible. Interaction styles may differ between dyadic and triadic contexts (McHale & Cowan, 1996). In the present study, we examined dyads in an attempt to more clearly delineate the nature of their interactions.

Second, the real-life dilemma was one from any aspect of the child’s life and parents frequently were not directly implicated (e.g., in those dilemmas dealing with friendships). The nature of a discussion may vary with participants’ personal investment in the issue; and previous research has indicated the importance of context in assessing interaction styles (Grotevant & Carlson, 1987). Because the Kohlbergian moral education paradigm entails peer discussion of hypothetical dilemmas, comparing different types of dilemma discussions in these two socialization contexts therefore seems important. In the present study, the dilemma discussions entailed both actual moral conflicts in the dyadic relationship and a hypothetical moral dilemma, and the hypothesis was that actual conflicts focusing on the child will better predict moral development.

Third, in Walker and Taylor’s (1991) study, the quality of the discussions was assessed by the DECS. Because this method detects only direct verbal expressions of affect, it may not be adequately capturing participants’ emotional functioning (which is particularly relevant in assessing the nature of parental and peer interactions). In the present study, the discussions were assessed not only by the DECS with its microanalytic analysis of the cognitive aspects of verbal interactions but also by a more macroanalytic rating of discussants’ ego functioning using Haan’s (1977; Haan, Aerts, & Cooper, 1985) Q-sort of ego processes. We anticipated that this method would better tap the affective quality of participants’ interactive behavior and personality with its psychodynamic emphasis than would the DECS with its cognitive-developmental emphasis. Coping ego processes reflect openness, flexibility, effective problem solving, responsiveness, sen-
sensitivity, and the appropriate expression of affect, whereas defending ego processes reflect rigidity, distortion, a closed-minded attitude to others’ perspectives and feelings, the mishandling or repression of emotions, and denial. Although research has indicated that ego functioning is predictive of one’s own moral development over time (Hart & Chmiel, 1992; Hart, Keller, Edelstein, & Hofmann, 1998; Matsuba & Walker, 1998), whether or not the ego functioning of others relates to children’s moral maturity still must be determined. We hypothesize that mature ego functioning on the part of both parents and friends would be important in facilitating children’s moral development. Mature ego functioning on the part of socializers scaffolds children’s moral development by engendering an affective context in which there is openness to new ideas, in which problems can be solved honestly and with flexibility, in which others’ feelings and ideas are sensitively considered, and in which emotions are expressed appropriately and self-control is evident even in difficult circumstances. This, of course, embeds moral development within the broader context of personality (Walker & Hennig, 1997).

Fourth, in Walker and Taylor’s (1991) study a single 2-year retest assessed the extent of moral development. In the present study, children were retested annually over 4 years to provide a more comprehensive and reliable measure of moral development.

Thus, the present study examined differences between parental and peer contexts with the intent of determining the characteristics of each context that predict the rate of children’s moral development over the subsequent 4-year longitudinal interval. The children were drawn from two age groups, late childhood and midadolescence, so that we could compare parent versus peer socialization contexts at these different points in the life-span. From childhood to adolescence social orientation shifts noticeably as young people expand their social world beyond the family and peers become increasingly significant in their relationships. In the present study, a fairly comprehensive assessment of the nature of their interactions was obtained through observations of participants’ verbal interactions, ego functioning, and level of moral reasoning.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The sample was composed of 60 target children (with equal numbers of boys and girls), 60 parents of these children (with one parent only participating from each family), and 60 same-sex friends of the target children (total N = 180). Of the 60 parents, 20 fathers and 20 mothers were from two-parent families (36 of these 40 families were intact and 4 were blended), and 20 mothers from single-parent families—thus, family structure is a variable in this study. The 120 children (target children and their friends) were drawn in equal numbers from two age groups: late childhood (Grade 5) and midadolescence (Grade 10), with mean ages of 10.9 years (SD = .60, range = 9.3–12.7) and 15.5 years (SD = .54, range = 13.8–17.5), respectively. The parents averaged 44.8 years of age (SD = 5.9, range = 28.3–59.9) and 16.3 years of education (SD = 3.8, range = 12–34). This sample was predominantly middle-class, according to Treiman’s (1977) Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale, with a mean occupational status score of 53.8 (SD = 10.1, range = 20–78), a score reflecting occupations such as librarian or office manager. The ethnicity of the sample was predominantly White (84%); the remainder were Asian (14%) and Hispanic, African, and Canadian Indian (1% each).

The economic and life circumstances of single-parent families often differ considerably from those of two-parent families (Scott, 1993) and so, as might be expected, some differences on demographic variables as a function of family structure were indicated in this sample. Parents in two-parent families were slightly older than those in single-parent families (Ms = 46.0 versus 42.4) and had higher occupational status (Ms = 54.4 versus 47.8), F(1, 58) = 5.36 and 4.34, p < .05; however, they did not differ in level of education.

Research participants volunteered in response to a letter mailed to parents of students or in response to a newspaper advertisement. Each was given a token honorarium of $10 for each session in which he or she participated.

**Procedure**

The design of this study entailed the target children participating in two sessions, once with a parent and once with a friend (in counterbalanced order). Thus, child/parent dyads and child/friend dyads came to the university at a convenient time, typically in the evening or on the weekend, to participate. After being briefed and providing consent, each participant was taken to an office for an individual audio-recorded interview of about 45–60 min. In this interview, they first responded to the three hypothetical moral dilemmas of either Form A or B (randomly chosen for each dyad) of Kohlberg’s Moral Judgment Interview (MJI; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987), and then they were asked to recall an actual moral conflict involving the other person in the dyad (which they were to discuss with their dyadic partner subsequently). The MJI was later tran-
scribed and scored for participants’ stage of moral reasoning development. Following the interview, they also completed a questionnaire that assessed perceptions of their relationship with the other person in the dyad (these data are not germane to the issues examined in the present study and will not be discussed further).

Once the individual interview was completed, participants reconvened in a larger room to participate in a “dyadic discussion session” which typically took 45–60 min. The session was audio- and video-recorded, with a relatively unobtrusive wall-mounted camera, for later transcription and coding for participants’ moral reasoning, verbal discussion behavior, and ego functioning. The discussion session was designed to involve interpersonal conflict on both challenging and personally relevant issues in the hope that a range of verbal interactions and ego processes could be reliably assessed. The discussion session had three parts (the order of which was randomized). In Part 1, participants were asked to discuss, and attempt to reach consensus on, one of the hypothetical dilemmas from the MJ to which they had individually responded in the interview. To foster discussion, the experimenter chose a dilemma on the solution of which they had individually disagreed. After explaining this (unrevealed differences) task, the experimenter exited to an observation gallery and returned when summoned by participants at the completion of this part of the discussion. Then the experimenter introduced Part 2, in which the target child was asked to describe the moral conflict he or she was having, or had recently had, with the other person in the dyad (parent or friend), as had been revealed in the second part of the individual interview. They were asked to discuss and attempt to resolve this relational conflict. In Part 3 of the session, the other person in the dyad was similarly asked to describe the moral conflict he or she was having with the child, and they were asked to discuss and resolve this conflict as well.

About a week later, the child participated in another session (both interview and dyadic discussion), this time with the other partner (e.g., if the first session involved child and parent, then the second involved child and friend). The other form of the MJ was used in this session.

Longitudinal data on moral reasoning development were obtained with the subsample of 60 target children who were reinterviewed with the MJ (using the same form as the initial session of the first wave of data collection) four times over the subsequent 4-year longitudinal interval (i.e., about 12 months between each retest). Of the 60 children, 58 participated in all retest interviews (97% retention). This attrition reduces the N for analyses involving retest data.

Scoring

Moral reasoning. The MJIs (both from the initial session and the retest interviews) were scored for stage of moral reasoning development according to the standard scoring procedures (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987) by an experienced graduate student coder. Scores were assigned for every moral judgment that matched a criterion judgment in the appropriate section of the manual. These scores were combined to provide the percent usage at each stage for the interview. Level of moral reasoning development was indicated by the weighted average score (WAS), which includes information regarding usage at all stages and is given by the sum of the products of the percent usage at each stage multiplied by the stage number (range = 100–500).

Each of the three moral dilemmas in the dyadic discussion was also scored for participants’ moral reasoning, again by the same coder and relying on Colby and Kohlberg’s (1987) manual. Because the manual is keyed to particular dilemmas but the actual moral conflicts represent a wider range of issues, the scorer relied more on general stage structure definitions than on particular critical indicators for criterion judgments. Thus, scores were assigned for every moral judgment that matched a stage structure definition for a criterion judgment anywhere in the manual. These scores were used to determine the percent usage at each stage and to calculate WASs.

Thus, in total, scores were assigned to reflect participants’ moral reasoning in four contexts: (1) the MJI, (2) the hypothetical dilemma in the dyadic discussion, (3) the target child’s dilemma (regarding the partner) in the discussion, and (4) the partner’s dilemma (regarding the child) in the discussion.

Colby and Kohlberg (1987) report that their moral stage coding system yields scores that are internally consistent and reliable, with Cronbach’s $\alpha \geq .92$, alternate form reliability $\geq .84$, retest reliability $\geq .96$, and interrater reliability $\geq .92$. In terms of validity, Walker (1988) has reviewed the stage-like nature of moral reasoning development and found considerable support for the criteria of structure, sequence, and hierarchy. Interrater reliability for the moral reasoning scoring in the present study was determined by a second rater who independently scored a randomly selected 20% of the MJIs and 20% of the dyadic dilemma discussions. Reliability was calculated in terms of the WASs with intraclass correlations and in both cases was substantial: $r(105) = .86$ for the MJIs and $r(142) = .84$ for the dilemma discussions.
**Verbal interactions.** Various interaction coding systems have been devised (see Grotevant & Carlson’s 1987, review), but Powers’ (1983, 1988) DECS seemed most appropriate for capturing the quality of the verbal interactions in dyadic discussions and has yielded meaningful findings in previous research (Walker & Taylor, 1991). Thus, the interactions in the dyadic discussion sessions were coded from the transcripts by using the DECS, which assigns a code to every conversational turn of each participant. More than one code may be given to a conversational turn, but each code would refer to separate parts. This, then, is a microanalytic approach in which the unit of analysis is the conversational turn, of which there are typically hundreds per session.

The 25 codes of the DECS reflect the intended purpose of the speech in relation to the discussion. For present purposes, these codes were grouped into five conceptual (and one miscellaneous) categories (note that these categories have been modified somewhat from Powers’ initial formulation). The labels for these categories reflect the commonalities among the codes comprising each. Analyses were conducted at the level of these categories. The categories, and the codes comprising each, are as follows: (1) operational (speeches that operate on the reasoning of another)—critique, competitive request, counterconsideration, concession, clarification (explanation or integration), competitive clarification; (2) representational (speeches that elicit or re-present the reasoning of another)—request, paraphrase, comprehension check; (3) informative (speeches that entail sharing of opinions)—opinion, competitive opinion, agreement, disagreement, request for change, intent for closure; (4) supportive (speeches that indicate positive affect and encouragement to participate)—encouragement (including listening responses), humor; (5) interfering (speeches that indicate negative affect and interfere with sustained and coherent discussion)—distracting, refusal, devalue task, distortion, resist/threaten, hostility; and (6) miscellaneous—unclear, incomplete statements.

The DECS has not been extensively used, so evidence regarding its psychometric properties and validity is minimal (however, see Grotevant & Carlson’s 1987 review). Powers (1988) reports interrater reliability averaging .69 (Cohen’s $\kappa$) over eight DECS categories. Indications of construct validity include meaningful associations between family verbal interactions and adolescent ego development (Powers, Hauser, Schwartz, Noam, & Jacobson, 1983).

In the present study, each person’s verbal interactions for each dilemma discussion in the dyadic session were scored in terms of the 25 codes, which were later collapsed into the six categories. Two graduate student raters did this coding. Each scored a randomly selected half of the data. Interrater reliability was determined by their independent coding of 120 separate dilemma discussions of a randomly selected subsample of 40 participants (i.e., 17% of the data) and was calculated in terms of category agreement. Interrater reliability was found to be substantial, Cohen’s $\kappa = .85$. Given the differing lengths of discussion between and within dyads, analyses were conducted in terms of percentage use of each category of interactions rather than in terms of frequencies.

**Ego functioning.** The level of ego functioning that participants used in handling these conflicts was assessed by using Haan’s (1977; Haan et al., 1985) 60-item Ego Q-Sort procedure. Each participant in the dyadic discussion was rated independently by a different rater; both raters were graduate students who had been extensively trained in this procedure. The Q-sort was done macroanalytically after viewing the videotape of each dilemma discussion. In the Q-sort, the rater placed the 60 descriptive items (such as “reacts sensitively to others’ feelings” and “produces intellectualizations which seem self-serving”) in a fixed 9-step quasi-normal distribution, ranging from most uncharacteristic of the person (−4) through neutral (0) to most characteristic (+4). The Q-sort items assess 10 coping and 10 complementary defending processes reflective of four ego domains: (1) cognitive—the coping processes of objectivity, intellectuality, and logical analysis and the corresponding defending processes of isolation, intellectualizing, and rationalization; (2) intracceptive—the coping processes of tolerance of ambiguity, empathy, and regression in service of the ego and the corresponding defending processes of doubt, projection, and regression; (3) attention—the coping process of concentration and the corresponding defending process of denial; and (4) affective-regulation—the coping processes of sublimation, substitution, and suppression and the corresponding defending processes of displacement, reaction formation, and repression.

Haan’s Ego Q-Sort has been widely used and has established reliability and validity, especially considering the subjective nature of the rating process. For example, Haan (1986) reported alphas for individual ego processes averaging .86 and interrater reliability averaging .73 (in terms of Q-correlations). Morrissey’s (1977) review supports the measure’s construct validity; for example, in terms of its relation to standard personality inventories.

As is typical (Haan, 1977; Haan et al., 1985; Hart & Chmiel, 1992), an overall ego functioning score was calculated as the difference between the average of the 10 coping processes and the 10 complementary
defending processes (such a composite score results in loss of information regarding specific ego processes but is appropriate for present purposes). Thus, a positive score indicates overall coping whereas a negative score indicates defending. Interrater reliability was determined by having the two raters independently code each of the three dilemma discussions of 28 randomly selected participants (i.e., a total of 84 discussions; 12% of the data). Reliability was assessed in terms of the overall ego functioning score, calculated with an intraclass correlation, and found to be adequate, \( r(82) = .81 \).

**RESULTS**

The results of this study are organized into two major sections. The first section reports analyses of the relationship between parent versus peer socialization contexts and the rate of children’s moral reasoning development over the longitudinal interval. In other words, this section addresses the question: What are the effective aspects of parent and peer interactions for children’s developing moral maturity? The second section fleshes out the first set of findings by examining more extensively the observed differences in the nature of interactions with parents versus peers. In other words, on what dimensions are the differences between these two contexts most salient?

**Predictors of Rate of Moral Development**

The analyses in this section examine parent versus peer interactions in relation to the rate of the target children’s moral reasoning development over the 4-year longitudinal interval. (These analyses were restricted to the 58 children with complete retest data.) The first step was to derive a score that would best represent children’s development over the five assessments of moral reasoning—to capture their rate of moral maturity. This was done with straight-line growth curve analysis, an approach with several advantages over simple difference scores or residualized change scores in representing development especially when multiwave data have been obtained (Willett, 1988). The approach involves estimating a curve to represent each child’s developmental trajectory over time, which yields an intercept (indicative of the child’s status on the variable) and, more importantly, a slope (indicative of rate of change). These curves were estimated by using hierarchical linear modeling (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) with time (in months) from the initial interview as the predictor variable and level of moral reasoning development (in WASs) as the dependent variable. Slopes were found to average .52 (SD = .71), which is indicative of typical rates of moral reasoning development for children over a 4-year longitudinal interval. (Note that the slope represents the rate of change in WASs per month. Thus, over a period of 48 months, development would average about a quarter of a stage, 25 WAS points.) A preliminary 2 (Gender) \( \times 2 \) (Grade: 5, 10) \( \times 2 \) (Family Structure: single versus two-parent) ANOVA revealed no differences in rate of change as a function of these variables. However, as would be expected, initially lower stage children evidenced steeper slopes, which is indicative of faster rates of development, \( r(56) = -.60, p < .001 \).

The second step in addressing this question involved representing each of the socialization contexts of interest in a way that provides a coherent portrayal of how a parent or a friend actually behaves. Thus, we are attempting to capture the quality of parents’ and peers’ interactions in a comprehensive and integrative way. Although it would be possible to examine separately the contribution of each of the variables to children’s rate of development, such an approach could be of limited value and probably misinformative because the interrelation of these variables has been shown to be significant (e.g., Walker & Taylor, 1991, found that moral reasoning disparity in itself was not predictive of children’s development, but it was predictive in the context of parental representational and supportive interactions). To illustrate, a challenge to a child’s viewpoint carries different meaning when it occurs in a situation where the dyad partner is generally coping (as reflected by objectivity, tolerance of ambiguity, and empathy) versus a situation where the partner is ego-defending (as reflected by rationalization, doubt, and regression). Thus, the analytic strategy adopted here (following Powers, 1983, and Walker & Taylor, 1991, for example) was hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA), a more holistic and phenomenological approach that generates discrete clusters or profiles of individuals on the basis of the relative relation of a set of variables to each other. In other words, the approach focuses on discerning different types of parents and different types of peers as indicated by their overall style of interactions. To examine both socialization and dilemma-discussion contexts, six cluster analyses were conducted: one for each of the three dilemma discussions (hypothetical, target, and partner) within each of the two sessions (parent/child and friend/child). The cluster analyses were conducted by using Ward’s method with squared Euclidean distances and were applied to the seven variables (which were first standardized so that no variable was given inordinate weight) that represent the quality of the dyad partner’s interactions: the
five DECS categories reflective of the partner’s verbal interactions (operational, representational, informative, supportive, and interfering), the partner’s overall ego functioning, and the disparity in level of moral reasoning between the partner and the child. Note that no definitive interpretive procedure exists for determining how many clusters to retain from the clustering procedure. A balance must be struck between maximizing interpretability with a reasonable number of clusters and minimizing the distance between adjacent cluster solutions in the agglomerative process. As will be evident, four-cluster solutions seemed to achieve this.

Preliminary $\chi^2$ analyses were conducted to examine the possible relationship between cluster groups within each context and both gender and age group of the target children, but none was revealed. Similarly, $\chi^2$ analyses were used to examine the possible relationship between cluster groups in the parent/child context and both gender of the parent and family structure, but again none was revealed.

Once the clusters for each of the six contexts were derived by using the HCA procedure, they were then used to predict the target children’s rate of moral reasoning development (slope) over the 4-year longitudinal interval. Differences in this criterion variable across cluster groups within each context were examined with Duncan’s multiple-comparison tests (with $\alpha = .05$). Significant differences in children’s development were revealed in three contexts: (1) the parent/child discussion of the target child’s dilemma, (2) the friend/child discussion of the hypothetical dilemma, and (3) the friend/child discussion of the target child’s dilemma. Thus, the central hypothesis of this study was supported: The rate of children’s development was indeed predicted by the quality of their parents’ and friends’ interactions in moral discussions. Note, however, that no significant differences in children’s initial level of moral reasoning across these clusters were found for any context. Thus, the behavior of parents and friends was found to be predictive of the target children’s rate of development over the longitudinal interval but to be unrelated to children’s contemporaneous level of development.

Additional 4 (Cluster groups) $\times$ 2 (Gender of target child) ANOVAs were conducted to examine the potential role of gender in children’s rate of development, but no main or interaction effects with gender were found. Similarly, within the parent/child context, the potential role of both gender of parent and family structure in children’s rate of development was examined, but again no main or interaction effects with these variables were revealed. Also note that in neither socialization context was the discussion of the partner’s dilemma (where the focus is on the other person) related to the child’s moral development. For the sake of economy of presentation, we will not discuss the clusters in those contexts that did not relate to children’s moral development.

For the parent/child target dilemma context, the multiple-comparison test indicated that Groups 1 and 4 differed significantly in rate of moral development with slopes of .16 and .81, respectively (the other two groups did not differ from any other and so are of minimal interest). Thus, Group 1 was essentially stagnant over the longitudinal interval whereas Group 4 evidenced a relatively high rate of growth (with an overall increase of about one half stage over the 4-year interval). Table 1a provides the standardized scores for the clustering variables across the cluster groups in this context. As is apparent from this table, in this context of discussing the target child’s moral conflict, the parents in Group 1 (where children evidenced minimal development) are best characterized as displaying a high level of interfering interactions combined with poor ego functioning. On the other hand, parents in Group 4 (where children evidenced substantial moral development) are characterized by quite a different pattern, one apparently conducive to development, involving a high level of representational interactions and a low level of informative interactions, combined with a high moral reasoning disparity (in this case, parents are presenting moral reasoning about one and a half stages higher than their child’s level).

For the friend/child hypothetical dilemma context, the multiple-comparison test indicated that Groups 1, 2, and 3 did not differ from each other but that all differed significantly from Group 4 in rate of moral development with slopes of .43, .44, .44, and 1.59, respectively. Thus, the first three groups evidenced moderate rates of development whereas the fourth group evidenced a high rate of development (with an overall increase of about one moral stage). Table 1b provides the standardized scores for the clustering variables across the cluster groups in this context. The friends in Group 1 can be characterized as displaying a high level of informative interactions combined with poor ego functioning when discussing a hypothetical dilemma. The friends in Group 2 (where the target children evidenced a similarly moderate rate of development) are also characterized by a relatively high level of informative interactions combined with supportive interactions. The friends in Group 3 are characterized by a high level of operational interactions and low levels of support. On the other hand, friends in Group 4 (where the target children evidenced a high rate of moral development) are characterized by a high level
of representational interactions, a low level of informative interactions and, surprisingly perhaps, a high level of interfering interactions.

Finally, for the friend/child target dilemma context, we found that Group 1 differed significantly from Groups 3 and 4 in rate of moral development with slopes of .01 versus .81 and .84, respectively (Group 2 did not differ from any other group and so is of minimal interest). Thus, Group 1 was essentially stagnant whereas Groups 3 and 4 evidenced a high rate of growth (with overall increases of about half a stage). Table 1c provides the standardized scores for the clustering variables across the cluster groups in this context. These data reveal that the friends in Group 1 (where the target children evidenced minimal development) can best be characterized in terms of their high level of operational interactions in the context of discussing the target child’s dilemma. On the other hand, the friends in Group 3 (where the target children evidenced a high rate of development) are characterized by relatively high levels of representational and supportive interactions; and the friends in Group 4 are also characterized by a high level of representational interactions but combined with interfering interactions (as was found in the friend/child hypothetical dilemma context).

Parent versus Peer Contexts

The analyses reported in this second section of the results are intended to help clarify the findings in the first section by more fully examining differences between parents and friends in the nature of their interactions. In other words, how should we characterize the nature of parent/child versus friend/child interactions in the context of the discussion of different types of moral conflicts? These analyses compared parents’ versus friends’ interactions with the target child across the three dilemma discussion contexts and as a function of the age group of the child and were conducted for verbal interactions as assessed by the DECS, overall ego functioning as assessed by the Ego Q-Sort, and moral reasoning disparity between the child and the dyad partner.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine the potential role of several design and demographic variables that were of minimal relevance for the central hypotheses of this study, including the order of the parent/child and friend/child sessions, the order of the three dilemmas within the dyadic discussion, gender, and family group (mothers from single-parent families, mothers and fathers from two-parent families—note that this variable combines parent gender and family structure). First, a 2 (Order of Sessions) × 6 (Order of Dilemmas) × 2 (Dyad Partner: parent, friend) × 3 (Dilemma Discussion: hypothetical, target child’s, partner’s) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted for each of the dependent variables examined in this section, but no main or interaction effects for either session or dilemma order were found. Second, a 2 (Dyad Partner) × 2 (Gender) × 3 (Dilemma Discussion) ANOVA was conducted for each of the de-

### Table 1 Standardized Scores for Clustering Variables across Cluster Groups in Different Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clustering Variables</th>
<th>Cluster Group</th>
<th>Operational</th>
<th>Representational</th>
<th>Informative</th>
<th>Supportive</th>
<th>Interfering</th>
<th>Ego Functioning</th>
<th>Moral Reasoning Disparity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Parent/child target dilemma context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (n = 9)</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>−.65</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>−2.02</td>
<td>−.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (n = 22)</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td>−.28</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>−.24</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>−.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (n = 20)</td>
<td>−.52</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>−.74</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>−.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (n = 7)</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>−1.16</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.38</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Friend/child hypothetical dilemma context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (n = 14)</td>
<td>−.49</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>−.37</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>−1.22</td>
<td>−.35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (n = 27)</td>
<td>−.42</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>−.28</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (n = 13)</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>−.24</td>
<td>−.43</td>
<td>−.58</td>
<td>−.35</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (n = 4)</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>−1.83</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>−.58</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Friend/child target dilemma context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (n = 4)</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>−.23</td>
<td>−1.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>−.30</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (n = 41)</td>
<td>−.22</td>
<td>−.42</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−.30</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 (n = 7)</td>
<td>−.16</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>−1.07</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>−.30</td>
<td>−.49</td>
<td>−.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (n = 6)</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>−1.18</td>
<td>−.62</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>.31</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
dependent variables, but no effects of gender were found. Finally, and for the parents only, a 3 (Family Group) × 3 (Dilemma Discussion) ANOVA was conducted for each of the dependent variables, but no main or interaction effects of family group were found. Thus, for the sake of economy of presentation, the following analyses collapsed over these design and demographic variables.

Verbal interactions. A 2 (Dyad Partner) × 2 (Grade of Target Child) × 3 (Dilemma Discussion) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted for each of the five DECS categories of verbal interactions. Percentage scores were used as the dependent variable. These analyses revealed significant main effects of dyad partner for the operational, representational, informative, and interfering categories (for F-ratios see Table 2). As shown in this table, these effects indicate that parents were more operational and representational in their interactions than were friends, whereas friends were more informative and interfering than were parents. There were no differences for the supportive category. Thus, parents clearly engender a more cognitively stimulating discussion as evidenced by their greater use of both the operational and representational categories, whereas friends engage in more simple sharing of information and opinions, without really dealing with what the other person is saying, as well as more often being interfering in their interactions.

The analyses also revealed significant main effects as a function of the target child’s age for both the operational and representational categories, F(1, 116) = 18.77 and 14.43, p < .001; although the effect for the representational category was qualified by an interaction with dyad partner, F(1, 116) = 13.48, p < .001. The main effect for the operational category indicates that interactions with grade 10 children were more operational than those with grade 5 children (Ms = 8.5% versus 4.6%). The locus of the interaction for the representational category was examined with analyses of simple main effects, which revealed that parents’ interactions with grade 5 children were more representational than those with grade 10 children (Ms = 29.0% versus 19.1%), whereas there were no differences in friends’ representational interactions as a function of the target child’s age. No significant differences were revealed for the other three DECS categories as a function of the target child’s age group.

Finally, the analyses revealed significant effects for type of dilemma for the operational, representational, and supportive categories (for F-ratios see Table 3). These effects were further examined with Duncan’s multiple-comparison tests. As illustrated in Table 3, the percentage of operational interactions on the hypothetical dilemma was greater than on either of the real-life ones, whereas interactions on the real-life dilemmas were more representational than on the hypothetical dilemma. Interactions on the target dilemma when the child was sharing his or her own conflict were more supportive than on either of the other two types of dilemmas. Thus, the hypothetical dilemma discussion was somewhat more cognitively sophisticated and perhaps more indicative of an intellectual exercise (as evidenced by the operational category, reflecting more critiques, counterconsiderations, and attempts at integration), whereas both real-life dilemmas elicited more of the representational style of asking questions and paraphrasing, probably reflecting the fact that participants were revealing the relational conflict they had with the other person.

Ego functioning. A 2 (Dyad Partner) × 2 (Grade of Target Child) × 3 (Dilemma Discussion) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted for ego functioning. The overall score was used as the dependent variable. A significant main effect for dyad partner was revealed, which indicated that parents evidenced greater overall ego coping in dealing with these moral conflicts than did friends (see Table 2), a pattern perhaps reflective of an underlying developmental trend. There was also a main effect of type of dilemma that was qualified by an interaction with the age group of the target child, F(2, 232) = 5.23, p < .01. The locus of this interaction was investigated with analyses of simple main effects and Duncan multiple-comparison tests. These analyses indicated that dilemma differences were found only for interactions with grade 10 target children where ego functioning was better for discussions of the hypothetical dilemma than either the target or partner dilemmas (Ms = 1.74 versus 1.23

| Table 2 Parents’ and Friends’ Interactions in the Dyadic Discussion Session |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|
|                                | Parents | Friends | F(1, 116) |
| DECS category (in %)            |       |       |          |
| Operational                    | 8.2 (5.9) | 4.9 (4.4) | 14.25*** |
| Representational                | 24.1 (10.2) | 8.6 (5.0) | 135.92*** |
| Informative                    | 55.2 (9.8) | 68.3 (9.7) | 52.81*** |
| Supportive                     | 6.7 (4.5) | 6.5 (3.4) | .06 |
| Interfering                    | .6 (1.3) | 2.8 (5.3) | 9.48** |
| Ego functioning                |        |       |          |
| (on −4 to +4 scale)            | 2.26 (1.50) | .78 (2.04) | 20.63*** |
| Moral reasoning disparity      |        |       |          |
| (in WAS points)                | 53.2 (45.2) | −4.6 (28.2) | 74.19*** |

Note: Standard deviations are indicated in parentheses.

**p < .01; ***p < .001.
and .93, respectively), a pattern consistent with the findings from the DECS analyses. Although on the hypothetical dilemma dyad partners held different opinions, the degree of personal investment was not the same as in direct interpersonal conflicts. Thus, the lower level of ego functioning on the actual dilemmas is not surprising given that participants were discussing moral conflicts that they had with each other.

**Moral reasoning disparity.** A 2 (Dyad Partner) × 2 (Grade of Target Child) × 3 (Dilemma Discussion) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted for moral reasoning disparity. The difference in level of moral reasoning between the target child and his/her discussion partner was used as the dependent variable. Thus, this analysis examined the extent of moral stage mismatch within actual moral discussions as a function of dyad partner and dilemma context. A significant main effect for dyad partner was revealed (see Table 2). Parent/child dyads evidenced a much greater disparity in moral reasoning across dilemma contexts than did friend/child dyads, with parents reasoning about one half stage higher than the child and with friends reasoning at the same level. This main effect was qualified by a Person × Grade interaction, $F(1, 116) = 6.42, p < .05$. The locus of this interaction was examined with analyses of simple main effects that revealed greater parent/child disparity for the younger grade 5 children than the older grade 10 children ($M$s = 66.1 versus 40.3 WAS points). Note that there were no differences in moral reasoning disparity across dilemma discussion contexts (see Table 3).

The previous analysis examined patterns in moral reasoning disparity in the dilemma discussions. That analysis revealed a considerable disparity between parents and children but none for friend/child dyads. This prompts the further question of the relation between participants’ moral reasoning performance in the discussion session and their moral reasoning competence as assessed by the MJI. Is there any indication that participants use a different level of reasoning when in actual moral discussion than when being interviewed under perhaps more optimal conditions? This issue was examined by a 2 (Dyad Partner) × 2 (Grade of Target Child) × 4 (Dilemma Context: MJI, hypothetical dilemma discussion, target dilemma discussion, partner dilemma discussion) mixed-model ANOVA using level of moral reasoning (as given by WASs) as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed the expected main effect of dyad partner, $F(1, 116) = 135.69, p < .001$, with parents consistently using a higher level of moral reasoning than friends. There was also a main effect of grade, $F(1, 116) = 35.82, p < .001$, with partners (both parents and friends) of grade 10 children evidencing a higher level of moral reasoning overall than partners of grade 5 children. Finally, there was a main effect of dilemma, $F(3, 348) = 20.66, p < .001$, which was qualified by a Dyad Partner × Dilemma interaction, $F(3, 348) = 5.91, p < .001$. The locus of this interaction was examined with analyses of simple main effects and multiple-comparison tests that revealed dilemma context differences for both parents and friends. Parents were found to evidence their highest level of moral reasoning on the MJI ($M = 360.8$), with a substantially lower level on the hypothetical dilemma discussion ($M = 327.1$) and a lower level still on the target and partner dilemma discussions ($M$s = 310.4 and 308.1). Thus, parents clearly accommodate to their child’s level of moral reasoning. They show a drop of about half a stage from the competence displayed on the MJI (but recall from the pre-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Interactions in the Dyadic Discussion Session as a Function of Type of Dilemma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dilemma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECS category (in %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interfering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego functioning (on −4 to +4 scale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral reasoning disparity (in WAS points)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Standard deviations are indicated in parentheses. Means in the same row with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ in the Duncan test. |
DISCUSSION

This research was intended as a response to the polarization among theoretical perspectives within moral psychology regarding effective socialization contexts for children’s moral reasoning development, with some theories emphasizing vertical relationships with parents and others emphasizing horizontal relationships with peers. Our hypothesis was that both socialization contexts are important for the development of moral maturity, simply because these relationships are highly significant in children’s lives and often entail interactions with obvious moral implications. However, given the profoundly different nature of these relationships on a variety of dimensions, the processes that impact on moral development should operate differently in stimulating growth. Our purpose was to examine, through a reasonably comprehensive assessment of the nature of parent and peer interactions, what it is about children’s socialization contexts that contributes to different developmental trajectories and outcomes in moral reasoning. Our basic hypothesis was supported by the findings of this study—the rate of children’s moral reasoning development over a 4-year longitudinal interval was predicted by the nature of both their parents’ and friends’ interactions in moral discussions, but the relevant dimensions differed between the two socialization contexts.

In addition to limitations of the sample, some limitations to the design of the present study should also be noted. First, the primary data for this study were based on dyadic interactions in the context of discussing moral conflicts. Dyadic moral discussions do not tap all relevant aspects of parental or peer interactions, although they are reasonably representative and significant. Many interactions, both in the family and peer context, often involve several people and may entail situations that do not have obvious moral overtones. Second, parents and peers are not the only socialization agents in children’s lives; thus, attention needs also to be given to the role of teachers, other adults, the media, and so on. Third, although gender of socialization agent (parent or friend) was not found to be a significant variable in this study, it has been significant in similar research (e.g., Pratt et al., 1999), which suggests the need for further exploration. Fourth, the index of moral development used here assessed reasoning only. Although Kohlberg’s Moral Judgment Interview is perhaps the standard measure and has been well-validated, it reflects the cognitive-developmental model’s rationalistic emphasis. Such an index of development does not tap other important aspects of moral functioning such as moral emo-
The two other categories of interactions assessed by the DECS yielded less consistent findings. For example, within the peer context, friends’ supportive interactions were sometimes associated with erable moral growth and sometimes with stagnation. Note, however, that this occurred in the context of different clusters of variables and appreciating the larger context is important. That is, supportive interactions combined with representational ones were predictive of development whereas supportive interactions combined with informative ones were not.

The other conundrum concerns the interfering category in that such interactions were associated with minimal development in the parent context (as also reported by Powers, 1983, and Walker & Taylor, 1991) whereas in the peer context interfering interactions were consistently associated with more rapid rates of moral development. The finding that interfering interactions in a peer context facilitates moral development seems, at first glance, to be counter-intuitive but can be interpreted as consistent with the Piagetian view that egalitarian relationships between friends allow the freer expression of conflict than do asymmetrical parent/child relationships (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Cooper, Carlson, Keller, Koch, & Spradling, 1991). Indeed, other empirical evidence indicates the facilitatory effect of such interactions among peers. Haan (1985) had friendship groups of university students participate in either hypothetical dilemma discussions or moral games. Students’ ego functioning was assessed as well as the extent of social disequilibrium (i.e., affective-social conflict) in their discussions or game playing. Haan reported that participants evidenced moral reasoning development from pre- to post-test if they showed high levels of ego coping and if they had encountered socially turbulent group experiences. These findings suggest that interfering interactions in a peer context may actually be reflective of the participants’ meaningful engagement with the conflict between them. The effect of peers’ management of conflicts, however, is still not well understood (Laursen, Hartup, & Koplas, 1996; Urberg, 1999).

In terms of the role of ego functioning, the findings of the cluster analyses were consistent in indicating that immature ego functioning interfered with children’s moral development, as hypothesized. Parents and peers who are ego defending do not provide either the stimulating interpersonal relationships or the climate to engage moral problems in a meaningful manner. Poor ego functioning entails rigidity, rationalizations, inability to tolerate ambiguity and complexity, insensitivity to others’ feelings and ideas, regression, denial, and the mishandling of emotions. Such behaviors do not appropriately scaffold the development of children’s moral thinking.

Regarding the issue of the optimal moral stage disparity for stimulating children’s development, we
found that a high stage disparity in the reasoning presented by parents was effective, consistent with the findings of Walker and Taylor (1991). The stimulation of higher level moral reasoning in the context of an appropriate style of interactions seems to be foundational for development. Note that in the peer context, moral reasoning disparity did not distinguish the clusters, perhaps reflective of the minimal disparity in moral reasoning typically found among peers (unlike the studies by Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983, and Taylor & Walker, 1997, where disparity in moral reasoning was a variable in their experimental designs).

Children's moral reasoning development was predicted not only as a function of parent versus peer socialization context but also as a function of the dilemma discussion context. We consistently found that when the discussion involved the target child's moral conflict, the partner's interactions were predictive of the child's rate of moral growth, whereas when the discussion involved the partner's conflict, interactions were unrelated to moral development. Although both are real-life moral conflicts that are reasonably representative of normal interactions and certainly are of relevance to the two parties involved, the target's dilemma has the explicit focus on the child's concerns whereas the partner's dilemma focuses more on the other person. This finding implies the importance of dealing with moral issues that are of direct consequence to the child in attempts to promote moral development. Interestingly, the friend/child discussion of a hypothetical moral dilemma was also predictive of children's moral development, consistent with the paradigmatic Kohlbergian approach to moral education (although more recent formulations of Kohlberg's approach recommend not only the discussion of hypothetical dilemmas but also actual moral and political problems involved in student democratic self-governance and community building; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Perhaps among peers interactions around such hypothetical issues are conducive to moral rethinking and development whereas in adult/child contexts, the considerable disparity in intellectual resources interferes with children's engagement with the moral problem.

In understanding the differing impact of parent versus peer contexts, comparing the nature of their interactions is instructive. In terms of verbal interactions, parents provided a more cognitively stimulating environment by relying on more operational and representational behaviors than did friends. This is reflective of adults' higher level of cognitive functioning and the leadership position they frequently assume in discussions. Friends engaged in more simple sharing of information (without dealing as much with the other's reasoning), a finding that differs from that reported by Kruger and Tomasello (1986), although they used a somewhat different coding of transactive dialogue behavior. Friends were also more likely to engage in interfering behaviors than were parents, perhaps reflecting children's lower level of concern about appropriate behavior in such contexts. This difference is similarly evidenced in ego functioning with parents displaying higher levels of coping than did friends. The findings of the present study suggest that affective conflict has quite different meanings in parent/child versus peer/child contexts. We also found evidence that interactions change from late childhood to midadolescence. Interactions with older children were more cognitively sophisticated (as evidenced by operational interactions), whereas parents' interactions with younger children were more representational, indicative of parents' attempts to elicit and to understand the younger children's reasoning.

In summary, then, the findings of this study challenge the polarization among theoretical perspectives in moral psychology by demonstrating that both vertical parent/child and horizontal peer relationships have a role to play in children's developing moral maturity. Both of these types of relationships are highly significant in children's lives and frequently entail moral concerns—as the participants in this study readily revealed. However, these relationships evidently impact children in rather different ways. Further research along these lines is clearly warranted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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