Chapter 2

Cognitive Structure of Moral Reasoning, Development, and Evolution With Age and Pathology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents research on moral judgment from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day. First, the authors will present the contribution of Piaget and Kohlberg’s work on moral development from childhood to adulthood as well as the work of Gilligan on moral orientation and the difference observed between men and women. Then, the authors will analyze underlying structures of moral judgment in the light of the Dual Process Theory with two systems: system 1: quick, deontological, emotional, intuitive, automatic, and system 2: slow, utilitarian, rational, controlled, involved in human reasoning. Finally, the model of Dual Process Theory will be confronted with data from moral judgment experiments, run on elderly adults with Alzheimer’s disease, teenagers with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and children and teenagers with intellectual disability in order to understand how cognitive impairment affects the structures and components of moral judgment.

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INTRODUCTION

Social interactions with others play a crucial role in child development. Through social interactions, children begin to establish a sense of “self” and to learn what others expect from them. When playing with others, children learn appropriate social behaviors, such as sharing, cooperating, and respecting the property of others. Social interactions in the early years enhance not only cognitive development but also moral reasoning, perspective taking of others and prosocial behaviors. Children learn social rules and need to know what is allowed and forbidden in the group they belong to in order to fit in successfully.

In this chapter we will chronologically investigate the different aspects of moral judgment and moral reasoning through the following authors: Piaget, Kohlberg and Gilligan who are considered as the pioneers of moral reasoning research. We will first highlight their contributions in the understanding of moral reasoning. Then we will focus on the recent theory of dual system theory which we will use to explain the cognitive structures of moral judgment and their evolution with ageing and mental disorders.

PIONEER WORK ON MORAL REASONING

Piaget’s Theory

In studying moral reasoning through “rule games” with children, Piaget (1932) distinguished three stages in children’s awareness of rules related to their age: “pre-moral judgment” (up to 4-5 y/o, in which rules cannot be understood); “moral realism” (from 5 to 10 y/o, in which rules are seen as coming from a higher authority and cannot be changed); and a “moral subjectivism”, (after 10 years old, in which rules are seen as mutually agreed by the players, and can be changed through mutual consent). Cognitive development leads to the decline of egocentrism and the growth of perspective taking of others. Consequently, the unilateral respect of the higher authority (usually an adult), evolves into an agreement in which equality between peers and an autonomous morality of reciprocity prevail. In a further study of moral reasoning, Piaget asked children to judge within the context of a story, the behaviour of a person according to his intent and the consequence of his action. Children had to give a verbal explanation of their judgment. Piaget’s results showed that before 10 years old children judge on the basis of the consequence...
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