MOSAIC 2005 CONFERENCE RESEARCH REVIEW

Current research on moral education and development in Europe

The Moral and Social Action Interdisciplinary Colloquium (MOSAIC) is an international multidisciplinary network of scholars working within the fields of the philosophy, psychology and sociology of moral development, moral education and moral thought. MOSAIC runs an annual conference, traditionally in June or July. This conference attracts an international mix of doctoral students, early career researchers and more established academics. The theme of the 2005 conference, held at the Universität Konstanz in Germany, was the moral and religious challenges facing education in Europe. The programme was diverse, with papers covering topics as varied as values education, religious orientation, morality across cultures, measuring morality, individual differences and moral domains. The inaugural lecture, delivered by Reinhard Hesse of the Pedagogical University of Freiburg, Switzerland, discussed how global changes impact on ethical reasoning and how, in an age of nuclear arsenals, ethics and science are welded together. He concluded that individuals must do all they can to sustain the globe and change destructive human urges.

This research review aims to showcase some of the research presented at this MOSAIC conference. A selection of seven abstracts extended and edited to form summaries demonstrates the varied research in the fields of moral development, moral education and moral thought currently being undertaken by MOSAIC members. These provide a resource for those involved in, or who intend to embark on, related work.

The first summary, from Mudje Koca of Liverpool Hope University, UK, is concerned with the implicit barriers faced by university students living with a disability. The next two summaries explore the challenges ethno-religious conflict pose for moral development. Marijana Handziska of Ss Cyril & Methodius University, Republic of Macedonia, focused on the impact that living during a period of political instability in the Republic of Macedonia had on the moral competence of Macedonian adolescents, whilst I explored how differences in the intensity of ethno-political conflicts impact on moral maturity. Both studies illustrated the negative and regressive impact political violence has on moral development. Sieglinde Weyringer and Jean-Luc Patry of the University of Salzburg, Austria, presented a values education programme being pioneered in Austria. Georg Lind, from the University of Konstanz, Germany, reflected on the 30th anniversary of the Moral Judgment Test (MJT; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985) by presenting the findings from 17 validation studies. The presentation illustrated the development of
the MJT and the processes involved in validation, concluding that the findings demonstrated both the measure’s cross-cultural validity and the universality of aspects of cognitive-developmental theory. Zsuzsanna Vajda and Szabolcs Hajnal of Szeged University, Hungary, reviewed moral domain theory (see Turiel, 1998), exploring how the antecedents, consequences and target of moral transgressions need to be considered when explaining moral judgements. The final summary explores individual differences in moral reasoning, with a focus on politicians. Aleksandra Cislak from the Warsaw School of Social Psychology, Poland, conducted three experiments to examine the role of self-interest in the ascription of morality and the resulting perception of political candidates in Poland.

Selected summaries

*The problems faced by disabled students in higher education: an ethical perspective*
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This paper discussed from an ethical perspective the barriers faced by students living with a disability who enter and study in higher education in the UK. An ethical analysis of the challenges faced by students with disability in higher education is necessary as access to the university is not only limited by physical access; it is also restricted by academic and psychosocial factors. Delaying or denying a student’s application on the basis of his or her disability is deemed illegal according to the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 (Great Britain Parliament House of Commons, 1995) and viewed as unethical. However, this delaying or denying process can sometimes be implicit, with barriers being raised through negative attitudes, ignorance and prejudice (Ash et al., 1997). The paper explored four key topics. First, the paper discussed the social model of disability, which argues that people become disabled because their needs are not met by the society; for example, an inability to speak is an impairment, but an inability to communicate because appropriate technical aids are not available is a disability (Morris, 1993). Second, issues around the limits of confidentiality and who sets the boundaries of confidentiality were discussed. Third, the paper explored the innate conflict faced by support workers and disability coordinators, who act as advocates for the student but are university employees. Fourth, the implications of staff, student and societal assumptions about current educational capacity and the potential capacity of students with disability were explored and illustrated through case studies. The paper concluded by suggesting practical solutions to these ethical issues.

*The moral judgement competence of adolescents in the Republic of Macedonia in the case of transgression towards state symbols*
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This study investigated how capacity for moral reasoning is affected when Macedonian students reason about situations of aggression towards state symbols
of the Republic of Macedonia, in contrast to their level of reasoning on neutral moral tasks, during a period of civil upheaval. State symbols (coat of arms, flag and national anthem) are not given in perpetuity. They are a result of a societal agreement. State symbols can be changed. Their important and basic function is to enable the citizens of one state to have at least a minimal identification with the legitimate community. Hostility towards state symbols can be interpreted as an attack on ideas and beliefs behind the symbols (Prencipe & Helvig, 1999). Moral reasoning involved in the case of an act denoting violence against state symbols has not been investigated in detail. The flag, the anthem and the coat of arms are state symbols that represent the people of one nation, including their collective goals and ideals. Violence against them (setting on fire, trampling and spitting on the flag, failing to play the national anthem during state holidays, and so on) is an act of political protest and represents a symbolic attack on the ideas, the history and the policy of the state (Prencipe & Helvig, 1999). The Republic of Macedonia is a relatively young state, and the symbols of the state are contested, both nationally and internationally.

The study employed the Moral Judgment Test (MJT; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985) validated for use in Macedonia and a Redrafted-MJT (RMJT), which comprises two moral tasks based on actual situations of transgression against the Macedonian flag. These measures were supplemented by a questionnaire measuring attitudes towards the Macedonian State and the future of the Republic of Macedonia. All the measures were administered to 62 Macedonian adolescents during a period of political instability in the Republic of Macedonia.

The findings indicated that Macedonian adolescents had significantly lower levels of moral competence on the RMJT moral tasks than on the regular MJT moral dilemmas. These results suggest that reasoning about socio-political issues at a time of political crisis had a negative impact on moral competence. The adolescents also reported feeling unsafe and that the State of Macedonia, to which they felt attached, had no future. The results illustrate the negative impact political violence, or the threat of political violence has on socio-moral reasoning. The results were also discussed in relation to Maslow's (1943) pyramid of needs and how the need for safety and security overrides other moral debates.

Moral reasoning among Nigerian and Northern Irish children: the impact of political conflict
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Northern Ireland and Nigeria have been plagued by decades of inter-ethnic strife. In Nigeria there has been conflict between Christians and Muslims. In Northern Ireland the conflict is between Catholics and Protestants. It has been argued that growing up in a society in political turmoil will cause a delay or decline in moral reasoning (Fields, 1973; Punamaki, 1987). However, it needs to be remembered that no two conflicts are the same: conflicts are dynamically different, with varying degrees of intensity; and the conflict in Northern Ireland is much less violent than
the conflict in Nigeria (Darby, 1997). Previous research in Northern Ireland (Ferguson & Cairns, 1996) indicated that living in areas exposed to higher levels of ethno-political violence had an adverse effect on child and adolescent moral reasoning. The study reported here again focused on this issue and explored how the intensity of political conflict impacts on moral maturity for Nigerian and Northern Irish children.

The moral reasoning of 10- to 11-year-old Nigerian children \(n = 37\) was compared to children of the same age \(n = 48\) from Northern Ireland. The research employed the Sociomoral Reflection Measure-Short Form (SRM-SF; Gibbs et al., 1992) and assessed the measure’s usefulness for cross-cultural research. The results indicated that the Nigerian children scored significantly lower on the SRM-SF. The findings suggested that level of conflict intensity, coupled with unquestioning obedience to religious and external authority, contributed to lower levels of moral reasoning among Nigerian children, especially in relation to concepts of law and legal justice, in comparison to their Northern Irish peers. The conclusion also noted that the SRM-SF performed suitably in this study, suggesting that the measure is appropriate for further non-Western research, particularly with child samples.

Values and Knowledge Education (VaKE) – can they be combined? Concepts, philosophical bases, experiences and evaluation
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This paper described an evaluation of a classroom-based values education programme developed at the University of Salzburg. Since the recent enlargement of the European Union, the European Community has placed an emphasis on the discussion of shared values. Values are a matter of high concern for teachers. But teachers often complain about the lack of time available to integrate values education as a compulsory content of their normal lessons.

VaKE (Values and Knowledge Education; see Patry, 2002) is a didactical approach, which tries to combine knowledge acquisition and value education. Kohlberg’s (1984) theory of moral development and Glasersfeld’s (1995) theory of constructivism formed the theoretical basis. In practice VaKE is based around dilemma discussion. A dilemma is presented and discussed, the students recognise that their knowledge is not sufficient to argue competently; they search for necessary information and proceed to a dilemma discussion on a higher level. In this setting the learning process is part of the students’ own responsibility; they have to create their knowledge basis according to the challenge presented in the discussion. Learning becomes an active process, because the acquired knowledge will be tested for its viability.

The VaKE approach has been used in several learning environments, for example in the regular classroom, in a workshop during a summer academy and in a central-European summer camp for gifted students from seven different countries. This camp offered five workshops with different topics: European values
(civil rights; history (French revolution); science (cloning of human beings); communication (radio frequency information technology technique); and the baselines for activities of the International Committee of the Red Cross (interventions in a country at war).

All the lessons and workshops were evaluated using questionnaires, socio-graphics analyses, and the lesson interruption method (a special observation technique (Patry, 1997)). The results of the analyses of the dependent variables which were assessed were presented and discussed, with particular emphasis on ethical discourse, on constructivist learning, and on the knowledge acquired by learners and applied in values discourse. The presentation also dealt with the appropriateness of this approach for moral education within regular classrooms.

Cross-cultural validity of the Moral Judgment Test (MJT): findings from 17 validation studies
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The Moral Judgment Test (MJT; Lind & Wakenhut, 1985) was developed 30 years ago to assess moral attitudes and moral judgement competence of university students in five European countries: Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Poland and (the former) Yugoslavia. Rigorous validation procedures have been implemented to make sure that the MJT has the same meaning for the participants in these countries and to allow researchers to draw safe conclusions from comparisons of the data. The validity of the MJT has been tested, not only by checking on its semantic equivalence by careful translations but also by analysing its pragmatic equivalence using three empirical criteria derived from theory and research: (a) Preference Hierarchy (Rest, 1969); (b) Affective-cognitive Parallelism (Piaget, 1976); and (c) Quasi-simplex Structure (Kohlberg, 1958). In addition, the MJT has been translated into 25 languages and employed in even more countries and cultures. Findings from transcultural validity studies on 17 different language versions of the MJT were presented. The findings showed that all new versions fulfilled these three criteria and can be regarded as cross-culturally valid, enabling use in cross-cultural research. Moreover, these findings support, in an unprecedented way, the universal validity of these three assumptions of cognitive-developmental theory.

The effect of context on moral judgements
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This paper presented empirical research on moral judgement. The research explored socio-moral domain theory, focusing not only on the result but also on the process of moral thinking. Socio-moral domain theory was developed at the end of the 1970s by members of Kohlberg’s school (see Turiel, 1998). According to this theory, moral judgement (as opposed to interpretation of conventions) is based upon an innate
sensitivity to moral transgression. This is the reason why, from a very early age, children can make a distinction between moral and conventional issues.

However, the authors argued that socio-moral domain theory does not have enough interpretative power to explain the process of making moral judgements. The research aimed to discover some details about the process of moral judgement and its background in rational thinking. It was assumed that besides transgression itself, attributes of the context have an effect on the evaluation of the transgression’s seriousness and moral character. By the context was meant antecedents (motives of the transgressor and other circumstances) and the final consequence of the action. A second assumption was that people take those transgressions which are directed against another person more seriously than those which are not directed to a living person but are against law or authorities. Moral dilemmas based on Piaget’s stories were presented to four groups of young adults. Participants were asked to rank different sets of dilemmas by the seriousness of transgression. In the dilemmas presented the transgressions were identical but the antecedents and consequences were different.

The results mostly supported the hypotheses and indicated that, when people make judgements about the seriousness of transgression, they take into consideration both the antecedents and the consequences. The research showed that moral thinking has a complex, logical character and helped to illuminate understanding the difference between child and adult moral judgement.

The role of self-interest in moral ascriptions and political perceptions
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Three experimental studies examined the role of self-interest in morality ascription and political perception. Despite the data confirming the potential of self-interest in shaping human judgements and decisions, the role of self-interest in social cognition seems to have been ignored or disregarded as a factor involved in influencing social judgement. Yet research has indicated the crucial role self-interest plays in forming attitudes toward social and political issues. For instance, Rasinski and Tyler (1988) demonstrated that in the 1984 US presidential election voting preferences depended on voters’ concerns about the candidates’ ability to benefit them, as well as on their judgements of the procedural (but not distributive) fairness of the candidates. The author built on this research and presented the argument that self-interest is a prominent factor shaping interpersonal attitudes, via morality ascriptions. In the present work these findings were applied to clarify certain phenomena, namely the importance of self interest, perceived competence and perceived morality in the field of political perception and voting preferences in contemporary Poland.

In the first experiment, pensioners (n=82) and university students (n=80) were provided with information indicating that a politician who was running for election was either competent or incompetent and was promoting a political programme that would either be beneficial or harmful to the interests of pensioners. The results
directly indicated that self-interest affects voting intentions and perceptions of the political candidate. Also, when the politician’s actions were beneficial to self-interest, the politician was perceived as more moral and vice versa.

In the second experimental study, 133 university students were provided with information indicating that the actions of a prospective political candidate would either be harmful or beneficial to his own self-interest or the self-interests of the voter. This experiment confirmed the findings of the first experiment, and the findings further demonstrated that politicians who served their own interests were viewed as more competent, while political candidates who served the voter’s self-interests were perceived as more moral.

In the third experiment, three university students (n=103) examined cases of moral norm-breaking which either harmed or benefited their self-interest. The findings demonstrated the influence of self-interest versus norm maintenance on the moral appraisal of others. The results indicated that those who maintained moral norms were perceived as moral, while those who chose to break the rules were perceived as immoral and were less liked. However there were a number of paradoxes. The broader implications of these findings were discussed, especially in relation to the social challenges they present to potential political candidates.

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References


