

Identity Development in Gifted Children: Moral Sensitivity

Abstract

Starting from an early age, many gifted children show evidence of moral sensitivity. These children tend to care about others, want to relieve pain and suffering or show advanced ability to think about such abstract ideas as justice and fairness. The beginnings of moral sensitivity are found in the development of empathy between child and care-taking parent. This is also the basis of identity formation and development of the self. This article also includes a discussion of how the phenomenon of asynchrony manifests in moral development of gifted children and the paradigms these children develop to give form to their moral concerns.

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Manuscript submitted January, 1997.

Revision accepted September, 1997.

When Rorey was six, he befriended Carl, age twelve, who was developmentally disabled. Other children teased and tormented Carl, especially Todd. Rorey stood up to these tormentors, though Todd was twice his age and size. This so surprised Todd that he stopped teasing Carl. When asked why he had helped Carl, Rorey stated he knew that Carl needed a friend, and it was the right thing to do to be his friend and defend him. He felt teasing others was wrong. He never engaged in such behavior himself, even later in the elementary years when teasing is a game most boys play.

On a shopping expedition, three-year-old Crissy told her mother that she did not need any new clothes. She also would not allow her mother to buy her toys even though her mother had planned several purchases with money Crissy had recently received from relatives. The only purchase Crissy would allow that day was a pair of shoes since she had outgrown her old ones. Instead, she wanted the money to be given to the poor.

Both Rorey and Crissy are gifted children with a high degree of sensitivity to moral issues. In these examples both children exhibit empathy for others and incorporate that empathy into moral choices. The literature suggests that, starting from an early age, many gifted children show evidence of sensitivity about moral concerns in their empathy for others, compassionate responses to the plight of others, idealism, concern about world issues, and in their advanced understanding and judgment of moral issues (Galbraith, 1985; Roeper, 1988; Silverman, 1993, 1994). Roeper (1995), for example, described her experiences with young gifted children of preschool age who comforted others upset over separation from parents. The consoling child often described an awareness of knowing how others felt based on remembering how he or she had felt previously.

Sensitivity to moral issues was noted in gifted children as far back as Terman's (1925) studies. These early studies showed gifted children to be advanced in trustworthiness and moral stability. Hollingworth (1942) gave many examples of early moral awareness, including a boy of nine who "wept bitterly at how the North taxed the South after the Civil War," (p. 281). She saw this as an example of how good and evil in the abstract come to be troublesome for exceptionally gifted children. Hollingworth also mentioned specific traits of character related to moral development. Child D was noted to show a refusal to lie, loyalty to standards once adopted, readiness to admit to just criticisms, unselfishness and amiability (p. 121).

Following Hollingworth (1942), contemporary writers also mentioned concern about moral issues as important for the gifted from an early age. Gross' (1993) studies of children with IQ's over 160 found them far above age peers in conceptualization of fairness, justice, responsibility for self and responsibility towards others. Silverman (1994) suggested advanced moral sensitivity is an essential feature of being gifted, and described a number of unusually compassionate children who were intensely aware of world issues and the feelings of others.

A number of writers have shown advanced development in making moral judgments for gifted children when compared to age peers. On the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (Rest, 1979), based on Kohlberg's premises, Janos and Robinson (1985) compared radically accelerated college students and two groups of highly gifted high school students with a group of typical undergraduate college students. They found the three groups of highly gifted students scored higher on the DIT, thus exhibiting higher levels of moral reasoning and judgment. Howard-Hamilton (1994) found that gifted high school students scored well above the norm for age peers on the DIT. Gross (1993) found that two of her exceptionally gifted students, at age twelve, scored above the levels of college students.

Theories of Moral Development

Evaluating theories of moral development is difficult due to lack of a consistent definition. For some, moral development is seen principally as ability to reason about universal principles of justice and fairness (moral judgment). For others, it is a matter of ability to empathize with and act to alleviate others' suffering (compassion). Both reasoning and compassion are necessary in formulating moral actions; however, it is the relative importance of each that distinguishes different theories.

Two of the main modern theories of moral development, Kohlberg's (1984) and Gilligan's (1982), are based on long standing, underlying philosophical arguments about the basis of moral development. Each is a stage theory in which people develop from one stage to the next as they grow in ability to make complex judgments. Where the theories differ is on how people make judgments.

Kohlberg's (1984) theory focuses more on the use of reason to draw conclusions about what ought to be done to achieve justice and fairness in a particular situation. Altruism, compassion and empathy are less important than principles of justice, and are not the main part of the reasoned process of coming to moral decisions. The moral reasoner is one who knows that a moral decision is required, understands that principles need to be applied universally, thinks of the greatest good for the most people, and then makes a decision based on abstract principles of justice and fairness. Kohlberg's theory follows Piaget's and Inhelder's (1969) thinking about the stages of mental development. Because Kohlberg's (1984) theory is based on the ability to reason abstractly, young children are not seen as being able to reason about moral issues yet; they are pre-moral.

Another major avenue of exploration of moral issues is based on altruism. Modern philosophers such as Blum (1987) and Matthews (1994) suggested that childhood responsiveness to others is a primary moral characteristic. Responsiveness requires both a cognitive and affective grasp of a situation. It does not require true empathy yet, nor does it require that children be aware of why they act as they do, only that the act has been done. What is required for an act to be moral is a recognition of the emotions of the other, and of the action needed to change the situation. What changes from childhood to adulthood is the amount and type of experience the person brings to the situation. For example, the adult might offer advice the young child might not yet know about. This model of morality has some similarity to the model of care developed by Gilligan (1982). In Gilligan's model it is the interrelationships among people that are important, and these are based on empathic responses between people. Responding to another's pain or difficulty is the basis of moral action. This requires an empathic attitude to others, a sensitivity to others' needs, and a wish to act with these needs in mind. This type of thinking reflects sensitivity towards others rather than a focus on reasoning about what is a principled or unprincipled act.

While Kohlberg's (1984) theory has been directly tested with gifted children, especially through use of the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1979), there has been little direct application of Gilligan's (1982) theory to the gifted. Like many other researchers, Gilligan appears to use some data from gifted children, but does not distinguish between data obtained from gifted children and more average subjects. For example, an extensive study at the Emma Willard School illustrated the moral decisions made in the context of relationships with other girls (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1989). Many of the girls described appear to be quite gifted.

A third approach was suggested by Dabrowski whose work has been described and interpreted by Piechowski (1986; 1991). Dabrowski specifically studied gifted youth and adults and developed a theory of emotional development that was based on observations of his gifted subjects. Piechowski (1991), in interpreting the theory, noted that gifted

youth, like gifted adults, feel a deep longing for ideals in life, such as justice, fairness, honesty, and responsibility. Gifted children also expect that adults ought to be able to do something to right the wrongs of the world and may be profoundly disappointed by their lack of doing so.

Dabrowski's theory (Piechowski, 1986) does not specifically discuss young gifted children. Dabrowski focused on adolescents and adults; thus, his theory required both life experience and ability to evaluate concepts in order for people to develop further in emotional and moral complexity. Like the theories of Kohlberg (1984) and Gilligan (1982), Dabrowski's theory suggests stages of development (five), with growth towards an ideal of self-actualization in the final stage, realized by few. For young gifted children, the applicability of Dabrowski's theory lies in his description of exceptional emotional sensitivity and intensity that can accompany giftedness. As the child grows into adolescence and identity is formed through evaluation of personal values, the person may develop through Dabrowski's stages. Piechowski (1991) described a number of adolescents who appeared to show potential for the kind of inner growth in both emotional self-awareness and moral sensitivity described by Dabrowski's theory. For these adolescents, the development of self is accompanied throughout life by growth in moral sensitivity, integration of universal concepts of justice and fairness and universal compassion.

Early Attachment, Identity and Development of Morality

Development of sensitivity to moral issues depends on acquiring both a firm sense of self, and an understanding of mutuality in relationships with others. This is the case whether the focus is on reasoning right from wrong, or on the development of empathy and compassion in relationships with others. Both development of identity as a self, and of mutuality in relationships with others arise in the first year of life, and are related to the interactions between the infant and the primary caretaker. In fact, as Ainsworth (1969) and Stern (1985) have shown, it is the process of early attachment between mother and child that leads to the formation of identity. This occurs through the phenomenon of maternal attunement to the child's earliest emotional expressions, and mutual delight in the interactions between parent and child (Ainsworth, 1969). Not only does the baby need the care-taking parent's engagement in play, soothing, and understanding experience, but also in expanding emotional and social repertoires. Initially, it is the parent who responds, matching the baby's level of intensity, and tempo. Over time, the baby also contributes to the interaction by responding to the parent. As mutuality develops, the child and care-taking parent both experiment with variation and elaboration of the introduced behavior. Being responded to in a closely imitative manner, and developing the capacity to follow the parent's lead, allows the child to experience empathy. Feeling understood and having an influence on the parent then gives rise to the beginnings of an independent self (Ainsworth, 1969; Stern, 1985).

Highly gifted children who may require more intense stimulation from parents, more attention and involvement, may also require more intense early attunement. Anecdotal parent reports for more than 35 gifted children above IQ 170 suggest that for those children who appeared securely attached, early attunement was intensified around activities chosen by the child. One parent described the process as learning to listen to what her child was really asking when she made what seemed like overwhelming demands for attention.

During the process of early attachment, mutual attunement grows to become mutual empathy (Gilligan & Wiggins, 1987). First, the infant receives empathy from the parent. In the reciprocal interaction that develops between them, the child becomes attuned to the parent's feelings even though he or she is not yet able to label what the feelings are. By 12 months of age, the average child is able to detect the feelings of parents and respond to them. By 18 months of age, children are able to respond to feelings of siblings, friends and others. Hoffman (1994) argued that the experience of empathic feelings is important in the development of moral understanding. Parental explanations to children about the cause of others' distress, especially if accompanied with a strong affective component, are effective in promoting altruistic behavior in the children.

Within the care framework proposed by Gilligan (1982), justice is seen as involving the self as well as others within the circle of care. Thus, morality is seen as caring. In young children, the development of reciprocity in relationships thus marks the beginning of care, and the earliest development of morality (Gilligan and Wiggins, 1987). For example, Crissy, age four, would not allow adults to buy her many gifts. She told them their love was enough. Crissy regularly thought about the needs of others, from those who were close to her to the suffering people of the world. She gave

away many of her outgrown toys and clothes, and even gave treats away to other children.

To develop sensitivity to moral issues, children must also understand rules and standards. Dunn (1987) described young children's increasing understanding of social rules and explanations for consequences. During the second year of life, children regularly explored, experimented with, and violated rules. It was the emotional responsiveness of the parent, and the mutual interaction between parent and child that enabled children eventually to modify behavior and incorporate the standards within themselves (Kagan, 1981). The early empathic response of children to parental distress developed into responsiveness to parental disapproval and anger. Kagan (1984) stressed the importance of emotions in the development of moral standards; in fact, emotions are the basis for acquiring morality. Thus, the early maternal attunement described by Ainsworth (1969) and Stern (1985) is the basis for development of a personal identity, empathy for others and for development of a rules-based internal standard that becomes moral reasoning of right and wrong.

The Problem of Asynchrony

Gifted children tend to exhibit wide discrepancies in the development of intellectual, social, emotional, and physical areas (The Columbus Group, 1991). They may be many years above chronological age in intellectual reasoning, but closer to age peers in social and emotional functioning. Also, emotional and social maturity may vary with the situation and the participants. The same child who is empathic and giving on one occasion may be quite selfish and unconcerned on another. A child who may be able to reason at an exceptionally high level about moral issues may be no more able than age peers to resolve social situations in an equitable and mutual manner. Having the knowledge or the ability to reason is not the same as having the ability to make a good decision. Conversely, having ability to act with compassion or to make a moral stand about what is fair or just does not necessarily mean the child can articulate why he or she acted so.

A number of writers have noted the interplay between the asynchrony of gifted children's chronological age and advanced sensitivity to moral concerns. Webb, Meckstroth and Tolan (1982) discussed the differences between gifted children and age peers based on advanced moral development. Such advancement may cause stress because the child is likely to question and even challenge traditions and practices peers follow without question. Also young gifted children may not be ready to deal emotionally with the ideas they generate. Some try to assume adult responsibilities without the emotional maturity necessary yet to abide human fallibility, or to deal with the fact a problem may have no good solution.

Gross (1993) discussed the ramifications of being advanced in moral development. The children in her study showed more intense awareness in thinking and feeling which set them apart from age peers. For example, one boy's, Ian's, views of ethical and moral issues such as justice, fairness, personal responsibility were above high school level when he was 10 years old. Another child, Fred, who at age 12 scored as high as college students on the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1979), was teased and mocked for his advanced interests in psychology and philosophy. Many gifted children, from an early age, show a tendency to question rules they feel are unfair or unjust, not only with adults but also with peers. For example, Nicholas, age eight, was upset over how the boys at school treated each other. He complained about the unfairness they showed in choosing sides in games, in changing rules part way through and in not letting certain children play. Nicholas was usually welcome to play because he was a good player, but he chose not to play after several of the smaller boys were excluded. He and these boys decided to form their own games and allow anyone to play. This sort of challenge to the norms of his peer group worked for Nicholas because he was popular, but it may not for other gifted children.

Silverman (1994) suggested that the greater the moral sensitivity and asynchrony of gifted children, the more vulnerability they experience. Thus, very young, highly compassionate children are especially vulnerable when they express moral concerns about problems of the world. They risk being overwhelmed by the pain they feel since they have not yet developed effective ways to deal with strong emotional content. Also, they have to deal with adult reactions that may not meet their expectations. For example, children who want to help the poor and homeless by giving away possessions may not comprehend parents' reluctance to do so.

The Construction of Moral Paradigms

Because major theories of moral development do not view children as full moral participants, a more encompassing theory based on both knowledge and reason, and compassion and empathy, is needed. We might call this a theory of moral sensitivity to distinguish it from developmental theories that are age and stage based. It would include children who are aware of others' suffering, who worry about issues of world peace, human and animal rights, who are able to reason out moral conflicts in a more advanced and complex manner than age peers, and/or who are able to perform compassionate or principled actions even if they are unable to articulate the moral reasons for doing so. Silverman (1994) has described additional aspects of a theory of moral sensitivity for the gifted.

Matthews (1994) suggested five dimensions across which moral development may take place: development of paradigms, use of defining characteristics, range of cases applicable, adjudication of conflicting moral claims, and use of moral imagination. While Matthews' five dimensions were written with more average children in mind, they are applicable to gifted children. Indeed, many of the children described in his books were gifted (Matthews, personal communication, January 3, 1996).

Matthews' (1994) dimensions are important because they stress asynchronous development. Thus, children may not show equal development across all dimensions and will still perform moral acts. This is because none of the five dimensions is dependent on an earlier level of reasoning to be later replaced by more advanced reasoning; it is not a stage theory. Instead, over time, the original paradigm is kept while other paradigms are added as experience grows and refines reasoning.

Matthews (1994) argued that children's moral development takes place across these five dimensions because long before children have to deal with moral dilemmas such as described by Kohlberg (1984) or are asked to give a justification for how they resolved a dilemma, they may have strong empathic responses to victims of suffering or injustice. Children, in Matthews' (1994) view, from an early age start to develop a working understanding of central paradigms for terms of moral assessment such as what is moral or immoral, fair or unfair, just or unjust, caring or uncaring, honest or dishonest, truthful or lying, brave or cowardly.

The development of paradigms

For each term of moral assessment, there is at least one paradigm developed to understand it. Gifted children may be like age peers in developing rudimentary paradigms; however, they may also develop more paradigms about each term, or develop paradigms that are more sophisticated than those of age peers. An example of a rudimentary paradigm about fairness, commonly developed by children, is that each person gets an equal share of cookies. This remains a reliable paradigm of fairness at all ages, but other paradigms are added over time (Matthews, 1994). Tim, age four, with his pre-school playmates, worked out a means of sharing the one train set: all would take turns. To Tim, fairness meant taking turns, not necessarily of equal length. Nicholas, age eight, developed a paradigm about fairness that stated that no one should be left out of playground games. Tiffany, age nine, worried about the cliques in her class. She tried to make sense of why other girls thought these were acceptable. In Tiffany's paradigm, fairness meant exclusivity was wrong.

Use of defining characteristics

Each term of moral assessment has characteristics that define it. The child need not be able to define the term in words, but has a working model of what the term means. This central paradigm is then referred to as a comparison standard for specific situations that arise. A rudimentary definition of lying, for example, is that a lie is something that is not true. Later on, a child might add an aspect about intent to deceive or mislead others. Another aspect might consider others' feelings. A child may learn what a social lie is, or may decide to keep quiet rather than tell either a falsehood or a hurtful truth (Matthews, 1994). Andrew, age six, was often in trouble for his antics and mischievous behavior. Yet, when confronted with wrongdoing, Andrew never lied. He always admitted his culpability, and took the consequences. Andrew didn't mean to misbehave; he was very high-spirited, but he did know lying was wrong and refused to try to excuse his misbehavior with a lie.

Some gifted children find defining characteristics problematic because they see too many shades of meaning. These

children have trouble defining paradigms clearly because there seem to be so many exceptions and qualifications. They are always saying, “Yes, but...” to any attempt to clarify meaning. Some may avoid the problem of trying to define the subtlety of what is and what is not a lie by attempting to develop an absolute, fact-based truth. Only if things are verifiable, are they acceptable. Even tiny details need clarification, and these children are exceptionally precise, even correcting small errors. Examples can be found in Gross (1993).

Range of cases applicable

Each term of moral assessment has a range of cases for which application of the central paradigm is required. There are also exceptions and borderline cases, for example, the social lie or lying to save someone’s life (Matthews, 1994). For gifted children, the range of cases may be broader; they may need to resolve dilemmas that would never occur to age peers. For example, Louise, age 12, wondered if it was honest to say her science project was finished when she hadn’t put that much effort into it. When she received an A, she wondered if she had really cheated. Mike, age 10, decided it was a lie to pretend to go to sleep but then read with a flashlight under the covers for several hours. It wasn’t a lie though if he really tried to go to sleep, but could not.

Adjudication of conflicting moral claims

Each term of moral assessment requires a means of adjudicating apparently conflicting moral claims. For example, a lie can be wrong, but one’s duty if necessary to save a life (Matthews, 1994). This is Kohlberg’s (1984) view of moral development. Gifted children with advanced cognitive reasoning skills may also be advanced moral reasoners. For example, Bob, age eight, decided that teasing was a form of prejudice and, therefore, a form of injustice. Rorey, age six, stood up for Carl because he felt it was only fair to stand up for someone who could not defend himself.

Use of moral imagination

Each term of moral assessment requires use of moral imagination. This means the ability to feel empathy, to see another’s perspective, to want to alleviate pain and suffering. In Matthews’ (1994) dimension, capacity for moral imagination focuses on the ability to take another’s perspective. In this way, it is more similar to Gilligan’s (1982) theory.

Many gifted children use their moral imagination in making moral choices. Crissy, even at age three, had a sense of others’ suffering, enough to want to forego new clothes and toys for herself in order to give to the poor. Elise, at age three, comforted her brother, Seth, age eight, who was consumed by night fears. Elise told him that he had to have courage which she described as like putting a bandage on a cut. It still hurts, but one knows it will get better. Her comfort of Seth, and her definition of courage helped him to decrease his need for night-time visits from parents. Bob, age eight, decided that teasing was a form of injustice because it was based on prejudice. He felt the suffering of the children who could not help the traits about which they were taunted. This caused Bob to wonder why it was acceptable to tease about physical traits like weight when it was not acceptable to tease about race or religion.

The benefit of using a description of moral development like Matthews’ (1994) is that the asynchrony of gifted children makes sense. A parent or other helping adult can work with the child in the context of the paradigm the child offers at whatever the level of advancement. Thus, the child who is exception-ally compassionate at age 3 1/2 will have developed a paradigm about what caring means. The adult who can understand the validity of this paradigm, and its limitations, can help a child like Crissy explore her feelings in a safe environment, and help her find the means to perform a real helping act. For example, instead of only giving away her own outgrown clothes, Crissy’s parents can help her to understand the universality of suffering. They may also help her to join in with others who collect goods for the poor and allow her to see some of the social network that is in place, for example, soup kitchens, church clothing shops, etc. This might help Crissy feel that she does not have to carry the burden of helping others entirely herself.

The support that children find as they explore these issues allows them to set some boundaries on the pain suffered because of their exceptional moral imagination. In this way, parents provide the safe environment growing gifted children need to develop an identity as effective and compassionate people.

Conclusion

The early experience of empathy based on maternal attunement leads young children to develop both an independent identity and reciprocal relationships with others. In the first year of life, the basis for future development of both compassion and empathy is laid. In the second year of life the basis for applying rules to determine right and wrong is developed. These mutual pathways to moral sensitivity are the basis of becoming a moral self in adulthood. Nevertheless, gifted children also appear to show asynchrony in their development of these parallel paths. Some may show exceptionally early sensitivity to suffering while others may show unusual awareness of issues of justice and fairness. On the other hand, many gifted children show only average moral sensitivity, and there are some who appear to develop only rudimentary paradigms about ideas of fairness, justice and compassion well into adolescence.

Gifted children develop identity in the context of values and influences from others around them (Piechowski, 1991). The integration of particular values into the way people view themselves then determines how they will act. Thus, a child who was exceptionally kind and caring at age six may, because of the need to feel accepted by peers, at age twelve act quite differently. The values this child incorporates in adolescence will then determine if he or she continues to value peer acceptance or becomes more able to take an unpopular stand against popular opinion.

The asynchrony of gifted children, especially in the area of moral sensitivity, brings special issues to consider. These issues need to be resolved in order to develop good internal boundaries as well as appropriate interpersonal interactions. Thus, very sensitive gifted children need to learn to put limits on exposure to suffering, find ways to deal internally with pain, and learn what types of help are useful to offer others. Gifted children who are consumed with a need for fairness and justice have to resolve underlying conflict when others don't see things the same way or have different values. These gifted children need to learn to tolerate difference, suffer fools gladly (Hollingworth, 1942) and decide how and when to take unpopular stands for values they cherish.

All gifted children need opportunities to discuss ideas about the paradigms they develop around moral issues. Caring adults can help them to discover their own internal resources while providing the support they need to integrate reasoning and compassion into wise moral choice.

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Author Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the National Association for Gifted Children forty-third annual convention, Indianapolis, IN, Friday, November 1, 1996. In order to protect confidentiality, all names and identifying details have been changed for all examples used in this article. In some cases, children described are composites of several children; in other cases, parents have given permission for the description of their child.