

The Influential Factors of Children's Moral Emotions

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Abstract: Moral emotions affect people's behaviors, and children are at the age of advancing cognitive abilities as well as developing moral emotions. The review elaborated on the influencing factors of children's moral emotions from four perspectives: family, education, innate nature and interactions within moral emotions. Previous studies have found that family effects are inconsistent and need to be examined. The patterns of classrooms would make a difference, and methods aimed at nurturing children's moral emotions are approachable. Among innate natures, the effort to control their temperaments contributes to children's moral emotions. Apart from that, some moral emotions would promote or hamper others. This article provides a comprehensive review for understanding how children's moral emotions are influenced, which can help people attach importance to this aspect of child development and help explore further research.

Keywords: moral emotions, children, family, parenting styles

1. Introduction

Moral emotion attributions entail both cognitive and affective self-evaluative emotions, which associate them with moral action [1]. For children whose cognitions are consummating and whose values are being shaped, the development of moral emotions is of paramount importance because more and more research has revealed that children's moral states will predict their future dispositions [2, 3]. So, the process of how children's moral sense form and grow deserves to be scrutinized, as it was, and many researchers have analyzed the elements affecting children's morality development from different aspects, among whom Piaget made a great contribution and paved the way for the later explorations with his theory of moral development [4]. Through the method of indirect story, Piaget distinguished two levels of children's moral reasoning: heteronomous morality and autonomous morality [4]. The theory has been confirmed by many studies, which illustrated that young children in the early stages primarily care about the consequences of behaviors and link morality with punishment, while the older tend to take notice of the intentions as a sense of obligation sprouts from their willingness [5].

Inspired by Piaget and Kohlberg extended the scope of moral development to adolescents and elaborated on moral development, constructing three levels (preconventional morality, conventional morality, postconventional morality) and six stages of moral development [6]. In the process of moral development, moral emotions play an important role, and they are discovered to have interactions with other key factors, for instance, moral emotion attributions, moral cognition, moral self, moral motivation, moral standards, moral decisions and so on [1, 7]. The Happy Victimizer Phenomenon,

which refers to early school-aged children attributing happiness to the perpetrators, although these young children know the transgression is not right, provided a fertile ground for the explorations of children's moral emotions [8]. The malleability of children decides the importance of research about children's moral emotions.

To date, numerous studies have been devoted to children's moral emotions [2, 9, 10]. Among the various directions, the influencing factors as well as the effects of children's moral emotions on their future behavior are two main contents and the former, which serves as the base for the latter, is the center of the review. However, there are still large swaths remaining ambiguous or even untapped. There are still influencing factors waiting to be discovered, dug and verified. Apart from that, although various studies paid attention to the aspect mentioned above, they addressed the issue from their own distinctive perspective, which made the existing research flourishing but miscellaneous, devoid of a macro and general system. So, there is a need to sort out and summarize the previous studies about the influencing factors in the realm of children's moral emotions. The review was devoted to filling up the need with an innovative way of categorization and a relatively multifaceted summary, which spotlighted the copious directions, unsettled questions, and inconsistent results regarding the influential factors of the children's moral emotions. In this way, the review was expected to illuminate some recesses of this domain for further investigation.

2. Methods

The literature was collected from the database Google Scholar and CNKI. The primary terms included were: "children," "moral emotions," "family," "educational," "temperament," and "intelligence." The studies which met the following standards were selected: (1) mentioned at least one moral emotion; (2) entailed the exploration or the hypothesis of the cause of some moral emotions; (3) the object of the research or the writing object was children, except for some studies which were obviously applicable to people of all ages.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Definition

Moral emotions instruct people's evaluation of their behaviors and others' emotional states, which decides the characteristics of moral emotions: self-conscious, self-evaluative and other-oriented [1, 11]. These emotions will automatically and instantly evoke one's sense of punishment or reinforcement [1]. In this way, they will help people judge whether they behave in accordance with moral standards efficiently [12]. Although cognition is considered to be the basis of the production of moral emotions, moral emotions have something special about creating motivational forces [7]. Emotions are abstract, but they can significantly influence oneself and other people through actual behaviors. Moral emotions interact with behaviors in two ways: consequential and anticipatory [1]. As the name indicates, the former is produced after the behavior and may lead to moral emotion attributions to learn from the past emotional experience. The latter appears before the particular behavior, making some expectations and presupposing some outcomes [7]. In this way, the consequential emotions reflect the effect of the behaviors on the moral emotions, and the anticipatory emotions present the effect of moral emotions on the behaviors. Moreover, moral emotions are divided into prototypical negatively valenced emotions, which contain guilt, shame, and compassion, and prototypical positively valenced ones comprising pride, gratitude, and elevation [13, 14]. A more elaborated classification of moral emotions was achieved by Gray and Wegner, who introduced a two-dimensional space of morality [15]. In this way, moral emotions are categorized into four parts according to valence (harm and help) and the underlying dyadic structure (agent and patient) [15].

Different moral emotions will also exert some impacts on themselves. An empirical study testing 351 children aged from 10 to 14 found that empathy can be promoted by a strong sense of moral pride [30]. Moral pride, a self-centered emotion, will facilitate prosocial behaviors accompanied by empathy. Guilt showed a dependent function of inhibiting antisocial actions. The high levels of both guilt and empathy do not necessarily produce a high level of prosocial behaviors, but the low levels of both are related to the low level of antisocial actions [2]. Another study hypothesized the mutual influences of moral emotions based on the two-dimensional structures (help and harm, agent and patient). It claimed that the emotions which entail the same elements of the two dimensions will intensify each other; the emotions of one person comprising different elements in one dimension will exclude each other; the emotions of the agent will elicit the emotions of the patient and vice versa [15].

3.2. Influencing Factors of Children's Moral Emotion

3.2.1. Family

Children are at a tender age when many aspects are far-reaching for the future but immature currently, such as personality, habits, and values are developing and being shaped. The special stage decides the implications for the family. It is reasonable to imagine the effect of the family on children's moral emotions and it is general acknowledged that the investigations aimed at the function of the family when children's moral emotions are developing are meaningful. Some researchers have probed into the correlations between the elements from family and children's moral emotions, but the consequences are inconsistent. In this part, this article will review past studies and put forward some new ideas.

To uncover the effect of the parental support, a three-wave longitudinal study tracked the level of sympathy and the change in moral emotion attributions of a group of children from 6 to 9 [31]. The development trend defined three trajectory classes of sympathy (high-stable, average-increasing, low-stable) as well as three trajectory classes of moral emotion attributions (high-stable, increasing, decreasing). For both sympathy and moral emotion attributions, the high-stable class means the level is always high; the increasing (average-increasing) class means the level rises apparently. The low-stable sympathy means the level is constantly low during the three years, and the decreasing class of moral emotion attributions means the level declined over time. The research found some anticipated results: firstly, compared with the high-stable sympathy group, children who were unsatisfied with the support they had received from their family have more possibility to be in 2 other less sympathy classes; Secondly, children who shew a higher frequency in attributing causes according to moral principles are better supported by their parents than those whose moral emotion attributions were still developing; Third, parental support may facilitate the development of the combination of sympathy, moral emotion attributions and moral reasoning. Children reporting high parental support were prone to show a high level of all three moral aspects. However, there are also some unexpected results: the caregiver-reported support of low-stable or decreasing sympathy and moral emotion attributions group and that of two high-stable groups showed no significant difference, which meant the caregiver support might have little impact on children who have low-stable sympathy or decreasing moral emotion attributions. However, the small sample sizes made this finding open to examination [16,31].

By contrast, another study found that maternal disciplinary styles (warmth; reasoning) and social support make no contribution to children's moral emotion attributions. However, children's aggressive behaviors are related to them. As for how these 2 aspects affect children's aggression, little information was mentioned, and evidence is insufficient about whether moral reasoning plays a role in the connection between maternal treatment and children's aggression [9]. Apart from that, a study testing 81 elementary children (aged from 8 to 10) is devoted to exploring the effect of parental

practices on two specific moral emotions: guilt and shame. The results showed that parental induction practices where parents value reasoning would make a contribution to children's greater perspective-taking, sensitivity to others, and guilt development. Parental practices in which love withdraws, and coercive discipline dominates are found to hamper guilt development. The parental practices replete with coerciveness and devoid of love are not found to be related to shame proneness, which implies the frequency of these parental hash strategies and many other elements beyond the study may have an effect on the shame [17].

The first research disclosed that the children who showed low sympathy and decreasing moral emotion attributions were little influenced by their parents. The second research pronounced maternal practices would affect children but not by affecting children's moral emotion attributions. The third revealed that parental induction practices would help develop children's guilt. The results of these research are not consistent, but the inconsistency does not mean they contradict. Because the control variables and the irrelevant variables of every study are different, they may account for the divergent results, and the inconsistency actually implies that the different elements of the experimental settings are possible to affect children's moral emotions, but they are not given enough attention.

3.2.2. Educational Environment

It may seem that education overlaps with the factors from family because parental practices account for a large as well as important part of education. To distinguish each content, education here is designated as school education or education especially targeted at cultivating children's moral emotions.

A study took the exclusion of disabled children as a stimulus, testing moral emotions of children between 9 to 12 with different education patterns (exclusive and inclusive). It found that for the younger respondents, children who received inclusive education had a strong tendency to sympathize with the disabled and to think the exclusion due to one's disabilities is wrong. However, for the older children, the patterns of school education made no difference [18]. Some assumed explanations are mentioned: As children grow up, the increasing interactions with the environment outside the school may make up for what school education fails to promote [18]. And the advancement of social-cognitive will widen the scope children associate with moral emotions [19]. So, the incidents that can evoke their moral emotions are not confined to those similar to the previous experience [18]. The different results of the effect of classroom's patterns on the older and younger children indicated that the school's education should be prepared and designed more thoughtfully for the younger children.

Can moral emotions be acquired and cultivated by education? In view of the disappointing finding mentioned before that for some children, parental practices seem to be useless, the answer to this question may open another window.

Bajovic and Rizzo [20] introduced a new concept of the meta-moral cognition process, the process of being aware of one's own moral emotions, which serves as a mediator of the moral cognition and moral emotions. This meta-moral cognition process was viewed as a key factor affecting people's moral decisions and behaviors. According to the four parts of this process (informative knowledge, performative knowledge, self-regulatory knowledge, and provisional knowledge), the study conceived of four methods accessible for school education to build children's meta-moral cognitive abilities. The first one is called affective strategy, which is expected to promote informative and self-regulatory. It aims at creating a secure and welcoming environment for children to talk about their reactions related to morality. The second one is critical moral discourse which is expected to develop informative and performative knowledge. It encourages children's discussions of their different moral emotions. Connect and deconstruct is the next step, which is hoped to improve the perception of models in their mind as well as self-regulatory. It is devoted to developing children's round perspective of events. Last but not least, the strategy of moral reflection is designed to lead children

to review their physical and mental reactions in the past. This study did not mention whether these strategies are put into practice nor whether they are measured the exact effect. But the reasonable scenarios provided some directions for the factors affecting children's moral emotions. For a long time, moral emotions are considered as a spontaneous but susceptible development affected by the world passively. The study offered a new perspective that people can create some positive methods orienting morality actively to nurture children's moral emotions. In other words, instead of only figuring out what affects children's moral emotions, people can create some positive influential factors actively.

3.2.3. Personal Factors

Research focusing on the moral emotions of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) disclosed some affecting elements from the children themselves. It found that as the ASD children grew up, the signs of guilt and shame diminished, while for children without ASD, the relative signs showed stability [21]. ASD can be seen as an innate trait affecting the development of moral emotions. However, there are kinds of impairments underlying the disorder, which are related to moral emotions. These impairments cast light on some specific factors which may also affect the masses. The dropping of social interest and social attention may account for the decrease of guilt and shame during ASD children's growth [21-23]. The assumed reason is that children sense moral emotions spontaneously at the beginning [24]. When they get older, their moral emotions are more evoked by concern about others, such as others' feelings and appraisals [25]. The lack of social interest and social attention impedes the concern about others, so some moral emotions like guilt and shame are shut out of their world to some degree [21]. Theory-of-Mind ability is also a promising candidate for affecting moral emotions. However, the study only found it's related to the pride of ADS children. As for the common children and the negative moral emotions of children with ASD, Theory-of-Mind ability seems to have little impact [21]. Some assumptions tried to explain. The non-ASD children do not depend so much on the ToM ability to cope with social contact [26, 27], and ASD children lack the premise of recognising others' reactions which was partly due to the failure of the tests in the experiment to make them notice that they were evaluated by others [21]. Apart from that, more comprehensive measurements of ToM ability are needed [21].

Children's temperament and their moral emotions also exhibit positive relation. A study carried out to explore two temperaments: effortful control and impulsivity, and two negative moral emotions, guilt and shame. It found effortful control was positively related to guilt, which signals it can play a part in preventing behaviors against morality and promoting reparative behaviors. Impulsivity and guilt also showed a positive relation, but this related part of guilt was found to link with shame, and the sole guilt or the sole shame was found to be unrelated to impulsivity [17]. In line with this study, inhibitory control, viewed as a stable component of effortful control has the possibility to generate self-regulation, which is fundamental to moral emotions [17, 28]. The study verified the effect of temperaments on moral emotions again but from a more specific perspective.

Moral emotions are entwined with moral cognition and moral reasoning, both of which seem connected to intelligence. So, the effect of intelligence on moral emotions drew some researchers' attention. Research tested 129 elementary school-aged children who are between 6 to 10 years old. In the research, intelligence showed no association with moral emotions and other aspects of morality. If the measurements of variables and samples are reliable, it may be attributed to excessive intelligence, which has exceeded the level that is able to differentiate moral emotions [29].

4. Implications

The review elaborated on the influential factors of children's moral emotions from four perspectives. Given that what people acquire in their childhood will be fundamental to their later development and moral emotions are an important component of morality as well as one of the triggers for the behaviors, the review was trying to collate the previous studies in this domain, which compensated the lack of a systematic summary when much attention was paid to a particular factor. The review not only provided a relatively round perspective regarding the influential factors of children's moral emotions, which helps people command a general view of these factors efficiently, but also made a few comparisons of different studies, such as the inconsistent results of the family factors and different directions within the educational factors, which widen the thoughts about the inconsistency and educational effects. Although much research has been devoted to this domain, there are still various unanswered questions, which were also included in this review. So, the review also sorted out these questions and put them on the stage, pointing out the directions for future research.

5. Conclusion

The review summarized the influential factors of children's moral emotions. By virtue of the method of literature review, a relative round perspective about the influential factors was achieved, and the particular results of these factors were reached. These factors were classified as the effect of family, education environment, and personal factors. From the perspective of family, the existing results are inconsistent. In one study, parental support was found to promote the development of the common children's moral emotions. Another study showed no effect of maternal styles (warmth and reasoning) on children's moral emotions. However, a study indicated that parental induction practices with love would facilitate the development of children's guilt. As for education, inclusive education was found to help develop younger children's sympathy. Apart from that, some forms of cultivating children's moral emotions have been proposed. When it comes to personal factors, social interest, social attention, and temperament (effortful control) have a relation to children's moral emotions. The intelligence and the ToM ability were found to have little impact. The review is conducive to organizing the various recent research about the influential factors of children's moral emotions and providing a relatively comprehensive system, which helps people understand and attach importance to this aspect and paves the way for further exploring because there are still some unconfirmed results.

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