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and children's perceptions of adult rule justifications

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## Abstract

The style of parenting of 100 children (mean age 11 years, 5 months) was established according to Baumrind's typology. Children were asked to indicate what they thought an adult would say to justify a moral rule in five different scenarios. Results indicated that parenting style did not relate to the number of justifications that children thought adults would produce but did affect the types of justifications they thought adults would give. Children of authoritative parents thought that adults would use more justifications based on reciprocity or equality in social relations than children of authoritarian parents. The results suggest that children of authoritative parents do not perceive adults to offer a more discursive moral atmosphere than children of other parents do; rather these children are more likely than others to think that adults will justify moral rules specifically in terms of equality in social relations. An unexpected finding was that children of permissive parents tended to judge that adults would legitimise judgements by pointing to the consequences of action for other people.

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Developmental research has consistently found a link between different styles of parenting and development in children's moral reasoning (Walker & Taylor, 1991). This work indicates that forms of parenting that both enforce moral rules and encourage the child's involvement in discussion are associated with developmental benefits (e.g. Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967; Smetana, 1995). Although the connection between parenting style and moral development has been demonstrated by empirical research, establishing with certainty *why* such a connection exists is more problematic. And whilst a parent is clearly not the only socialising agent in a child's development, it would appear that parents do have some effect on their offspring's moral behaviour because we find consistent correlations between parenting style and a host of outcomes in childhood and through to adolescence (Janssens, Janssens & Gerris, 1992).

There also remains a question as to *how* parental influence works. Classic social learning accounts characterise moral development as a result of the internalisation of adult moral rules through rewards and punishments or observational learning (see Leman, 2001). Yet this form of social learning would appear to run counter to the findings relating to parenting style – where the imposition of parental authority is a necessary but not sufficient factor for promoting moral reasoning (Baumrind, 1991). Clearly, contemporary accounts of moral development need to focus on the ways in which parental influence matches up with the child's activity in perceiving and constructing an understanding of the world for him or herself.

The current study explores the relationship between parenting style and children's perceptions of the reasons behind adult moral rules. Children were presented with vignettes depicting moral transgressions in which a parent told a child that an action was wrong. In the vignettes the child was then depicted asking, "Why?" Participants were asked to complete the story by suggesting how the adult would respond. It was not an aim of the study to establish a causal link between parenting style and children's own moral judgment and reasoning. Rather, the intention was to understand what children think adults think; how children imagine that adults will justify moral injunctions.

Parenting style was determined using Baumrind's typology (Baumrind, 1971). This distinguishes four alternative forms of parenting style along two dimensions: 'demandingness' and 'responsiveness'. *Authoritative* parents are both highly demanding and responsive. They establish and impose moral rules for children to follow but support parental authority with justification and explanation for why rules are imposed. In contrast *authoritarian* parents make demands on their children to follow the rules they set, but are relatively unresponsive. With this form of parenting social and moral rules are enforced but there is little room for verbal "give-and-take" between child and adult: rules are enforced by parental authority alone. *Permissive* parenting, is characterised by low levels of demandingness and high levels of responsiveness. Tolerance warmth and acceptance are characteristics of these parents although they do not exert authority or great control over their children in terms of enforcing rules. Finally, *neglecting-rejecting* parents score low on both dimensions. Neglecting-rejecting parents rarely control or even observe their children's behaviour (Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg & Ritter, 1997).

Previous studies using Baumrind's typology (e.g. Smetana, 1995) have found that the largest groups are those that can be characterised as either authoritarian or authoritative. In practical terms the most important contrast is between authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles: the former being associated with a raft of positive outcomes in childhood and adolescence, the latter being comparatively ineffective in promoting moral development.

There are at least two possible explanations why authoritative parenting is effective in promoting development. First, authoritative parents may point the child towards the connection between moral rules and explanations (of any kind). Thus, developmental benefits may be a consequence of the discursive atmosphere that exists in authoritative parent-child relations: moral rules are legitimised through the application of (or search for) 'reason' in its broadest sense (Moshman, 1995) and not through the advancement of any particular ethic or moral rule. However, a second possibility is that authoritative parenting is effective because the adult presents, to the child, a specific means of legitimising moral rules. Thus it is not so much that authoritative parenting enables the child to explore and grasp an understanding of rules for him or herself that is the effective ingredient in fostering a child's moral growth. Rather, authoritative parenting provides children with a particular type of justification or ethic to apply when judging moral issues. These contrasting explanations, what we might describe as the "discursive atmosphere" and "specific justifications" accounts respectively are, of course, not unconnected. For instance, one consequence of a discursive atmosphere might be that reason guides the child to use particular types of justification. But whilst with the first explanation development is a consequence of the child's own grasp of the rational nature of rules, with the second it

involves an internalisation of more specific means for legitimising rules for social conduct.

One way to explore these alternative accounts is to examine how children perceive adults to justify their moral judgments. In this respect the two explanations for the effectiveness of authoritative parenting - the discursive atmosphere and specific justifications approaches – entail different predictions in terms of the moral vignettes. Firstly, if the discursive atmosphere account is evident in children's perceptions of adult reasoning, one would anticipate that children of authoritative parents will judge adults to give more justifications overall (regardless of type of justification) than children of authoritarian parents. However secondly, and in contrast, the specific justifications account would predict that there will be differences in the use of different types of justification between children from different parenting style groups. We made no specific predictions concerning children from other parenting groups.

## Method

### Design

A between participants design was used. The independent variable, parenting style, consisted of four levels: *authoritarian*, *authoritative*, *permissive* and *undifferentiated*. Dependent variables related to the types of justifications children attributed to the adults depicted in the stories. A first set of analyses explored whether children did or did not attribute any explanations at all to the adults in the stories. A second set of analyses explored whether children used particular types of justification. A third set examined children's mean use of these different types of justification.

### Participants

There were 100 participants - 48 boys and 52 girls - with a mean age of 10 years and 7 months (ranging between 10 years, 3 months and 11 years, 2 months). The sample was drawn from two schools in a suburban area outside London, England and was broadly middle class and predominantly of white ethnic origin.

### Procedure

Children completed a Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) based on the one used by Buri (1991). They were then asked to write responses in a booklet to a series of questions depicting hypothetical moral dilemmas. These two tasks were carried out in the school and took around forty minutes to complete.

### Materials

#### Parenting style.

Several revisions were made to the PAQ for the current study (see appendix 1). As with the original, there were four response options for each question: fits a lot (score of 4), fits some (3), fits very little (2) and does not fit (1). Children were asked to complete the PAQ for both their mother and their father (where appropriate). Each child received three scores for each of the three parenting styles – permissive, authoritarian and authoritative for both mother and father. Mother's and father's scores were combined to get an overall measure of parenting style.

Following the criteria set by Buri (1991) and Smetana (1995), in order to be allocated to a parenting style a child's parents' combined score had to be above the mean for that type of parenting style and at least half a standard deviation above the other two scores. When father's and mother's styles were combined sixty-two percent could be classified as clearly belonging to one of three styles - of the 100 participants,

9 were classified as permissive, 29 were authoritative and 24 were authoritarian. The rest (38) were allocated to an “undifferentiated” group.

#### Justifications for parental authority.

Children were presented with five short stories or vignettes (see appendix 2) accompanied by illustrations that depicted five moral transgressions adapted from Turiel (1983) - hitting, stealing, lying, breaking borrowed property on purpose, and breaking a promise. In each story a child had broken or was about to break a rule. In a caption below the parent says to the child, “You should not do this”, and the child asks, “Why?” The caption beneath the final picture (which shows the parent giving the child an answer) was left blank for participants to fill in. To account for practice effects the order in which the stories were presented was randomised.

#### Coding of responses and justification categories

Children’s responses to each story were coded in two different ways. First, responses were examined to see if children had offered an explanation or not. An explanation was deemed to be anything that went beyond a simple restatement of the rule or imperative given by the adult in the story. If children simply restated what was already in the story or gave no response a score of no explanation was recorded.

Second, when children attributed an explanation to the adult, these were judged to belong to one of six categories (see Table 1). The first two categories refer to the social relation between adult and child. *Equality* attributions refer to or indicate an equal relationship between the adult and child depicted in the story. A response attribution of *authority*, in contrast, points to inequality (asymmetry or constraint) in adult-child relations. Two further categories captured children’s attribution of justifications that refer to the consequences of action. First there were those responses that pointed to the *consequences for the child* as justifications for acting or not acting



in a particular way. With such justifications children felt that adults would highlight the child's self-interest as a motivating factor in making moral judgements. Second, there were response attributions that stressed *consequences for others* as legitimising factors. A fifth category *rules and norms* was used if the child explicitly mentioned moral rules or social norms. A response was not included in this category if the child simply repeated the adult's command or instruction. A last category combined all *other* explanations but was rarely used.

--Insert table 1 here--

To establish the reliability of the coding a second judge rated twenty of the responses. The second judge was given a description and brief introduction to the scoring of categories but was blind to the scores given by the first judge. The ratings between the judges on all the measures had a mean of Kappa = 0.83 with a range between Kappa = 0.69 and Kappa = 1.00, which indicates excellent agreement overall.

## Results

A first 2-way ANOVA (gender x parenting style) revealed no significant main effects or interactions in terms of the total number of explanations given.

To test for any differences in terms of whether children used or did not use a particular type of justification, a chi-square test was carried out for each of the categories. The tests revealed only a marginally significant variation in the use of *equality* justifications ( $\chi^2(3) = 7.691$ ,  $p = 0.053$ ). As this was close to significance only the two larger parenting style groups, authoritarian and authoritative, were compared. To prevent capitalising on chance the continuity correction value was used. The test was significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.718$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ): children of authoritative parents tended to

use this category more (11 children, 38% of children in this parenting style group) than those of authoritarian parents (2 children, 8% of children in this group).

--Insert table 2 here--

A final analysis focussed on the extent to which children used each category. Table 2 shows the mean use of different types of justification by parenting style. A 2-way ANOVA (gender x parenting style) was carried out on the mean use each of the justification categories. There was a marginally significant of parenting style on mean use of *equality* justifications ( $F(3,92) = 2.57, p < .10$ ) but subsequent *post hoc* independent t-tests revealed no significant differences between groups. There was a significant effect of parenting style on mean use of justifications focussing on *consequences for others* ( $F(3,92) = 3.38, p < 0.05$ ). Independent t-tests were carried out to find where the differences were using a Bonferroni adjusted p-value ( $p < 0.0083$ ). The t-tests were significant only for permissive-undifferentiated  $t(45) = 2.790, p < 0.0083$ . As can be seen from Table 2, the children of permissive parents give significantly more explanations referring to others' feelings than the children of the undifferentiated parenting style.

## Discussion

The current study investigated children's perceptions of the reasons behind adults' imposition of moral rules. These relate, in turn, to contrasting accounts of why authoritative parenting is beneficial in promoting moral development. Support for a "discursive atmosphere" account would be found if children of authoritative parents, compared with other children, judged that adults would give more justifications overall. However, there were no significant variations in the total number of justifications attributed. Support for the "specific justifications" account would be

found if there were variations in the type of justifications that children thought adults would give. Results support this second account: children of authoritative parents thought that adults would give more justifications based on equality in social relations than did children of authoritarian parents.

These findings indicate a clear association between authoritative parenting and children's attributions of adult moral justifications. Although a direct causal link between parenting style and children's moral development can only be inferred the current study suggests that any such connection may, in part, be a consequence of parents communicating a specific content or type of moral rule rather than a consequence of any discursive atmosphere or more general link between moral rules, explanation and justification.

Whilst the current study points to an important distinction relating to research on parental influence, it is prudent to include two notes of caution in interpreting these results. First, the current study only tells us that children think adults think - it does not tell us whether these are accurate perceptions nor whether they correspond to children's own moral reasoning. For instance, there remains a possibility that children of authoritative parents are better than others at knowing what their parents will say but the observed benefits of such parenting to moral development (e.g. Smetana, 1995) are moderated by other factors – a greater general maturity in reasoning or better peer relations. Further research is undoubtedly required to clarify the causal relationship between parenting style, children's perceptions of adult rule justifications, and children's moral reasoning.

A second point is that although there are fascinating differences in children's attributions of adults' use of equality justifications, these justifications were not the most commonly reported. Mostly, children thought that adults would use justifications

that focussed on the consequences of action (either for the child or for others) or justifications that made appeals to moral norms or rules as reasons in their own right.

The prevalence of moral rules and norms as justifications is perhaps a feature of asymmetry in adult-child relations and a lingering moral heteronomy that may still exist in children at this age; even as children begin to discover moral autonomy most are still, at the age of 11 years, very much subject to adult authority in most realms of their life. The prevalence of consequences justifications is something that has been studied comparatively little in previous research on moral reasoning. However, alongside the current research, several other studies have highlighted this form of justification as an important one in terms of adult moral reasoning (Haviv & Leman, 2002; Wark & Kerbs, 1996). Children's recognition of adults' use of consequences justifications suggests that they recognise a pragmatic form of moral reasoning that previous work (e.g. Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932) has tended to ignore.

A final unexpected result was the greater use of justifications focussing on consequences for others by children of permissive parents. When an adult uses these justifications he or she makes an appeal to the child to consider another's perspective – to consider, for instance, how another child might feel. It involves, in this sense, social perspective-taking which is a relatively sophisticated socio-cognitive skill (Selman, 1971) and pointing to the perspectives of others might be considered a good strategy for promoting a child's moral development. However, permissive parenting is not associated with promoting moral development (Smetana, 1995). How might this apparent anomaly be explained? One possible explanation is that whilst permissive parents may offer consequences explanations (and whilst their children may pick up on this) permissive parents do not enforce moral rules. And so these children might

come to view morality in a rather diffuse and abstract sense in which rules are not binding and have no obligating force.

The current study examined the influence of parenting style on the ways in which children think adults justify moral rules. Results raise the intriguing possibility that authoritative parenting may not be effective because parents point children to make a connection between any form of justification and moral rules. Rather, children of authoritative parents perceive adult authority to be justified in terms that include a specific sense of equality in adult-child relations. Theoretical accounts that emphasise the child's unbridled search for reasons as a key trigger for developmental advance appear to run against children's own perceptions of the ways in which adults justify moral rules. It may therefore be not so much the encouragement of a search for reasons as the communication of a specific ethic of equality in social relations that marks out authoritative parenting as an effective means of promoting a child's moral reasoning.

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Appendix 1

Revised Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ)

Note: Adapted from Buri (1991). Response options: (1) fits a lot, (2) fits some, (3) fits very little, (4) does not fit.

Revised PAQ Statements.

1. My father/mother thinks that I should have my way as often as him.
2. My father/mother thinks that it is best if I do what s/he wants even if I disagree.
3. My father/mother expects me to do what s/he says without asking any questions.
4. My father/mother thinks it is important to discuss the reasons behind family rules.
5. My father/mother will discuss family rules if I think they are unfair.
6. My father/mother thinks I should be allowed to choose and to do what I want to even if s/he disagrees.
7. My father/mother talks to me and helps me in this way to make right choices.
8. My father/mother thinks that I should always obey rules set by adults.
9. My father/mother tells me what I can and cannot do but allows me to discuss this if I disagree.
10. My father/mother thinks that parents should teach children that it is the parents who make the decisions.
11. My father/mother often lets me decide in the family.
12. My father/mother tells me in a good way what is good and bad to do.
13. My father/mother gets angry if I protest against what s/he wants me to do.
14. My father/mother thinks problems like graffiti or violence will stop if parents are nice to their children.
15. My father/mother punishes me if I do not do as I am told.
16. My father/mother lets me make my own decisions without interfering.



17. My father/mother listens to what I think about family rules but does not always let me have my own way.
18. My father/mother thinks that he should control my behaviour.
19. My father/mother thinks problems like graffiti and violence will stop if parents are strict when their children do not do as they are told.
20. My father/mother insists that I do as s/he says just because s/he is an adult.
21. My father/mother discusses family rules and apologises to me if he was wrong in telling me off.

Questions excluded from initial PAQ.

My father/mother demands that I do what I am told without asking questions.

My father/mother thinks that it is his/her job to make sure I behave the way I am supposed to.

My father/mother does not tell me what I can or cannot do but lets me choose myself.

My father/mother expects certain behaviours from me but will also listen to me.

My father/mother sets rules for me about what I can and cannot do but will talk about this with me.

My father/mother allows me to make decisions and often lets me choose what I want to do.

My father/mother tells me what to do and how to do it.

My father/mother gives me clear rules for my behaviour but listens if I disagree with him/her.

My father/mother does not control my behaviour, activities and wishes.

Appendix 2

Moral stories and questions to children

Note: Each story was accompanied by a cartoon picture to aid comprehension.

Children were given space to write a response.

Story 1: John wants his sister's toy car, but his sister is playing with it. John hits his sister to get the toy car. John's mother comes in and says to John: "You should not hit". John asks "Why?" What do you think his mother says?

Story 2: Laura takes her sister to the park and promises her mother to look after her. Laura meets some friends and leaves without her sister. Laura's mother says to Laura, "You should not break your promise". Laura asks "Why?" What do you think her mother says?

Story 3: Mary takes some money from the table to buy sweets. Mary's mother sees her and says, "You should not steal". Mary asks "Why?" What do you think her mother says?

Story 4: Michael takes a biscuit from the biscuit jar. He lies to his father and says he did not take a biscuit. Michael's father says, "You should not lie". Michael asks "Why?" What do you think his father says?

Story 5: Katy has borrowed her sister's ball. She breaks it on purpose. Katy's father says to Katy, "You should not break you sister's ball". Katy asks "Why?" What do you think her father says?

Table 1. Justification categories for children's responses

Category	Description	Examples
Equality	Reference based on reciprocity or equality in the relationship between adult and child	"You wouldn't like it if I did it to you", "I trusted you"
Authority	Reference based on a unilateral or authority relationship between adult and child	"Because I said so", "I'm the adult, I make the rules"
Consequences for child	Reference to the consequences of action for the child	"She won't want to be your friend if you do that"
Consequences for others	Reference to the consequences of an action for those other than the child	"It will hurt her"
Rules and norms	Explicitly refers to a moral rule or norm not stated in the vignette	"You are breaking the rules", "It is wrong to lie",
Other	All other explanations	

Table 2. Mean use of different types of justification by parenting style (standard deviations in parentheses)

Justification type	Permissive N=9	Authoritarian N=24	Authoritative N=29	Undiffer- entiated N=38	Total N=100
Equality	0.11 (0.33)	0.08 (0.28)	0.48 (0.69)	0.42 (0.72)	0.33 (0.62)
Authority	0.89 (1.54)	0.71 (0.91)	0.69 (0.93)	0.92 (1.08)	0.80 (1.03)
Consequences for child	1.67 (1.37)	2.21 (1.38)	1.93 (1.51)	1.68 (1.23)	1.88 (1.39)
Consequences for others	2.11 (0.78)	1.29 (0.86)	1.72 (1.00)	1.24 (0.85)	1.47 (0.93)
Rules and norms	2.17 (2.22)	1.48 (1.50)	1.23 (1.45)	1.05 (1.76)	1.65 (1.23)
Other	0.22 (0.44)	0.17 (0.38)	0.38 (0.49)	0.29 (0.46)	0.28 (0.45)