
Mutually Responsive Orientation Between Mothers and Their Young Children: A Context for the Early Development of Conscience

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Abstract

Some parent-child dyads establish a mutually responsive orientation (MRO), a relationship that is close, mutually binding, cooperative, and affectively positive. Such relationships have two main characteristics—mutual responsiveness and shared positive affect—and they foster the

development of conscience in young children. Children growing up with parents who are responsive to their needs and whose interactions are infused with happy emotions adopt a willing, responsive stance toward parental influence and become eager to embrace parental values and standards for behavior. The concurrent and longitu-

dinal beneficial effects of MRO for early development of conscience have been replicated across studies, for a broad range of developmental periods from infancy through early school age, and using a wide variety of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive measures of conscience in the laboratory, at home, and in school. These findings highlight the importance of the early parent-child relationship for subsequent moral development.

Keywords

relationships; mutuality; conscience

How do young children become aware of rules, values, and standards of behavior accepted within their

families and cultures? How do they gradually come to internalize those values and make them their own? Why do some children adopt societal norms wholeheartedly and with ease, and become conscientious citizens, whereas others do not?

The emergence of an individual conscience, a reliable internal guidance system that regulates conduct without the need for external control, is the endpoint of the process of integrating a child into a broader network of values. How this process works continues to be debated as one of the perennial and central issues in human socialization (Grusec, 1997).

Research on conscience was once dominated by a cognitive approach, focused on children's abstract understanding of societal rules, measured by their ability to reason about hypothetical moral dilemmas. Moral development was seen as a product of cognitive maturation, aided by peer interactions, but fundamentally unrelated to parental influence. In contrast, other theories acknowledged parental contributions. Parents and other socializing agents were seen as critical in several versions of learning theory. Those approaches emphasized the importance of parental discipline and modeling as instruments that modify and shape children's behavior. Somewhat later, attributional theories underscored the importance of children's perceptions of parental discipline, and revealed surprising, often paradoxical effects of salient parental rewards and punishments.

More recently, many scholars have come to appreciate an approach grounded in psychoanalytic and neo-psychoanalytic theories. Although Freud's views on the early development of conscience as linked to the Oedipus or Electra complex have long been discarded, his general emphasis on the role of early emotions and early relationships in emerging morality has proven insightful. That approach has been strongly reinviso-

rated and modernized by John Bowlby and the burgeoning research on attachment. From that perspective, moral emotions, moral conduct, and moral thought are all components of an internal guidance system, or conscience, whose foundations are established in early childhood in the context of socialization in the family. The early parent-child relationship, which encompasses but is not limited to control and discipline, can substantially foster or undermine that process (Emde, Biringen, Clyman, & Oppenheim, 1991).

THE RELATIONSHIP PERSPECTIVE: MUTUALLY RESPONSIVE ORIENTATION

In 1951, Robert Sears argued for a shift in psychological research from studying individuals to studying dyads. Over the past two or three decades, the science of relationships has blossomed in personality, social, and developmental psychology (Collins & Laursen, 1999; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Several scholars have proposed that when relationship partners—whether two adults or a parent and a child—are responsive and attuned to each other, are mutually supportive, and enjoy being together, they form an internal model of their relationship as a cooperative enterprise, and develop an eager, receptive stance toward each other's influence and a compelling sense of obligation to willingly comply with the other. For example, Clark (1984) referred to "communal relationships" in adults as contexts in which the partners are invested in each other's well-being, are empathic and responsive to each other, and experience an internal sense of mutual obligation.

In developmental research, those resurging perspectives afford a productive vantage point for exploring

social development. Socialization is seen as a process jointly constructed by parents and children over time (Collins & Laursen, 1999; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Maccoby, 1999; Reis et al., 2000). Maccoby (1999) referred to parent-child mutuality as a positive socialization force that engenders a spirit of cooperation in the child. Attachment scholars believe that children raised in a loving, responsive manner become eager to cooperate with their caregivers and to embrace their values.

To describe such relationships between parents and children, my colleagues and I have proposed a construct of *mutually responsive orientation (MRO)*. MRO is a positive, close, mutually binding, and cooperative relationship, which encompasses two components: *responsiveness* and *shared positive affect*. Responsiveness refers to the parent's and the child's willing, sensitive, supportive, and developmentally appropriate response to one another's signals of distress, unhappiness, needs, bids for attention, or attempts to exert influence. Shared positive affect refers to the "good times" shared by the parent and the child—pleasurable, harmonious, smoothly flowing interactions infused with positive emotions experienced by both.

We further proposed that children who grow up in mutually responsive dyads, compared with those who do not, become more eager to embrace their parents' values and more likely to develop a strong conscience. Their eager stance to embrace parental values reflects an internal sense of obligation to respond positively to parental influence, and emerges from a history of mutually gratifying, mutually accommodating experiences. A child who has developed a mutually responsive relationship with the parent comes to trust the parent and to expect that the parent will be responsive and supportive;

at the same time, the child comes to feel motivated to cooperate willingly with the parent, to embrace the parent's values, and to adopt parental standards for behavior and make them his or her own. In this view, the parent-child relationship influences the child's conscience mainly through a gradually evolving shared working model of the relationship as a mutually cooperative enterprise rather than through the cumulative history of parental discipline as the instrument of behavior modification.

MOTHER-CHILD MRO AND CHILDREN'S CONSCIENCE: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In two large studies, we measured the qualities of the mother-child relationship and the child's emerging conscience for more than 200 mother-child dyads. To assess the strength of MRO for the individual dyads, we observed the mothers and children interacting in multiple lengthy, naturalistic yet carefully scripted contexts at home and in the laboratory. The situations we observed included caregiving routines, preparing and eating meals, playing, relaxing, and doing household chores. We coded each mother's responsiveness to her child's numerous signals of needs, signs of physical or emotional distress or discomfort, bids for attention, and social overtures. We also assessed shared positive affect by coding the flow of emotion expression for both the mother and the child over the course of each interaction, focusing particularly on the times when they both displayed positive emotion. We obtained these measures repeatedly, following the same families over a period of several years.

In the individual dyads, the degree of MRO was significantly con-

sistent across separate sessions close in time, and significantly stable over several years. This indicates that our observational markers captured a robust quality of the relationships that unfolded along a fairly stable dyadic trajectory.

Using a broad variety of laboratory paradigms, we also observed rich manifestations of the young children's conscience: moral emotions, moral conduct, and moral cognition. These assessments took place at many points in the children's development—starting in their 2nd year and continuing until early school age. The children's moral emotions, including guilt, discomfort, concern, and empathy, were observed when they were led to believe that they had violated a standard of conduct, or when they witnessed others' distress. While they were unsupervised, either alone or with peers, their moral conduct was assessed in many types of situations in which they faced strong temptations to break various rules and were coaxed to violate standards of behavior. Their moral cognition was measured by presenting them with age-appropriate, hypothetical moral dilemmas and asking them to express their thoughts and feelings about rules and transgressions, and consider moral decisions. We also asked their mothers and teachers to evaluate the children's moral emotions and conduct displayed in environments outside the laboratory—at home and at school.

Both studies supported the view that children who grow up in a context of a highly mutually responsive relationship with their mothers develop strong consciences (Kochanska, 1997; Kochanska, Forman, & Coy, 1999; Kochanska & Murray, 2000). The strength of the replicated findings was striking, given the broad range of the children's ages and the wide variety of conscience measures used.

In both studies, the links between MRO and the development of conscience were both concurrent and longitudinal. The concurrent links were found for both toddlers and preschoolers. The longitudinal findings were robust: MRO in infancy predicted conscience development in the 2nd year, and MRO in toddlerhood predicted children's conscience at preschool age and again at early school age. The history of MRO in the first 2 years predicted conscience at age 5. In short, the beneficial effect of MRO on the development of conscience was evident across diverse measures of conscience involving emotions, conduct, and cognition. It was also evident whether conscience was assessed by observations in the laboratory or reports from mothers and teachers. These results have been replicated by other researchers (Laible & Thompson, 2000).

HOW DOES MRO EXERT ITS IMPACT?

What causal mechanisms may be responsible for these well-established empirical findings? Using statistical approaches (sequences of multiple regressions, as well as structural equations modeling, or SEM) to analyze the causal factors that accounted for the associations in our data, we determined that MRO exerts its influence through at least two mechanisms.

The first mechanism involves promoting the child's positive mood. Early MRO between the parent and the child contributes to the child's positive, happy disposition, and that, in turn, increases his or her broad eagerness to behave prosocially. This finding is consistent with a large body of research in social and developmental psychology (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Adults and children who are in a positive mood have often been

found to be more prosocial, altruistic, cooperative, rule abiding, and socially responsive than those who are in neutral or negative moods.

The second mechanism involves promoting the child's responsive stance toward parental influence. We have found that in playlike teaching situations, children in mutually responsive relationships are attuned to their mothers and eagerly follow their lead (Forman & Kochanska, 2001; Kochanska et al., 1999). In discipline situations, they show what we called *committed compliance*—willing, eager, wholehearted cooperation with the parent (Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001). Such a generalized responsive stance may be an intermediate step between simple cooperation with the parent and genuine internalization of parental rules, evident even in the parent's absence. We believe it reflects the child's emerging working model of a cooperative, reciprocal, mutually accommodating relationship in which partners naturally do things for one another without abrogating their autonomy.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

MRO and Qualities of Individuals

It takes two to develop dyadic MRO. Although the relationship between a parent and child—like any relationship—is more than a simple sum of their characteristics, those characteristics may nevertheless foster or impede the formation of MRO. Recent advances in research on the role of genetics in behavior and on the biological foundations of children's temperament are beginning to be reflected in scientific work in what has been traditionally conceived as the domain of relationships. For example, Deater-

Deckard and O'Connor (2000), studying identical and fraternal twins, and biological and adoptive siblings, found that parent-child MRO was driven, in part, by the child's genetically based qualities. In addition, a child's biologically based traits, such as being prone to anger or joy, or being hard or easy to soothe, may facilitate or undermine the evolution of the child's relationships within particular dyads. Being responsive to and having enjoyable interactions with a child may be more challenging if the child is temperamentally difficult than if he or she is easygoing and mellow.

Mothers' traits, some also biologically based, may be important as well. We have found that the more empathic mothers are, the better able they are to form MRO with their children (Kochanska, 1997). A large body of research indicates that depression and high levels of negative emotion in mothers reduce their responsiveness and positive behavior when interacting with their young children.

More complex interplay between biological and relationship factors also deserves future research attention. Our findings indicate that MRO may be particularly beneficial for children with certain temperaments, particularly fearless, thrill-seeking children whose behavior is not easily modified by actual or anticipated punishments and threats. Other interactions between temperament and relationships are also possible.

MRO as a Developmentally Changing System

A mutually responsive relationship between a parent and an infant differs from a mutually responsive relationship between a parent and a preschooler, or between a parent and an adolescent. The contexts and currency of par-

ent-child interactions change. In infancy, those contexts include mostly the contexts of caregiving, play, and daily routines, and the currency of exchange is often nonverbal. Gradually, the contexts expand to include parent-child discussions of events and ideas, and the exchanges are increasingly verbal (Laible & Thompson, 2000). The child's and the parent's relative contributions to the relationship change over time, and so do their cognitive representations, perceptions, and expectations of the relationship and of each other. Psychologists' understanding of the child's side of MRO lags considerably behind their understanding of the parent's side of MRO. How MRO can be assessed in a manner that is developmentally sensitive and yet captures stable qualities of the parent-child dyad over time is one of the future challenges.

MRO and Internal Representations

In research to date, MRO has been inferred from parents' and children's observed behavior and affect during interactions. This outer layer, however, only partially captures the essence of a relationship. Scholars studying relationships have adopted Bowlby's premise that, over time, the parent and the child gradually form inner representations, or internal working models, of their relationship (Collins & Laursen, 1999). Those evolving models include generalized memories of each other's behavior, implicit beliefs and feelings about each other and the relationship, and a sense of what the relationship is like and what to expect from one another. Those generalized products of an individual's experience serve to organize and bias his or her future information processing, behavior, and emotions. In the case of MRO, the parent's and

child's internal models entail mutual cooperation and implicit reciprocity, and the child's internal model is thought to underlie his or her willingness to embrace parental rules. Those inner representations, however, are difficult to access and to study. To develop sensitive yet rigorous methodologies that will provide insights into the representational aspect of MRO is an important future challenge.

MRO and the Family System

The relationship between a parent and child is itself nested in a network of family relationships. The importance of studying development in the context of the entire family system has been increasingly acknowledged. In particular, future research should study mother-child and father-child MRO, both separately and as a triadic interconnected system. More generally, family-level variables such as stress, conflict, support, and affective ambience may be significant dimensions of the context in which mutually responsive relationships with the child may flourish or fail.

Recommended Reading

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Note

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