Part I

Introduction

1 Parent–child conversations as contexts for moral development: Why conversations, and why conversations with parents?

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Throughout the world, most parents care about their children becoming good people and are deeply invested in nurturing their moral development. Given the profound interest in what parents do to promote their children's moral growth and how children respond to parental inputs and strategies (Bornstein, 2002; Grusec & Hastings, 2006; Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997; Hoffman, 2000; Kuczynski, 2003; Kurtines & Gewirtz, 1987), it is surprising how little attention researchers of moral socialization and moral development have paid to the sorts of conversations that parents and children actually have about morally laden events. This is unfortunate, as conversations that touch on morally laden issues are not merely ubiquitous – such conversations are, to a large extent, *constitutive* of moral experiences (see also Habermas, 1992). It is not unusual for harm and injustice to happen via conversations. Children often hurt or mistreat others and feel hurt or mistreated by others in conversational exchanges. Helping, caring, and soothing can also often come via words and discourse with others. Many of the social actions that make up both moral transgressions and prosocial behavior happen in conversation. Even more directly relevant to this volume is the fact that children, not unlike adults, tend to reflect on and make sense of those hurtful and helpful conversations, as well as of other kinds of hurtful and helpful experiences, via more conversations. Indeed, when children admit to their transgressions, complain about the hurtful behaviors of others, or boast about their good deeds, they tend to do that via conversations. When parents teach their children about rules, discipline them, help them understand the consequences of their own actions, encourage them to do the right thing, scold them for their misdeeds, or praise them for their kindness – most of that also happens in and via conversations. This is not to say that conversation is the only way in which moral life "happens," but conversations are certainly a prevalent arena for the actual experience of morality and an essential vehicle through which the business of moral socialization is transacted.

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In stressing the significance of conversations for understanding the processes of moral socialization and moral development we are not implying that parents directly *transmit* their knowledge about right and wrong to their children who, in turn, take it all in and adopt it wholesale. Anyone who, in the role of parent, has ever had a morally laden conversation (or any other type of conversation) with her or his child can attest to the fact that things are almost never as simple as may be suggested by the term "transmission." In the past, traditional socialization researchers assumed that the socialization process was largely unidirectional, such that moral internalization was seen as stemming primarily from parents' transmission of values, standards, and customs to children through discipline and other parenting practices. However, contemporary approaches to socialization speak about a bidirectional and interactive process that incorporates the influences and mutual adaptation of both parents and children (e.g., Dunn, 2006; Grusec & Davidov, 2006; Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000; Kochanska *et al.*, 2009; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006; Thompson, Meyer, & McGinley, 2006; Valsiner, Branco, & Dantas, 1997), thus coming close to the view purported all along by constructivist theorists, who have consistently underscored the child's active role in the process of moral development (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984; Lapsley, 2006; Turiel, 2002). And the evidence for children's active engagement in the moral development process is robust. Research has amply demonstrated that starting at a young age children construct their own understandings of moral concepts by observing and reflecting on the consequences of simple exchanges involving sharing and helping, as well as everyday misdeeds or rule violations that result in minor forms of physical harm, psychological distress, and unfairness (e.g., Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006; Smetana, 2013; Turiel, 2006).

It is noteworthy that research focusing on children's and adolescents' active constructions of their own moral understandings has richly documented the many decisions that children and adolescents must make as they consider events in the moral world, but has had little to say about parents' contributions to this process. As examples, research has shown that although young children have a basic grasp of moral concepts bearing on fairness and welfare, their capacity to apply these concepts to novel situations is constrained in nontrivial ways by their still limited socio-cognitive and psychological understandings (e.g., Chandler, Sokol, & Wainryb, 2000; Lagattuta, 2005; Smetana *et al.*, 2012; Wainryb & Brehl, 2006). Adolescents, whose socio-cognitive and psychological understandings are more developed, are still often baffled by the inexhaustible complexity of the social world (e.g., Cooley, Elenbaas, & Killen, 2013; Helwig, 2006; Recchia, Brehl, & Wainryb, 2012; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005;

Wainryb & Recchia, 2012). Both children and adolescents must wrestle
with the fact that everyday actions often have unintended or unforeseeable
consequences, and everyday conflicts at times involve competing needs
or incompatible claims that inevitably result in someone getting hurt.
Research conducted across the world has shown that children and ado-
lescents actively engage with the endless complications of moral life (Was
this fair? Why was she hurt? How can I do what's right for me without
hurting someone else? Why do they treat me this way?), weighing con-
flicting considerations and applying their moral concepts flexibly (Turiel
& Wainryb, 2000; Wainryb, 2006; Wainryb & Recchia, 2013). But this
research has been largely silent about the types of scaffolding that parents
provide throughout the process, perhaps because of the assumption that
the heart of the constructivist process lies in children's own evolving reflec-
tions about their social experiences.

There is little doubt that children grapple with some of these decisions
on their own, thinking "in their heads" so to speak. Nevertheless, if for
no other reason than that parents are often present (as well as interested,
inquisitive, probing, or nosey), children also talk about many of these
issues with their parents. These conversations afford children a different
platform for thinking and reflecting about moral experiences. Though
there hasn't been much systematic theorizing or research comparing the
more meditative, solitary, or introspective type of thinking and the type
of thinking that goes on in conversation, we suggest that conversations
have a number of distinctive features that make them a uniquely fertile
arena for moral thinking and moral development.

How is reflecting on an experience in conversation different from "thinking in your head?"

Try to remember what it is like for you to "think in your head," espe-
cially when you are working through a confusing, perhaps emotion-
ally arousing, guilt inducing, or distressing event. Thinking in one's
head often mingles words with other forms of imagery and experience;
thoughts may be poorly structured and incomplete, and some aspects
of the experience may be left unlabeled and unorganized, perhaps even
unrecognized. It is true that people also may experience such imagery
in the course of conversation. Nevertheless, because conversations hap-
pen between two people rather than "in someone's head," they *require*
at the very least that the experience be represented linguistically. This
demand for linguistic representation, in and of itself, tends to elicit a
more organized structuring of the events (Clark, 1996; see also Vygotsky,
1934/1986). Furthermore, listeners in a conversation typically expect

that at least some basic information about the event be provided: the
characters, the temporal sequence, the speaker's opinion and evalua-
tion, even some sense of the interpretation they should hold (Pasupathi,
2001). Altogether, then, conversations are likely to afford a special kind
of reflecting on experience, one that is organized in a narrative or story-
like fashion (Nelson & Fivush, 2004); by contrast, solitary reflection nei-
ther provides nor requires such clear structure. As suggested by research
conducted with both children (e.g., Fivush, 2007; Fivush, Haden, &
Reese, 2006) and adults (e.g., Pasupathi, 2001), it seems plausible that
the story-like structural properties of the type of thinking that happens
in discourse with another person may help children draw more complex
meanings and conclusions from their experiences.

A second important feature of conversations is that, more than soli-
tary reflection, conversations afford the speaker some distance from the
experience. This may be because, in conversing with another person,
one's experience becomes an object of joint reflection. There is some evi-
dence from research on disclosure (e.g., Clark, 1996; Pasupathi, 2007)
suggesting that telling others about an experience results in a sense of
greater distance from, and more perspective toward, the experience (as
measured, for example, by the extent to which events are recalled in
the first versus third person or in present versus past tense). This sense of
greater distance, one that we surmise is likely to be afforded by the expe-
rience of thinking in conversation more than by the experience of think-
ing alone, tends to make those experiences less immediate and more
integrated into a person's sense of history, and thus less likely to form the
basis of intrusive or unwanted thoughts. This sense of distancing may be
especially relevant when discussing moral transgressions, which are often
accompanied by remorse, shame, or guilt. Importantly, this distancing
process is not one that makes those feelings and cognitions go away;
in other words, the added sense of distance wouldn't merely make the
child feel good or happy. Rather, this sort of distancing and the lessen-
ing of intrusive distress may be what is necessary for a child to be able
to, for example, further reflect on her own transgressions or wrongdo-
ings and draw conclusions about them (rather than, say, avoid thinking
about them or be inclined to change their meaning to a less threatening
or upsetting one).

In addition to affording more organization and more perspective, con-
versations also engender a shared psychological space – one where the
topics, beliefs, and opinions being discussed evolve and change with con-
tributions from the two parties. Another way to put this is that conversa-
tions are much more than an exchange of information. As people talk
with one another, they don't just swap facts: they may learn new facts,

and they may also begin to view these facts in a new light, draw new con-
clusions from them, and engage in new trains of thought. This is likely to
be true, and important, in conversations between parents and children
about morally laden issues. Even if in such contexts parents at times
assume a didactic tone, most parents don't *just* lecture, and most parents
certainly don't just lecture and then exit the stage. Parents, but also chil-
dren, may at times enter some of these conversations with a clear goal
in mind – a mother may want her son to understand that what he did
was wrong, or may want him to comply with an expectation or request;
a child may want to explain what made him angry and impatient, or may
want to mitigate his responsibility for some wrongdoing. But it is often
the case that goals and understandings change and evolve in the course
of conversation. As conversations unfold, with each partner explaining,
listening, arguing, elaborating, disagreeing, rephrasing, suggesting, cajol-
ing, insisting, and resisting, a new story is created and new knowledge
is constructed. Conversations thus might create the space for the child's
understandings to be expanded and changed, integrating, albeit imper-
fectly, other ideas and viewpoints.

Finally, it is important to recognize that conversations are not only
about the contents being constructed and transacted. In talking about
such contents as who did what to whom, why, what it felt like, what it
meant, and whether it was right or wrong, a variety of emotions might
also emerge, both in the speaker and in the listener. Research suggests
that the sharing of emotion in conversation helps children learn how
to both interpret and regulate their own emotional experience (e.g.,
Denham & Kochanoff, 2002; Fivush, 2007; Thompson, 2010); conversa-
tions thus can serve as a kind of container for emotions that might other-
wise be overwhelming. Though this function of conversations should not
be underestimated, in this context it also matters who the listener is, and
how that person is perceived by the speaker (Will he understand where
I'm coming from? Can I trust her with these feelings? Will he think badly
of me if I tell him the truth? Will she forgive me? Will he help me figure
out what to do?). Hence, in this case, the relational background of the
partners in conversation takes center stage. With this in mind, we now
shift to considering how and why conversations *with parents* may serve as
unique contexts for children's moral development.

How is talking to your parents different from talking to other people?

Certainly, children and adolescents have conversations – meaningful
conversations – with many people who are not their parents, such as

teachers and peers. In this volume we focus on conversations between children and their parents, for a number of reasons. From our perspective, these reasons do not include the belief that parents have a unique status as arbiters of moral truth, or that they consistently act as reliable sources of moral knowledge; as parents ourselves, we are well aware that parents are as prone to moral fallibility as anyone else. Nevertheless, in particular in the wake of assertions about the preeminence of the peer group (Harris, 2009), we feel compelled to reclaim the uniqueness of parental influence.

First, parents are the most continuous scaffolding partner in children's lives, starting in infancy and through adolescence; teachers and peers are much less stable presences. For this reason alone, parents merit special attention. Parents and children talk, and they talk often. Some may do it better than others – but parents scaffold their children's thinking all the time. Parents know their children, if not perfectly, quite a lot better (or longer) than most others. By virtue of their constancy, parents also know where stories begin, or perhaps we should say, they often know about events and circumstances preceding whatever incident their child is discussing. This shared history, and parents' "insider" knowledge may render them particularly valuable in helping their child make sense of complex or obscure events. This shared knowledge is also reciprocal, in many key respects. Especially with increasing age, children can anticipate how their parents will think and feel about, as well as react to, particular kinds of events. As they become immersed in family narratives and learn about parents' own morally laden experiences (e.g., Bohanek *et al.*, 2009; Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, 2010), this knowledge is also likely to provide a backdrop for how children talk to their parents about their good and bad deeds, and how they interpret, and more or less willingly accept, parental input.

Second, by virtue of their role or position, parents have, and typically also feel, a strong responsibility to do the right thing by their children. Most parents are invested in their children's moral development – in having their children become good people. Thus parents may be particularly motivated to help their children learn something useful from experiences involving moral considerations, and their goals in this respect may differ from those of both teachers and peers. Teachers, who like parents also feature an adult perspective, may also want children to learn something from their experiences. However, for many teachers the goal is to get children to avoid future wrongdoing or rule-breaking. Even teachers who strive to support children's moral development may be less likely than parents to prioritize children's moral learning, given the realities of managing a classroom and the pressure to focus on academics. Peers,

and particularly friends, may be prominent conversation partners and sounding boards for children, especially starting in middle childhood. Nevertheless, in the name of emotional support and to avoid posing risks to their friendship, friends more than parents may be inclined to uncritically validate children's perspectives on morally laden events, rather than providing constructive challenges to children's viewpoints.

And last, but certainly not least, the affective relationships that children have with their parents are unlike those with anyone else in children's lives. Although children may love, trust, and depend on many different people, few would contest the unique affective bond that exists between parent and child. From their earliest days, children's affective experiences with their caregivers serve as a blueprint for their representations of themselves, others, and relationships (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1993). Furthermore, in a fundamental sense, these relationships are interminable; they cannot be discarded or dissolved the way that relationships with teachers or friends might be. Thus, conversations with parents may provide a unique milieu for children to explore the implications of their morally laden experiences. In particular, if parents are attuned to their children's needs and convey a predominant attitude of acceptance and caring, this creates a safe space for children to share and reflect on uncertainties, mistakes, and regrets, in addition to proud moments and accomplishments (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). When children discuss sensitive or difficult topics with their parents, parents may certainly challenge children's ideas or question children's choices. Nevertheless, inasmuch as these conversations occur within an overall climate of warmth and positive regard, children receive powerful reassurance that they are loved and accepted despite having done the wrong thing or having been a "bad person." Similarly, children also learn that they can disagree with, resist, or challenge their parents' stances on morally laden topics without risking the relationship. As a consequence, conversations with parents may provide a context for children to develop a sense of their own moral agency. This latter point underscores how the occasionally contentious nature of conversations with parents, in fact, can be extremely constructive under some circumstances. As noted above, whereas friends may also provide a climate of acceptance and caring, it is possible that they may be more exclusively oriented toward validation. In contrast, parents may be more likely to "tell it like they see it," even if the message is one that children will not be particularly pleased to hear. When they do so, parents will often get it "right," thereby helping children understand or recognize unfamiliar or opaque aspects of the social, psychological, and physical world that have a bearing on their moral judgments or behaviors. They may help their children make sense of the sorts of emotionally

arousing situations characteristic of transgressions, which make it diffi-
cult for children to think things through and make reasonable judgments.
And parents may help their children make sense of their own transgres-
sions in ways that help them forgive themselves, repair relationships, and
make better decisions in the future. On the other hand, parents will also
sometimes make mistakes, by misattributing intentions, glossing over
nuances, or dismissing emotions, to name a few examples. As we sug-
gest above, while parents are generally more knowledgeable and more
sophisticated than their children, they are by no means infallible – in
the informational or the moral sense. Arguably, far from being disasters,
these imperfections in parents' understandings are a crucial part of the
give-and-take process of conversation. Those occasions when parents get
things "wrong" provide opportunities for children to elaborate on their
own understandings of moral concepts, as well as to carve out their dis-
tinct stances on their experiences. In sum, parental inputs of all kinds are
some of the most important materials that children use in their efforts to
figure out the moral world; parents' suggestions, comments, and expla-
nations are among the stuff that children take in, test, push against, make
their own, reject, and build on.

Obviously, however, the picture is not always quite this rosy; to say that
conversations with parents play a unique role in furthering children's
moral development is not to say that nothing can go wrong. Although all
parents may occasionally discuss events with their children in ways that
are mistaken, misguided, or unhelpful, some parents may more consist-
ently respond to children's experiences in ways that are mismatched to
the features of the event. For example, some parents may "overmoral-
ize" events that are perhaps more appropriately discussed in terms of
conventional norms or personal choice (Nucci, 2010; Smetana, 1995).
Further, not all parent–child relationships are characterized by an over-
all climate of trust, validation, and caring; under these circumstances,
children may not feel safe to share risky information with their par-
ents, and parents' challenges and admonishments may be experienced
in more threatening and less constructive ways. Moreover, by virtue of
their position and resources, parents have more power than do their chil-
dren, and in conversation, can wield this power in ways that are overly
coercive, controlling, and punitive. Most parents are likely to engage
in such strategies on occasion, but when they do so consistently and
exclusively, children may resort to complying with parents' demands,
acquiescing to parents' perspectives concealing, or even lying, rather
than fully engaging in conversation and taking the risk of disclosing
potentially incriminating information (Baumrind, 2012; Grusec, 2012).
Some parents may also be consistently dismissive or disapproving of