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EGOCENTRISM – SOCIOCENTRISM: THE DYNAMIC INTERPLAY IN MORAL DEVELOPMENT¹

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research on moral development has been greatly influenced by Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1976). However, recent criticisms reveal important inadequacies in these popular theories of moral development that professionals may need to consider in their practice. The purpose of this paper is to (1) identify weaknesses in the current theories of moral development, (2) describe a model of moral development that focuses on the continual interaction of egocentrism and sociocentrism in response to organismic changes as well as environmental influences throughout the life-span, and (3) suggest applications of this model to practice and research in the helping professions. The limitations of space allow only a brief outline.

Hogan (1975) objected to Piaget's conception of the young child as egocentric and to the implication that an autonomous conscience is basic to the highest stage of moral development. Viewing egocentrism as pathology, Hogan argued that "children are sociocentric, possibly from birth, and certainly by the end of the first year" (p. 538). Gilligan (1977) criticized Kohlberg's conception of moral development for failing to recognize that the typical dimension on which women base their moral judgments – a sense of responsibility for self and other – is

as legitimate a basis for a mature morality as Kohlberg's sense of abstract justice.

Part of Hogan's argument is due to a misinterpretation of Piaget. In Piagetian terms, the egocentrism of the child is the inevitable result of the child's cognitive immaturity. In contrast, Hogan appears to have interpreted "egocentrism", in its more popular sense, as self-centeredness, in the sense of an affective inability to respond to others. However, neither Piaget's nor Hogan's perspective alone results in an adequate conception of moral development.

Fundamental to this inadequacy is the tradition of conceptualizing egocentrism and sociocentrism as polar ends of a continuum, as opposites rather than as two separate dimensions. Conceived as two dimensions, the opposite of egocentrism becomes nonegocentrism (or the undifferentiated self) while the opposite of sociocentrism is nonsociocentrism (or the undifferentiated other). The value of this multi-dimensional representation is that it forces recognition that the sociocentric and egocentric aspects of the person are not necessarily in conflict or opposed; it implies that self and other can be in equilibrium at successively more differentiated and integrated levels of development. Montemayor and Eisen (1977) found that the development of self concept is not an additive process; rather, it is a restructuring, a movement from an undifferentiated conception of self to a unique, integrated sense of self. Scarlett, Press, and Crockett (1971) demonstrated similar transformations in children's conception of others.

Independent research conducted by Bloom (1977) indicates that a similar multidimensional model is needed to conceptualize the relationship of justice (Kohlberg) and social responsibility (Gilligan). To make matters more complicated, Kurdeck (1977) has found that differentiation of self and other is not a unitary dimension, but composed of at least three dimensions of affect, cognition and perceptual role-taking.

Thus, it is our view that an adequate conceptualization of moral development must include the progressive differentiation and integration of an understanding of self and other, and of justice and responsibility. In addition, it is hypothesized that each of these is in turn composed of perceptual, affective and cognitive dimensions. The theoretical perspective on which this is based is derived from the writings of Baldwin (1897), Mead (1934), Sullivan (1953), and more recently Loevinger (1976) and Riegel (1975).

Given this perspective on moral development, it follows that experiences in childhood that influence the child's sense of self and other form the basic foundation upon which a mature morality develops. In

the remainder of this paper we will outline what is currently known about the development of sense of self and other and ways in which helping professionals can facilitate optimal development along the egocentric and sociocentric dimensions at each stage of development.

From initial predispositions to respond socially (Condon, 1975; Goren, 1975), the infant rapidly develops a complex repertoire of social behaviors (Schaffer, 1977; Stern, 1974). The most significant development in terms of the infant's early differentiation of self may be the infant's primitive experiences of a sense of control (Watson, 1972). From both an egocentric and sociocentric perspective, research suggests that the primary need of the infant is for a person who can provide consistent and sensitive social stimulation (Bell, 1970; Bromwich, 1977).

Toddlerhood is often depicted as a time of rebellion and obstinacy, a troubled time in which the child must learn to control innate, pleasurable desires. This view of toddlerhood fails to recognize the strong motivation to demonstrate competence and mastery (White, 1959) that is characteristic of the child who has not been unduly frustrated or frightened. The eagerness and persistence that toddlers exhibit in learning new skills attest to the strength of the child's social competence motivation.

From the egocentric perspective, the toddler's sense of self is derived from what skills are acquired, and as Erikson (1950) suggested, what the child is able to will. Professionals must help parents perceive this period as "positivism" rather than "negativism", focusing on the positive enthusiasm in the child's assertive "No".

Recent research challenges the traditional conception of the toddler as socially incompetent (Becker, 1977; Clarke-Stewart, 1975; Rheingold, Hay, & West, 1976). These studies suggest that the traditional assumptions about the social incompetence of the toddler derive largely from cultural factors, that is, the lack of opportunity for peer interaction among toddlers and the tendency of adults to remain aloof with strangers. The toddler then requires primarily opportunity and freedom to explore, to initiate, and to master to acquire a sense of self and other. Professionals need to encourage caregivers at this stage to provide their toddlers with frequent opportunities for social interactions with peers and other adults, beginning in their own home. Such opportunities should enable toddlers to develop a better sense of self through their spontaneous interactions with others.

New directions in research in children's social development are beginning to reveal that the Piagetian perspective has led us to underestimate the social competence of the preschooler. The emerging field of sociolinguistics provides evidence of the complexity of the young

child's understanding of the social world (Ervin-Tripp & Mitchell-Kernan, 1977). Naturalistic observations of the play interactions of preschoolers are creating significant modifications in the conceptualization of the preschooler as "egocentric" (Garvey & Hogan, 1973; Maratsos, 1973). Evidence suggests that opportunity for peer interaction, role taking and, especially, sociodramatic play are critical for the differentiation of self and other in the preschool years (Nahir & Yussen, 1977; Van Lieshout, Leckie, & Smits-VanSonsbeck, 1976).

A number of studies (Keller, 1976; Urberg & Docherty, 1976) revealed that role-taking is a multi-dimensional, situation-specific skill. Thus, research is needed to identify the developmental sequences involved in the various role taking skills in relation to specific concepts and situations. This research will require searching for the underlying structures that determine conceptual and situational complexity.

The major obstacle to the personal and social development of the child in the early school years is very often the school. One of the major problems in the school is the predominance of competitive and individualistic classrooms. Johnson and Johnson (1977) presented compelling evidence to demonstrate that "almost all instructional activities should take place within a cooperative goal structure" (p. 232). Identifying another major shortcoming in the educational system, Lewis (1977) emphasized the child's need for a socio-emotional foundation to learning experiences. This need is particularly critical in the young and in children with learning problems. Thus, to promote optimal development of understanding of self and others in the early school years, a warm, supportive, caring, socially diverse environment is required. In addition, frequent opportunities for cooperative learning will promote the development of prosocial behaviors.

The primary need of the middle school child is for peer relations that facilitate development of humanistic values, especially an intimate relationship with a same-sexed peer (Sullivan, 1953). In many communities and schools, specific intervention is needed or the peer influence may result in antihumanistic values (Bixenstine, DeConte, & Bixenstine, 1976).

In adolescence, the emphasis in the past has been on the individual's need to establish a sense of identity (Erikson, 1950). The crucial awareness for the helping professional, from the perspective of this paper, is that establishing identity must occur in a social context. Much has been written about the adolescent's egocentrism; the avenue out of this close-sightedness is through social interaction, sharing of fears, dreams, doubts, and challenging beliefs.

In establishing an intimate relationship in adulthood (Erikson,

1950), a highly differentiated sense of the other is acutely important. Many of our current social problems stem from our failure to have conceptualized adequately the feelings, needs, and thoughts of the other in relation to the needs of the self. In effective parenting, the highly differentiated sense of the other is again critical. Ainsworth (1973) suggested that the essential parenting skill is the ability to see the baby's perspective, and throughout childhood, it is terribly important for the parent-child relationship that the parent be sensitive to the needs and perceptions of the child. It is not easy for an adult to see the world from the child's naive perspective, and the professional can be invaluable in helping parents develop this sensitivity.

In old age, the extent to which the individual has integrated his/her sense of self with a sense of the other will determine the individual's ability to face death with integrity (Erikson, 1950). A popular theory in the aging literature — disengagement (Cumming & Henry, 1961) — that the aged must detach themselves from an active and involved role in the society, and decrease their social interactions is challenged by the perspective here. Gutmann (1974) presented cross-cultural data to suggest that disengagement is not a universal phenomenon and may be largely culturally imposed. Shanan (1976) cited evidence to argue that ability to cope actively develops as a result of engagement in a social network. He recommended research on the process of engagement/disengagement during the life-span and its effects on the feelings of security, anxiety, and identity.

CONCLUSION

The process of differentiation of self and other continues throughout the lifespan, though qualitatively different at each stage. The essential requirement at each stage is that egocentric development be balanced by sociocentric growth. This guideline can be useful to the helping professional who is committed to the fostering of optimal moral development.

In closing, a cautionary statement is warranted. Unless basic deficiency needs are met (Maslow, 1962), efforts to advance moral development will be futile. Children who are hungry, poorly sheltered, frightened, and unloved, are poor candidates for developing a differentiated sense of self or other (Haymes & Green, 1977). Therefore, those of us concerned about promoting children's moral development must first be concerned about insuring all children the right to adequate food, shelter, and love.

Traditionally, psychologists have argued that as a science, psychol-

ogy should be neutral in terms of specifying goals and values (Kerlinger, 1964). However, as developmental psychology moves closer to identifying optimal processes and stages of development, the possibility of designing programs for the 'optimization' of human development becomes realistic (Branstadter & Schneewind, 1977). Developmental psychologists, most notably Piaget and Loevinger, have provided us with models of development that sketch the broad outlines of human development. Research is now needed to discover the processes that facilitate development through the life span. Given that information, its application to the amelioration of human society seems imperative. The perspective advocated in this paper — a balanced concern for the individual's emerging sense of personal and social competence throughout the life span — would contribute to the optimization of human development.

¹The complete version of the paper can be obtained by contacting the authors at the Institute for the Development of Human Resources of the University of Florida in Gainesville.