Using narratives to explore Mexican children's representations of justice

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Abstract

This paper explores children´s representations of justice in Mexico through the use of three different narratives in which the characters are involved in different types of transgressions. The study is being conducted with primary students (3º, 4º, 5º and 6º grade) and secondary students in Chiapas. In this case, a set of hypothetical situations as dilemmas are presented to students, using three different scenarios for each narrative that have been specifically designed for this work. The aim of this study is to explore the deontological elements used by children of different ages when they try to explain what happened in the narratives presented to them. The data is analysed based on the different type of domains (moral, conventional, prudential) contained in the stories and in terms of the three different dilemmatic situations that have been designed for each of the narratives, that is, a dilemmatic ending situation, an uncertain ending situation and a transgression ending situation. The qualitative results from the study are being presented here.

Keywords: deontic reasoning, moral, story structure, school children, corruption

Introduction

Corruption behavior attracts the attention of public opinion and social researchers due to its diverse forms of expression. In order to study the reasoning of children in elementary and middle school about this type of behavior, a situation was prepared by designing a story with empirically observed transgression sequences (see Plascencia, 2011). Reasoning is 'is any systematic mental process that constructs or evaluates implications from premises of some sort' (Bucciarelli, Khemlani y Johnson-Laird, 2008, p. 123).

In this article, we assume that the corruption process as such consists in a transgression or offense that is witnessed by an observer and overlooked due to mutual benefits (for offender and observer). For example, bribes (*mordidas* in Mexican Spanish) of transportation agents consist in a compensation for transportation agents so they won't write a ticket—so that the offense never reaches a judge with a rule-based framework that carries a sanction. The initial offender (someone who runs a red light, for example) has broken a formal rules system: green light means go, yellow means slow down, red means stop. What do children think upon reading a story about corruption? Do they derive the same reasoning when the initial transgression is from a different domain of social knowledge than those described by Elliot Turiel and colleagues? Does reasoning

vary if the story ends in conflict, ends with a resolution made in favor of the corruption, or has no clear resolution?

This article analyzes the deontic elements (must, can't, should or shouldn't) in short texts written by children after reading a story with two offenses. The first is a transgression of some domain of social knowledge: morals (stealing), convention (spitting in a classroom), or prudential (playing with real knives). The second transgression is when the offender offers money to the observer for not telling on the original offender to an authority figure.

Elementary- and middle-school students were presented with three stories with one of three possible endings: a dilemma, a corruption-accepting resolution, and an inconclusive ending.

In human social interactions, normative systems are formed that condition, influence, or permit behavior expression or constriction, and these systems are both individually and collectively generated. Behavior, as observable expression, is related to intention and with norm-creating systems. Social contact is of primordial derivation for the human species and its survival. In the first years of life, exchanges of information on the use and management of the world's objects take place, the capacity is developed to understand and represent possible interactions; all of these are evolutionary achievements of humanity (Tomasello, 1999), that will be practically maintained throughout further 'normal' development.

In studies on reasoning about the social environment and with the perspective of social-cognitive domains (Turiel, 1984, 1998, 2010), children from young ages on (around three years old) use references to rules to evaluate situations of social transgression. As such, there is a comprehension of rules that favor the social-conventional order, including those that refer to morality and those that have to do with personal choices and decisions. Thus, the understanding of these normative systems is not homogenous.

Although knowledge of social matters is extracted and constructed on the basis of interactions, moral rules tend to be valued by people as universally applicable independently of context, while social conventions are observed to be more linked to context and based in specific social situations. On the other hand, aspects of the personal domain are observed within a private domain in which decisions are made for and by oneself. Social rules attempt to establish order, demonstrate the belonging of actions, and define the modes by which diverse behaviors should be expressed around predefined criteria (see Plascencia, 2010b).

Among social rules are morals. As mentioned by Plascencia (2010a, p. 247), diverse resources and forms have been researched in order to study morality. These include the determination of the participation level of agents involved in moral matters, the degree of intentionality and its relationship with preceding and consequential actions, the formulation and degree to which normative systems are implicit or explicit, involved values and the relationship of all of these mentioned aspects with actions in context. Moral psychology studies reasoning, emotions and behavior of individuals in social

interactions influenced by implicit, explicit, conscious and unconscious normative systems, in public and private domains.

This condition awakes the interest of research that sets out to learn whether the rational position of individuals (reasoning), in situations of distinct social domains and with different amounts of contextual information, show different deontic reasoning. In part, this research concern stems from the fact that traditionally stories have been used with only one of the following three structures: 1) a dilemmatic ending, 2) a committed offense (in which one of the possibilities of structure 1 is chosen), and 3) an inconclusive ending that doesn't require the adoption of the dilemmatic situation. Indeed, in evaluations of moral actions in their contexts, one or another of these structural forms appears.

If someone walks along the road and leaves trash, or if one person slaps another on the bus, do we think about both actions in the same way, or based on the type of rule-braking taking place? Or, do we base our reasoning on the context and what we know about it? Or, is our reasoning based on the outcomes of each action? In other words, do we really take into account the deontic element that we refer to (in case we do)? Why do these actions produce certain emotions and kinds of reasoning in us, and why do we find it difficult to ignore them? And, if some actions can be ignored while others cannot, what gives rise to such phenomena? As Darley (2009) reports, when people experience an injustice they tend to grow indignant and seek a punishment for the offense, more as an intuitive or heuristic act with a strongly emotional element than as a rational issue.

Questions inserted into the topic of human social cognition encouraged the preparation of research on the development of concepts of justice (Plascencia, 2009) and one of the settings for evaluating justice was that of corruption. How does the comprehension of what one must, can, should or shouldn't do in social interactions appear in individuals after reading a story about transgressions? Why does one or another kind of reasoning influence the form by which individuals conceive of the degree of obligation, prohibition, or indifference with respect to their own behavior or the expected behavior of others? While this article benefits from the answer to the first question, other studies are made necessary by the second question. Individuals—and this could be said to be universal—elements and systems of interaction that serve as a basis for creating and maintaining representation objects that serve as normatively conditions relationship objects. Within these elements human social cognition is found, thus allowing individuals to have a comprehension of individuals, objects, and symbols within their physical and social environment, and their own position within these latter elements. From a tender age, individuals' reasoning on what one should do, can do, and must not do, is developed. This is referred to as deontic reasoning (Beller, 2009; Bucciarelli & Johnson-Laird, 2005; Fiddick, 2006) and influences the form in which people relate with one another and with objects they use in their interactions. From three years of age on, humans understand when a norm has been violated and even earlier, at two-and-a-half, spontaneous language has been found that suggests deontic reasoning (Beller, 2009). Children warn that it is prohibited to hurt others, or that going to public parks is allowed, or that they are obligated to maintain certain relationships with the State during their lifetime (pay taxes, vote, be included in a national registry, etc.).

Toward an analysis of social interactions where normative systems are presented

From the perspective of this article, three basic elements taken from moral psychology literature should be present in the interaction process: a) agents/patients, b) content, and c) type of action. Agents and patients are individuals who participate in normative actions. They capture, process, and act, that is to say, they operate the deontological system. The context includes the circumstances that favor, facilitate, impede or concrete action, as well as the space and time where interactions take place. Actions are the relationship and manifestations (reasoning, behavior, etc.) of the previous elements that depend on the existence of prescriptive or proscriptive requirements.

Through the two scenes utilized by Bucciarelli, Khemlani and Johnson-Laird (2008) examples are provided of the three basic elements described. The analysis is ours, but we present the scenes utilized by these authors. They present the two example stories to make a different point. The scenes are presented as transgressions that have already been committed and not as dilemmas or unsolved conflicts. In contrast, in the present research we explore deontic reasoning produced in children between 8 and 14 years old after reading stories with different endings: dilemmatic, committed transgressions and an inconclusive ending.

Example 1: Morally good event
A woman donated one of her kidneys to a friend of hers who was suffering from a diseased kidney and, as a result saved him from a certain death (p. 128).

Example 2: Immoral events
A violent bully terrorized the playground and beat up a younger girl with a hammer for no apparent reason (p. 128).

Both examples would appear to structurally identical stories—agent-action-effect—despite the fact that in the immoral events the effect is only implied (injury). For Gray and Wegner (2009), morality is presented by the participation of at least two people, the agent and the patient: he/she who commits (the organ donor, the perpetrator) the correct or incorrect act (to donate, to hit), and he/she who receives it (the man who received a kidney, the mistreated girl). However, despite their apparent structural similarity, differences in form and content exist that make both situations vary fundamentally. For instance, the gender of the participants varies: in the first example a woman does a morally good deed, while in the second example, a male (boy) carries out an immoral act. Additionally, the effects alter the situation of the receiving agents in a different manner although both relate to well-being (facilitation and causation of injury).

In the first example, the agent is a donor and the patient the receiver of this donation; the action is the donation; the context is made up of the state of the friend (suffering with possibility of dying), the possible situation of the donor (she could live despite donating, but in the future could have renal complications and will only have one kidney), the friendship, the irreversibility of the action (she will donate and the good will never be

returned) and the deontic requirements (Should she donate because he is a friend? Should she not because it is an irreversible act?).

In example two, the agent is the bully and the girl is the patient, the action to hitting, and the context is the inherent violence in the agent who hits, the randomness of the attack, the instrument used to hit with, the age of the mistreated agent, the recess and as such, the school.

The hypothesis is that the interaction of the three elements can be reasoned out differently by groups in different conditions, due to such differences as age, based on the contents of the story. The implications of a kidney donation are not perceived in the same way by children as by adults, and as such their responses will show distinct forms of argumentation. Children might think of the *per se* benefit (donation as giving) but not in the health effects (donation as permanently losing one's own organ). From another angle, donating a kidney and donating time or money do not imply the same kind of reasoning.

The hypothesis of our investigation is that presenting a structurally identical story with information contents from distinct social knowledge domains, as well as annulment or broadening of a part of the structure, will provoke different deontic reasoning and requirements. One of the central questions of this study is to what degree the modification of structure (ex. context, patient and agent) or content can generate new guidelines for organizing reasoning or if they suppose the use of different domains, and whether they generate deontic reasoning or not, by directly asking for their opinion.

One concern in hypothetical or actual situations is how much this reasoning effectively and directionally corresponds to the behavior type. It is outside the scope of this article to address this concern, but this element is worth considering in the platform used for reasoning. Would people who believe that a kidney donation is a moral act really donate themselves? How does the adherence to a normative system that promotes service and attention toward others—such as religious beliefs—condition reasoning about the same kind of actions outside of the religious context?

Introducing a different patient or context can make the action be seen as immoral rather than moral, such as in the following modifications:

Donating a kidney for   1] a satanic ritual
                              2] Adoring God
                              3] Use in medical science
                              4] Being seen as charitable by others

Although the action is identical, the context and the patients have changed. So, what elements produce the moral setting? Should the action be considered as a whole, meaning that the elements that we have separated into agent, context and action should really be observed as a united whole?

Methodology

Based on the above concerns, three stories were prepared about corruption with variations in the social action of the initial transgression and three possible endings. There are three kinds of transgressions: of morals (stealing), convention (spitting) and prudential (playing with knives). Additionally, each story may have three endings: a) a dilemmatic situation, b) a committed offense, or c) an inconclusive ending, as can be observed in Table 1.

Instruments

Written stories on corruption as proposed by Plascencia (2011) with structural modifications:

Table 1. Stories of corruption [Alternative domains shown within brackets]

Type of ending	Story
Transgression committed by observer	Juan sees his friend Paco playing with a real knife [robbing, spitting in class]. Paco realizes that Juan has seen him, so Paco offers Juan money in exchange for not telling anybody. After thinking about it, Juan accepts the money that Paco offers him.
Dilemmatic ending	Juan sees his friend Paco playing with a real knife [robbing, spitting in class]. Paco realizes that Juan has seen him, so Paco offers Juan money in exchange for not telling anybody. Juan is thinking about whether or not he should accept the money that Paco is offering.
Inconclusive	Juan sees his friend Paco playing with a real knife [robbing, spitting in class]. Paco realizes that Juan has seen him, so Paco offers Juan money in exchange for not telling anybody.

As can be seen, the design is three stories by three endings. The gender and age of respondents will also be taken into account.

The story narrates a situation in which one agent (B) commits a transgression (X: stealing, spitting in class or playing with knives). At the same time as the offense is committed, there is an observer (A) who witnesses it. The offender realizes that he/she has been observed and offers money to the observer in exchange for not telling anyone (C). Up until this moment, all three stories are identical:

Table 2. Structural moments in the corruption process
(original design based on Plascencia, 2011)

1	*A* directly observes that *B* does *X* [or, *B* commits *X* and is observed by *A*]		
2	*B* realizes that *A* has observed him/her committing *X*		
3	*B* offers *A* money to keep *X* from *C*		
	I. Dilemma	II. Acceptance	III. Uncertain
4	*A* evaluates the proposal of *B*	*A* accepts *B*'s money, and keeps *X* from *C* [Yb]	[The story ends in moment 3]

Assumptions of the stories

1. A recognizes the action of B
2. B supposes that A judges the action to be a transgression for which an offender should be told on (A will accuse B before others)
3. B tries to use a means to achieve a different result than that which is expected if A acts

Procedure

In classrooms, the three written stories were given as shown in Table 3. There was no control over the application, stories and questions were simply given to each student with the help of the teacher. The instructions were, one, to pass the sheets of paper around the classroom, two, to tell students that if they wanted to participate then they should fill out the sheets, and three, to give them time to write. The written instructions were: 1) Read the story, and 2) What do you think of the story? Write what you think of the story. A period of time between five and 12 minutes was given to read and write about each story.

Participants

The sample (351 boys, 343 girls; mean age 11 years) was intentional, not probabilistic, and balanced for independent variables (see Table 3).

The order in which the stories were given was balanced as shown in Table 3. Each participant answered three stories, one from each domain (1 knife/prudential, 2 spitting/convention, 3 stealing/morals), with the same type of ending.

Table 3. Balancing story applications based on the ending type

Sequence	Ending type					
	Acceptance		Dilemmatic		Uncertain	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
123	24	20	23	16	21	19
132	20	17	21	11	17	20
213	25	16	23	16	17	20
231	18	23	15	18	15	28
312	19	23	18	20	21	21
321	21	22	17	14	16	19

The story was prepared with pairs of masculine characters (Paco and Juan, Pedro and Rubén, Felipe and Javier), to distinguish between stories. Each participant gave their opinion about three stories from distinct domains (stealing, spitting in class or playing with knives) that were presented in all possible orders, but always with the same kind of ending for each reader.

Variables

Independent: domain content of the initial transgression (morals, convention, and prudential), ending type, gender, age.

Dependent: those constructed based on the writings and related to deontic elements of prohibition, obligation and permission, following the deontic square of Beller (2009).

Results

In order to prepare for analysis, the children's answers were transcribed literally and the elements of content were pulled out and grouped in categories based on the deontic structure of Beller (2009). Additional categories were defined through a thematic analysis and qualitative results are presented.

Children called the situation of corruption in the story by several names: bribing, manipulation, cover-up, buying, accomplice, fraud, and selling-out.

Categories were created as presented below. The categories are used to exhibit the deontic elements in the dynamics between agents, as well as representations of justice in these situations.

Prohibition

    a)   To reject the offensive action (stealing, spitting in class, playing with knives)
    b)   To reject the proposed transgression (offering money)
    c)   To reject the action of accepting the proposed transgression (accepting money in exchange for not telling about the initial offense)

Examples:

    a)   <u>It's really bad that he's playing with a knife.</u> He could get hurt or hurt somebody, and I think that Juan should tell somebody that he was playing with a knife and shouldn't accept the money (15-year-old boy).
    b)   <u>I think it's bad to buy people so they keep their mouth shut</u> and Rubén shouldn't accept because he doesn't realize that the person is buying him and he should tell the truth even if he's scared.
    c)   <u>Don't take the money</u> because it's a manipulation (13-year-old boy).

Obligation

    a)   To condition the action toward a given end
    b)   Obligation to tell others when an offense has been committed

Examples:

a) That is really bad because a boy can't rob even if he needs it he shouldn't do that, and if someone saw him <u>he has to face up to his mistake</u> and Javier shouldn't have accepted that money (10-year-old girl).
b) He can't take the money and <u>has to tell his teacher</u> (10-year-old girl).

Repetition of the action

The action will continue or the damage will increase if the offense isn't penalized.
Example: Felipe shouldn't accept Javier's money <u>because Javier could get used to stealing from his classmates</u>… (14-year-old girl)

Complicity

Accepting the proposal of the second transgression (not telling) makes the observer an accomplice of the first transgression, implying that he/she is also an offender.

Example: Felipe has to tell <u>because if he doesn't it means that he agrees</u> (13-year-old girl).

Bribing

The action is wrong because it is a bribe, a manipulation.
Example: <u>Pedro shouldn't take the money because it's a bribe</u> and what Ruben did isn't right (nine-year-old girl).

The transgression does harm because:
a) The offender (real or possible) exposes himself to harm.
b) The offender (real or possible) exposes others to harm.
c) Juan should have told not to play with the knife <u>because he could get hurt</u> and Juan shouldn't accept the money (14-year-old boy).
d) It's really bad that he offered him money to keep quiet and <u>Juan should tell because he could hurt somebody</u>

Punishment

Punishment is called for, either to repair damage or to avoid future transgressions.

Example: That is not okay because he accepted the money that Ruben gave him. Pedro should tell the teacher <u>so that she punishes him and he learns not to spit in class</u> (nine-year-old girl).

Fear of punishment

There is an obligation to tell on the offender or reject the proposed transgression, for fear of being punished.

Example: If the boy accepts the money, he doesn't tell anybody because then they will know <u>and he will go to jail too</u>.

Conclusions

In children's texts, deontic elements appear that reflect ways of confronting situations of transgression: prohibition and obligation. The observer in the story is given the moral responsibility to tell, either to a teacher or authority figure, to the misbehaving boy, or to others. In fact, not telling is directly linked with the responsibility for the observed offense - making the observer an accomplice. As such, justice in the story lies with prohibition of transgressions and obligation to take precautionary, compensatory, or restorative measures.

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