

## Reflecting on Moral Development and Education

**Education and the Moral Domain**, by Larry P. Nucci, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 242 pp., \$54.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

Reviewed by  
Ben Kirshner  
*Stanford University*

In *Education in the Moral Domain*, Larry P. Nucci (2001) presents research on young people's moral and social development. Central to the book is Nucci's exposition of *domain theory*, which posits that people's judgments about their social world are organized in three distinct cognitive domains: the moral, the conventional, and the personal. Here he summarizes his principal claims:

Perhaps the most powerful and important part of these research findings for educators in pluralist democracies is that the domain of morality is structured around issues that are universal and nonarbitrary. The core of human morality is a concern for fairness and human welfare. Thus, there is a basic ... morality around which educators can construct their educational practices without imposing arbitrary standards or retreating into value relativism. (p. 19)

The book is divided into two parts: The first discusses moral development; the second addresses implications for schoolteachers' classroom practices.

For some readers of *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, Nucci's argument that the domain of morality is distinct from culturally specific value systems may be difficult to accept. His claim comes out of research firmly rooted in a constructivist, Piagetian framework, with its attendant assumptions of "psychic unity" (Shweder, 1990, p. 6) and developmental stages. Also, the book pays little attention to the role of cultural activity in the development of moral thought (Cole, 1996). However, I recommend Nucci's book for those interested in debates about the relation between person and culture, and how this relation is expressed in a person's moral and social cognition. In this review, I begin by explaining Nucci's central claims and their contributions to the field and then critique two important limitations of his approach.

### DOMAIN THEORY

Domain theory turned Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development "on its side" (as cited in Shweder, 1990). Whereas Kohlberg conceived of moral development as moving in an invariant sequence from egoistic to conventional to moral forms of reasoning, domain theory offers three

domains of understanding (moral, conventional, and personal), which have their own distinct developmental stages beginning in early childhood and which are differentiated by individuals of all ages.

From the perspective of domain theory, *moral* issues represent universally applicable truths, which are structured by underlying conceptions of justice, rights, and welfare. For example, prototypical moral violations would involve hitting or stealing. In contrast, *conventions* are culturally specific norms that help maintain arbitrary and agreed-upon uniformities in social behavior. Violations of conventional rules vary from place to place: In a traditional school setting, a rule violation might be to address a teacher by his or her first name or to refuse to wear the school uniform. A third domain investigated in this approach is the domain of *personal* choices and preferences, which mark the boundary between self and others. Reasoning in the personal domain is closely linked to questions of autonomy, agency, and individual rights. Domain theorists such as Nucci recognize that, although some events are specific to a particular domain, many events in real life involve "domain mixture," which makes decision making more complex.

A second important feature of domain theory is its constructivist understanding of human development. Children's social interactions are a stimulus for structural transformations in the way that they reason about their social world. A key point here is that moral understanding, in particular, develops in relationships dominated not by authority but instead by egalitarian social relationships, typically with peers.

### CONTRIBUTIONS FROM DOMAIN THEORY

*Moral education* is a somewhat ominous term: Whose morality? In support of what cultural system? As such, it has been a contested subject in debates between conservative advocates of character education on the one hand and progressive educators on the other (Bennett, 1991; Kohn, 1997; Turiel, 1989). Whereas character education tends to prioritize the teaching of virtues and habits such as honesty and loyalty, progressive educators tend to prioritize critical thinking and reflective judgment (Turiel, 1989).

Given the recent popularity of "character education," Nucci's objections are refreshing and important. First, from a developmental standpoint, he argues that character-based approaches rest on flawed understandings of human behavior. Persons do not have global traits but instead behave differently depending on the situation and the domain of social reasoning that is most salient. Second, as implied by his constructivist approach, children are not passive recipients of adult morality but instead actively make sense of moral rules through social interaction. Third, Nucci endorses a progressive stance that critical moral reflection is a central feature of responsible education:

One cannot limit the notion of "good" children to conformity to the status quo and, at the same time, engage in the curricular and classroom discipline practices advocated in this book ... moral education entails enabling students to employ their moral understandings to evaluate the conventional practices of their own culture ... [because] morality may require changes in the ways in which society operates. (p. 204)

Another contribution from research in domain theory pertains to debates about culture, self, and morality. For example, recent work in cross-cultural psychology has advanced the view that

members of Asian cultures tend to adopt interdependent collectivist moral orientations, whereas members of European cultures tend to adopt independent, individualistic moral orientations (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). Nucci argues that it is important to "resist the temptation to view cultures as homogenous" (p. 64). He discusses one set of studies that explored how Druze villagers of Lebanon thought about issues of fairness and duty with regard to gender relationships. The researchers found that, whereas men described role relations in terms of obligations to the normative order, women were likely to reflect on the imbalanced power relationships that support masculine autonomy while depriving women of it:

The almost inverse responses of the Druze Arab men and women indicate that perceptions of the "morality" of hierarchical systems depend upon "where you sit" within the hierarchy. The compliance of the women was not the simple result of commitment to a "moral code" of respect for authority and tradition, but also included a pragmatic response to power . . . . The men's sense of "right" was offset by the women's sense of injustice. (p. 100)

In other words, Nucci and his colleagues (Wainryb & Turiel, 1994) want to show the ways in which people, even those living in "collectivist" societies, apply judgments about justice and individual rights to their everyday experience.

This approach represents an important contribution to cultural psychology: It reminds us to acknowledge not just differences across cultures but also differences within them according to social position and hierarchy. Furthermore, it accentuates the critical moral agency of the self. In this view, moral development is not limited to one's participation in a community but also includes one's capacity to step back and critically assess that community if it violates principles of justice, rights, and welfare. Such a position may resonate with those readers who espouse critical and progressive politics in their own teaching and research.

### CRITIQUING THE MORAL-CONVENTIONAL DISTINCTION

A central claim of domain theory—that people everywhere distinguish between morality and culturally specific convention and that morality is universal and nonarbitrary—poses a challenge to certain assumptions in cultural psychology. It would seem to contradict a basic Vygotskian position that culture fundamentally influences the nature of development (Cole, 1996). Unfortunately, although this is one of the most interesting features of Nucci's argument, issues of culture occupy the shortest chapter in the book (13 pages).

Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1990) challenged these assumptions of domain theory in their research on moral reasoning and cultural practices in India, where they found that even so-called "conventional obligations," such as dress, eating, and religious practices, were described in "postconventional" moral terms. In a lengthy assessment of domain theory, Shweder et al. concluded that the conventional-moral distinction is not universal but is instead limited to the United States, where the social contract is viewed as an agreement of autonomous, voluntary agents. They also argued that the content of moral obligations is not the same everywhere but instead is shaped in part through "social communication," that is, culturally specific patterns of construing and interpreting events. (A thoughtful counterargument is presented in Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987.)

These same issues are raised by Nucci's studies of moral reasoning among religiously observant Jews and Christians in the United States: Do religious adherents distinguish between universal moral rules and religion-specific conventions? If so, does this mean that religious authority is distinct from, and subordinate to, universal morality?

Nucci presents intriguing evidence that even religiously observant children and adolescents make distinctions between morality and convention. In interviews, Nucci and colleagues asked three sets of questions about different rule violations, which pertain to alterability (could this rule be changed if everyone agreed to change it?), universal applicability (suppose another religion didn't have a rule about the act, would it be wrong for them to engage in the act anyway?), and contingency (suppose God hadn't provided this law, would it still be wrong for you to do the act?). Nucci reports that conventional rules (the day of Sabbath, dietary laws, etc.) were viewed as alterable, nonuniversally applicable, and contingent on God's word. In contrast, moral rules (against stealing or hitting) were found to be inalterable, universally applicable, and not contingent on God's word. This led Nucci to conclude, "Even for deeply religious children from fundamentalist or orthodox backgrounds, morality stems from criteria independent of God's word" (p. 33).

Nucci's conclusion is a provocative one. Whereas culturally specific beliefs structure conventional rules, moral rules are independent of culture or religion. What is striking about these conclusions is that they sound so modern or, more specifically, Kantian. One of Kant's central contributions to the European Enlightenment was to limit religious authority by asserting a universal sphere of moral reason. Alistair McIntyre (1983) summarized Kant's position: "Hence a rational morality will lay down principles which both can and ought to be held by all men, independent of circumstances and conditions, and which could consistently be obeyed by every rational agent on every occasion" (pp. 43-44). The implicit challenge to religion, monarchy, and other premodern forms of authority was that they were to become subordinate to this "rational morality."

And yet religion (not to mention other premodern forms of authority) has not fully acquiesced. For example, in Judaism there is a long tradition of continuing internal debate about the relationship between human authority and divine authority in moral matters, which not all adherents resolve in favor of Nucci's findings. Some in the Jewish tradition challenge the assumption that morality should be subject to human authority rather than divine authority (Fackenheim, 1968). Another way of making this point is that universal moral principles do not necessarily come from a domain independent of the religious tradition but may be internal to it (Schweid, 1984-1985). Without going further into theological debates, the implication is straightforward: The decision to subordinate moral law to an arena outside of God's law is a theological (and thus cultural) one. What Nucci describes as a fact of human nature is in fact an issue decided in different ways by different religious traditions at different points in their history.

What then explains Nucci's persuasive empirical data? It may be that the hypothetical situations in the interview protocol force research participants to make distinctions that are foreign to their religious understanding. For example, here is one transcript:

I: Suppose God had written in the Torah that Jews should steal, would it then be right for Jews to steal?

M: No.

I: Why not?

M: Even if God says it, we know He can't mean it, because we know it is a very bad thing to steal. We know He can't mean it. Maybe it's a test, but we just know he can't mean it. (p. 42)

In the previous section, the participant agrees that it would be wrong to steal even if God had said it was not, which, in conjunction with other interviews, Nucci takes as evidence that there is a moral criterion independent of God's word. But then the participant also states that the scenario is unrealistic ("We know He can't mean it"). The very implausibility of the scenario may have forced participants into logical choices that were foreign to their own religious understanding and upbringing.

The study also raises questions of interpretation. What does it mean when an experiment leads to findings that contradict people's native understanding of their religion or belief system? Whose authority is more compelling? While some researchers might argue that such experiments reveal a deeper truth that lies underneath the surface facts of everyday life, it is important to think reflexively about the assumptions that are often embedded in research, especially if they are at odds with people's lived reality.

### MORAL IDENTITY

A final criticism pertains to Nucci's emphasis on the individual, which becomes most problematic in his discussion of "moral identity." In Nucci's view, those who engage in moral action do so because they desire to act in ways that are consistent with their own sense of self as a moral being. This view promotes an autonomous, bounded view of individual identity, as if identity were solely a matter of individual choice.

In contrast, sociocultural perspectives highlight the fundamentally social aspects of identity (Wenger, 1998) and acknowledge the dimensions of power and social position that are present in any community (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). When applied to the moral sphere, such an approach would also consider a person's participation in a meaningful community. It would examine the cultural practices associated with a group's moral beliefs and the ways that people appropriate them. Acknowledging these social and cultural features of moral identity can help us to better understand situations in which people struggle collectively to bring their world into conformity with ideals of justice.

### CONCLUSION

All told, Nucci's book is a thought-provoking, evidence-rich discussion of moral cognition and its implications for moral education. He offers convincing critiques of character education and the homogenizing impulse in some strands of cross-cultural psychology. At the same time, the book does not take into account the culturally or historically specific features of domain theory and gives little consideration to dissenting perspectives from cultural psychology or activity theory. Whereas Nucci adopts the classic psychological emphasis on the individual, these other approaches tend to analyze a cultural system or activity as the unit of analysis. Future work that brings together these perspectives in coherent ways could provide a rich new vocabulary for thinking about moral action.

## REFERENCES

- Bennett, W. J. (1991). Moral literacy and the formation of character. In J. S. Benninga (Ed.), *Moral, character, and civic education in the elementary school* (pp. 131–138). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fackenheim, E. (1968). *Quest for past and future*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kohn, A. (1997). How not to teach values: A critical look at character education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78, 428–439.
- Markus, H. R., Mullally, P., & Kitayama, S. (1997). Selfways: Diversity in modes of cultural participation. In U. Neisser & D. Jopling (Eds.), *The conceptual self in context: Culture, experience, self-understanding* (pp. 13–61). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- McIntyre, A. (1983). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press.
- Schweid, E. (1984–1985, Winter). Two neo-orthodox responses to secularization: I. Samson Raphael Hirsch. *Immanuel*, 19, 107–117.
- Shweder, R. (1990). What is cultural psychology? In J. W. Stigler, R. A. Shweder, & G. Herdt (Eds.), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 1–46). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Shweder, R., Mahapatra, M., & Miller, J. (1990). Culture and moral development. In J. W. Stigler, R. A. Shweder, & G. Herdt (Eds.), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 140–204). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Turiel, E. (1989). Multifaceted social reasoning and educating for character, culture, and development. In L. Nucci (Ed.), *Moral development and character education: A dialogue* (pp. 161–182). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.
- Turiel, E., Killen, M., & Helwig, C. C. (1987). Morality: Its structure, functions and vagaries. In J. Kagan & S. Lamb (Eds.), *The emergence of morality in young children* (pp. 155–243). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wainryb, C., & Turiel, E. (1994). Dominance, subordination, and concepts of personal entitlements in cultural contexts. *Child Development*, 65, 1701–1722.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Copyright of Mind, Culture & Activity is the property of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.