

# Children's judgments of parental fairness: An Indian perspective

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*The study examined children's moral reasoning with specific reference to adult interventions, across age and gender. Seventy-two children from the age groups 6-8 years and 10-12 years respectively were presented with two hypothetical vignettes pertaining to Piaget's justice framework of moral reasoning. Chi-square analysis and descriptive analysis of the moral reasoning in terms of frequencies and percentages were performed. The results indicated that age was significantly related with moral judgment and reasoning in the justice vignettes. However, Piaget's contention about children's authority orientation in moral judgment did not find complete support. No gender differences were found.*

Moral judgment, moral reasoning, justice, middle childhood, potential fairness, India

## INTRODUCTION

The field of moral development has been dominated by the cognitive-developmental approach for several decades. Jean Piaget was one of the earliest proponents of children's moral development. Piaget's theory of cognitive and moral development focused on the reciprocal interactions as the basis of children's development, which led to the understanding of experiences. According to Piaget (1965) it was through peer relations that children learnt a sense of right and wrong for themselves. Children's moral development, according to Piaget, was influenced by a variety of experiences including emotional reactions, relationships with adults and other children. The differences in the ways children related to adults and to other children formed the basis for Piaget's explanations of the development of moral judgments.

### Role of Parents in Moral Development

The child's moral development in the early years is influenced by the role of adults (the parents or the caregivers). Parents not only provide the child with protection, support and basic material needs, in most cases parents also act as the principal figures who enforce moral and other rules. The social learning theories put forth the view that children gain a sense of morality from significant others, particularly the parents, through social conditioning (Bandura, 1991). Parents serve as models that the child tends to imitate and thereby internalises the moral judgment and behaviour of adults. Parents also act as reinforcement agents for the child to learn morally appropriate behaviours (Leman, 2001).

Piaget (1965) defined two ideal types of morality – heteronomous and autonomous. Younger children, in general, reasoned in a way that Piaget described as 'heteronomous'. The heteronomous type of moral reasoning was characterised by moral realism. Moral realism was

associated with objective features of reality. This accounted for the reason why young children were more concerned about the outcome of actions rather than the intentions of the person doing the act. With age, however, the child's thinking transformed to autonomous, which enabled the child to view relationships from a broader perspective.

Because relationships with other children are more equal than with adults, they engage in reciprocal relations and thereby judge in terms of equality, fairness, and co-operation (Turiel, 1983). The autonomous type of equality and respect established at 10 to 12 years of age is characterised by the ability to consider rules critically and apply these rules based on a goal of mutual respect and co-operation. Therefore, children can judge the intentions and the motives of the actor as well as the consequences of the actions.

Piaget also examined how children thought about justice. Young reasoners equate justice with retribution, that is, children believed in immanent justice – that doing wrong inevitably led to punishment. Older children, and more autonomous reasoners, on the other hand, did not view bad acts to be inevitably punished as they thought in terms of reciprocity. Older children believed that punishment should be rationally related to the offence. However a study examining just-world reasoning in children's immanent justice revealed that children of all ages demonstrated their use of the just-world belief to make immanent justice responses (Jose, 1990).

### **Authority Orientation**

Authority is a social relation that is fostered by differential social power between persons and that calls for obedience to the person with greater social power (Damon cited in Kim, 1998). The traditional view of children's authority concepts comes from the work of Piaget (1965), who believed that the basis of moral obligation was children's acceptance of commands from persons whom they respected.

Piaget described three qualitatively different levels in the child's acceptance of moral rules; in each of these levels, the child also formed a perception of the authority. At Level one, the very young child (aged two to five years) existed in an essentially premoral state. During these years, children showed little consideration for the rules that governed behaviour and thereby less obligation toward authority. At the second level, when the feeling of obligation towards rules arose (at approximately five years of age), the child had entered the stage of heteronomous morality, which was characterised by a rigid acceptance of adult rules as being permanent, unchangeable, and absolute. Parents, as authority figures, tended to act as a source of moral knowledge for heteronomous reasoners. Thereby, children at this stage did not make moral judgments that were independent of authority (Laupa, Turiel, and Cowan, 1995).

The third and the final level was that of autonomy in which the obligatory nature of rules arose out of the respect that the child held for the group, of which he or she was an equal and participating member. Older children did not see morality as determined by authority figures, and therefore they no longer regarded unquestioning obedience to adults as a basis for moral action. As peers held importance for the older children, they incorporated the principles of mutual respect and co-operation.

Piaget's claim that heteronomous reasoners saw adults as infallible authority figures has been critiqued by researchers as being incorrect. A series of studies, conducted in the United States and Korea, have shown that young children's moral judgments were not formed by respect for authority and that they had a better understanding of the roles and jurisdiction of adults and peers in such positions (Braine, Pomerantz, Lorber, and Krantz, 1991; Kim, 1998; Laupa, 1991; Laupa and Turiel, 1986, 1993; Tisak, 1986; Tisak, Crane-Ross, Tisak, and Maynard, 2000). It has been consistently found that children did not regard adults as the only source of legitimate authority. Further, they did not believe that when justice was in conflict with authority, that authority was right and justice wrong.

In evaluating and judging the commands of authorities, children took into account several features of the situation and attributes of the persons issuing the commands such as the command type, authority status, knowledge, social position, and social context (Laupa, Turiel, and Cowan, 1995).

Children's judgments of authority actions were particularly interesting to study in the Indian context which was characterised by hierarchical family relationships, especially between parents and children. Independent of developmental patterns, children's socialisation was governed by conforming to parental authority and abiding by their rules (Krishnan, 1999). Given the significance of family values such as obedience to and respect for parents, Indian children would be more inclined to endorse parental authority. Hence we expected that the moral judgments of children in both the age groups (6-8 years and 10-12 years) would be in line with the judgments of parents, irrespective of the nature of the intention.

## METHOD

### Subjects

A stratified random sample was identified from a school in Vadodara city. The sample comprised 72 children in the age groups of 6-8 years and 10-12 years, respectively, from Indian-Hindu families.

### Measures

The measures for the study included a form for demographics and two hypothetical vignettes. The demographics form included items related to the background information of the study group.

The hypothetical vignettes, presented in a story form, were used to assess the moral reasoning of children. The vignettes were based on the justice based moral orientation.

A brief description of the two vignettes is given below:

**In the Good intention – Bad outcome vignette**, the child (actor) goes and helps a younger child who is facing difficulty in climbing the swing. The mother of the actor child watches him or her helping the other. However, the child accidentally drops the younger child and as a result the child cries. Later, the mother of the actor child scolds him or her.

**In the Bad intention – Good outcome vignette**, the child (actor) gets angry at his or her friend for not playing catch with him or her. The mother of the child (actor) notices that the child is angry. Later, when the actor child sees the friend riding a bicycle on the road, he or she decides to push him or her in a puddle. Later, the mother praises the actor child for saving the friend from a passing car.

The probe questions for the two vignettes were as follows:

Do you think the child was fair or unfair? Why? (Moral judgment and Moral reasoning)

Do you think the mother was fair or unfair? Why? (Moral judgment and Moral reasoning)

### Procedure

The vignettes were presented in a story form individually to each child, in a random order to counterbalance the carry-over effects. The vignettes were presented in the language preferred by the child (Hindi or Gujarati). In each of the three vignettes, the gender of the actor matched the gender of the child to whom the stories were presented. The vignettes were presented with the help of illustrations to facilitate the children's understanding.

Thus, there were two sets of vignettes and two sets of corresponding illustrations, one with girl characters and the other with boy characters. The content and details were essentially the same. A warm-up story was also presented first to familiarise the child with the procedure.

The children's responses were tape-recorded. These were later transcribed and then translated into English for the coding and analysis.

In order to ensure reliability, a co-rater independently coded the responses of the participants. Inter-rater agreement for the moral judgment of the two justice vignettes was 100 per cent. Agreement in coding for the moral reasoning as well as the justification categories was 95 per cent and 80 per cent respectively.

## RESULTS

The results for the justice vignettes are categorised as follows.

- a) Moral judgment of the mother's action with respect to age and gender.
- b) Moral reasoning in terms of intention or outcome with respect to age and gender.
- c) Types of intention or outcome based reasons by age and gender.

### **Vignette I (Good intention – Bad outcome: Mother disapproves)**

#### *Moral judgment of the mother's action*

The relationship of age and gender with respect to the moral judgment was examined through the chi-square test. Table 1 shows the relationship of age with moral judgment.

**Table 1. Relationship between age and moral judgment of the mother's action (Vignette I)**

Groups	Fair		Unfair		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Young children	22	61.1	14	38.9	36	100.0
Older children	3	8.3	33	91.7	36	100.0

$$\chi^2 (1) = 22.1, p < .001$$

Table 1 indicates that more young children (61.1%) judged the mother's act as fair whereas only few older children (8.3%) saw the act as fair. Age was significantly related with moral judgment of the mother's action [ $\chi^2 (1) = 22.12, p < 0.001$ ].

Thus, across the age groups, higher percentages of older children disapproved the mother's act as compared to younger children. This indicates that young children tend to regard parental authority in making moral judgments, whereas older children do not comply with parental authority.

Gender does not relate significantly to moral judgment [ $\chi^2 (1) = 0.55, p > 0.45$ ]. However, the percentage trend indicates that irrespective of age, a majority of the girls (69.4%) disapprove of the mother's act, whereas more boys (38.9%) judge the mother's act as fair.

#### *Moral reasoning with reference to intention or outcome*

The intention or outcome based reasoning with respect to age is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that a higher percentage (91.7%) of older children recognised the intention behind the act, whereas younger children (52.8%) focus on the outcome of the act. This implies that older children are able to recognise the good intention of the actor child, despite the mother's disapproval of the same. With respect to the moral reasoning attributed to the mother, significant age differences are recorded [ $\chi^2 (2) = 20.38, p < 0.001$ ].

**Table 2. Relationship between age and intention or outcome based reasoning (Vignette I)**

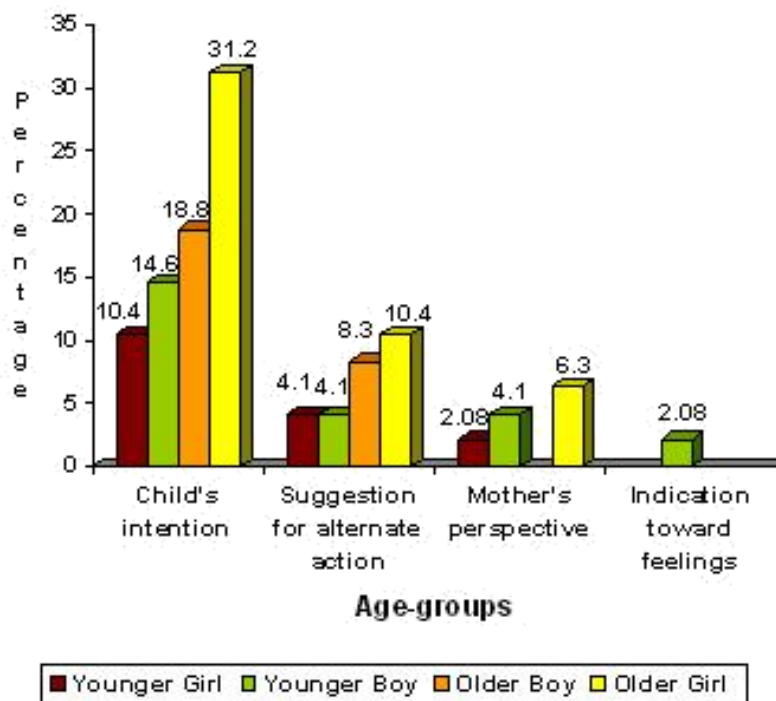
Groups	Intention		Outcome		Ambiguous		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Young children	15	41.7	19	52.8	2	5.6	36	100.0
Older children	33	91.7	3	8.3	---	---	36	100.0

$\chi^2(2) = 20.4, p < 0.001$

Note. The 'Ambiguous' category included a few responses which could not be categorised as either intention or outcome based reasons. A very small percentage of young children stated such reasons. For example, "Her (Rina's) mother did the right thing by scolding her because her mother explained to her that she should never pick up small children" (eight year old girl)

No significant association between gender and moral reasoning is recorded [ $\chi^2(2) = 2.81, p > .24$ ]. However, the percentage distribution indicates that irrespective of age, more girls than boys reason in terms of the intention.

Children's reasoning was further analysed in terms of the qualitative responses that emerged in reference to intention and outcome. The responses were calculated in terms of frequencies and percentages. Figure 1 presents the types of intention based reasoning by age and gender.



**Figure 1. Types of intention based social and moral reasoning by age and gender (n=48)**

As Figure 1 indicates, a higher percentage of responses, especially from older children, focus on direct reference to intention. Gender differences were also evident with older girls focusing more on the intention. For example, a ten-year-old girl said, "Mother did the wrong thing because Rina was only helping Neha, and she (Rina) slipped by accident".

Interestingly, in addition to focusing on the intention, children also referred to other aspects of the context, which indicated greater complexity in their thinking. Some children even offered suggestions for the mother in terms of an alternate behaviour or corrective action. For example, "When Rina's mother saw that Neha is near the swing, she should have told Neha's mother to place Neha on the swing because Neha can fall from Rina's grip, but Neha's mother would not let her fall" (ten year old girl).

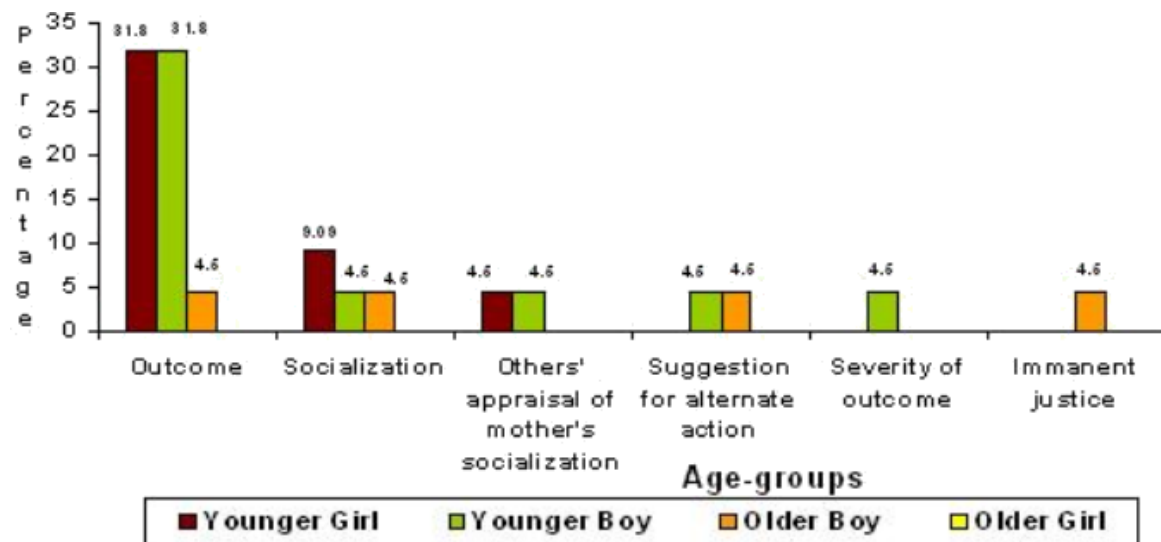
Children also articulated reasons related to the mother's perspective. More older girls stated this reason. For example, an 11 year old girl said, "Rina's mother did the wrong thing because she was unaware of the truth and therefore she scolded her (Rina) without even thinking".

Further, there was one response indicating the consequences of the act (that is, the feelings) on the third person.

For example “*Sunil’s mother did the wrong thing by scolding him. He was helping Rohit. So, Rohit’s mother would have felt bad that Sunil’s mother scolded him*” (seven year old boy).

### ***Outcome based social and moral reasoning***

Figure 2 presents the type of outcome-based reasons.



**Figure 2. Types of outcome based social and moral reasoning by age and gender (n=22)**

More responses focused (68.1%) on direct reference to outcome; young children reasoned more in terms of reference to the outcome. However, children also gave further reasons. Few young children were more inclined toward giving responses based on the socialisation aspect. For example, in a seven year old girl’s words, “*mother did the right thing by scolding so that Rina learns not to do such a thing*”. A response from a seven year old boy indicated the others’ appraisal of mother’s socialisation.

“*If Rohit got stitches, then people would point a finger at Sunil’s mother and say, your son has done it, your son has done it...*” Interestingly, an older boy centred his response on ‘immanent justice’. For example, “*Mother did the right thing because whoever does anything wrong with a small child, he or she should be punished. He or she has to undergo punishment*” (12 year old boy).

### **Vignette II (Bad intention – Good outcome: Mother approves)**

#### ***Moral judgment of the mother’s action***

Similar to Vignette I, the relationship of age and gender with respect to the moral judgment of the mother’s act was analysed. Table 3 presents the relationship of age with moral judgment of the mother’s action and demonstrates no significant difference between the younger and older children.

**Table 3. Relationship between age and moral judgment of the mother’s action (Vignette II)**

Groups	Fair		Unfair		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Young children	27	75	9	25	36	100
Older children	20	55.6	16	44.4	36	100

$\chi^2(1) = 3.00, p > 0.08$

An unexpected finding that emerges is the approval of the mother’s act by higher percentages of both younger and older children, across the age groups. However, as can be expected, more older children compared to younger children evaluate the parental act as unfair.

With reference to gender, no significant relationship with the moral judgment was observed [ $\chi^2(1) = 0.06, p > 0.80$ ]. Interestingly, more girls (66.7%) were in favour of the mother’s act, whereas more boys (36.1%) than girls were against the mother’s act of approval.

**Moral reasoning with reference to intention or outcome**

Similar to Vignette 1, the relationship of age and gender with respect to moral reasoning was examined. Table 4 presents the relationship between age and moral reasoning.

**Table 4. Relationship between age and intention or outcome based moral reasoning (Vignette II)**

Groups	Intention		Outcome		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Young children	9	25	27	75	36	100
Older children	21	58.3	15	41.7	36	100

$\chi^2(1) = 8.2, p < 0.004$

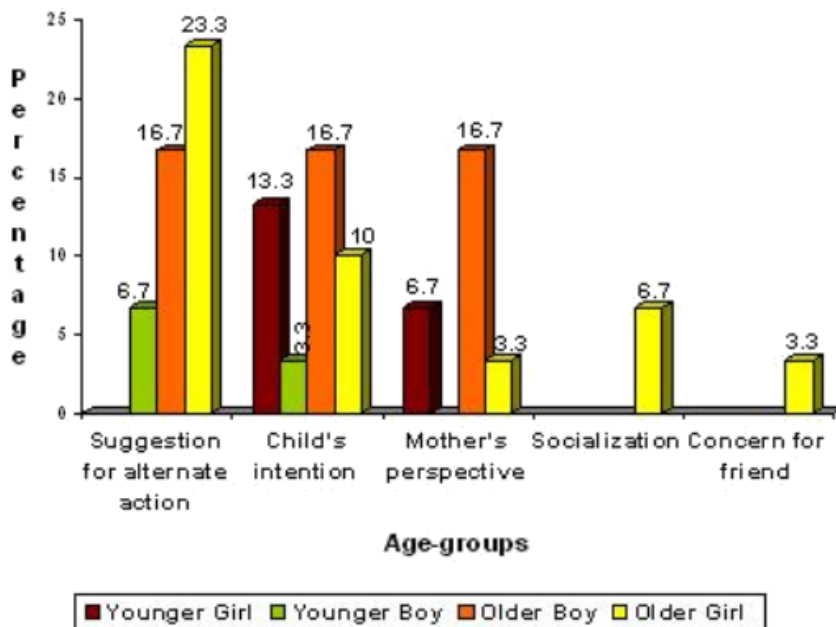
As the Table 4 indicates, a significant percentage of young children (75%) judge the act based on the outcome, whereas a majority of the older children emphasise the intention behind the act.

This reflects the expected pattern wherein older children give preference to the intention behind the act, whereas younger children consider the outcome of the act.

The chi-square for gender and moral reasoning is not significant [ $\chi^2(1) = 0.00, p > 1.00$ ].

**Intention based social and moral reasoning**

With reference to Vignette I, similar categories of reasons emerge. The categories for intention based reasons are presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Types of intention based social and moral reasoning by age and gender (n=30)**

Figure 3 demonstrates that a majority of the responses (46.7%) focus on the suggestion of an alternate action for the mother, followed by an emphasis on the direct reference to the child’s intention (43.3%). Older children focus more on these responses as compared to a very small

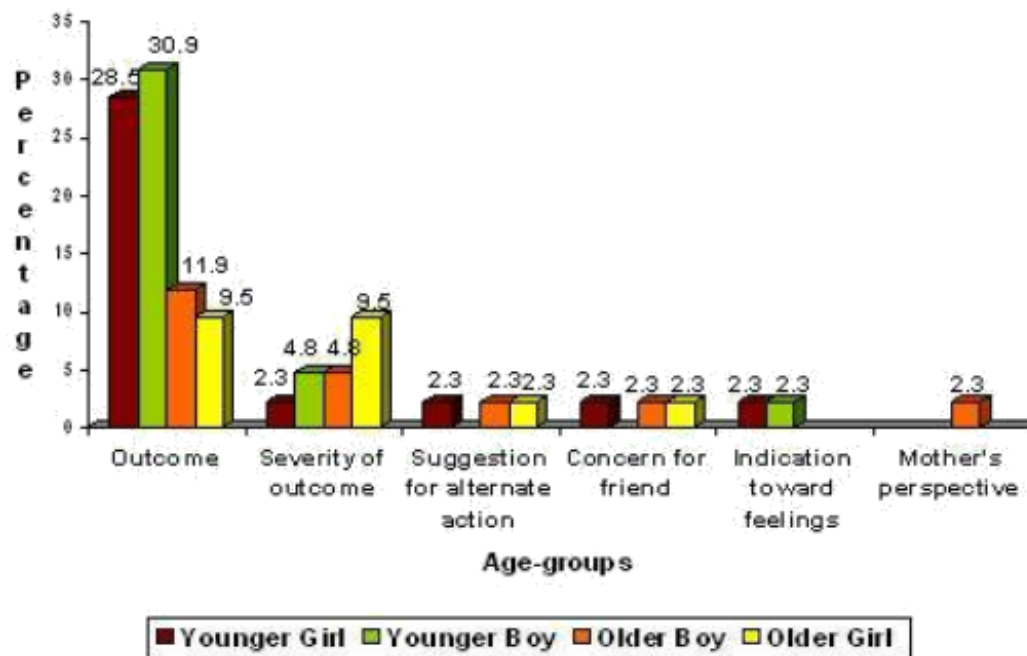
percentage of young children. Gender differences are observed in terms of older girls giving more preference to this category. An example of a suggestion of alternate action is evident in the response of a ten year old girl, “*Mother did the wrong thing. She should have said to her (Anita) why did you do this? It is wrong*” (ten year old girl).

In terms of reference to mother’s perspective, a significant percentage of responses were given by older boys. For example, one boy said, “*She (the mother) did not know that he (Rahul) was angry and therefore was pushing him (Manoj). She thought he (Rahul) pushed him on seeing the approaching car*”.

Concern for the friend also emerged as a response by an older girl. In her words, “*Anita pushed her (Ria) into the puddle, and her mother said thank you, it was not fair. She (Anita) did not know how much it would hurt her friend.... If she (Ria) did not want to play, then she should not have played. It is her (Ria’s) life. She can live her life the way she wants to...*” (11 year old girl).

### ***Outcome based social and moral reasoning***

Figure 4 shows the outcome based social and moral reasoning by age and gender.



**Figure 4. Types of outcome based social and moral reasoning by age and gender (n=42)**

As younger children tended to focus more on the outcome of the act, the reasons stated by them also indicated a clear reference to outcome (28.5% to 30.9%). Interestingly, a greater number of responses (9.5%) indicating the severity of outcome were given by older girls, followed by an equal percentage of responses (4.8%) by younger boys and older boys. For example, an 11 year old girl said, “*Mother was right, because had it been an accident, then she (Ria) would have had to spend a month in a hospital and even undergo an operation. And it would have cost a lot of money*”.

Concern for the friend as a response also emerged from older children. However, the percentage was small in comparison to other reasons. For example, “*Anita’s mother did the right thing by saying thank you because if she (Anita) had not pushed her (Ria), then the car would have come and a big accident could have taken place, and as a friend, she (Anita) always wants to think good for her friend*” (11 year old girl).

For the reasons attributed to both intention as well as outcome, older girls especially referred to concern for friend. There were very few responses related to the suggestion of an alternate action



for the mother, reference to the mother's perspective, and focus on the consequences of the act on the other person.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study bear on two important areas: (a) authority orientation and (b) complexity in children's reasoning.

With respect to authority orientation, the present study examined parental intervention in the justice vignettes. As the results demonstrated, developmental differences were obtained in terms of younger children being in favour of the mother's act and the older children disapproving the mother's act. Piaget held that older children tended to question authority, which has also been supported in the present study. Further, older children used their own ideas of right and wrong against which to evaluate parental discipline.

With respect to young children, Piaget viewed young children as belonging to the heteronomous stage characterised by moral realism, where they based their moral judgments on unilateral respect for authority. The present findings did not yield a complete support for this unilateral respect. Earlier studies had also shown that children did not always have deferential and compliant attitudes towards authority and that they most often did not equate moral obligations with reference to authority (Turiel and Smetana, 1998). This trend was evident in the results obtained from the older children, thereby lending support to Piaget's view that older children tended to question authority. In the Indian context where parental authority was more firmly embedded in a hierarchical structure, it would be expected that children conformed to authority. This finding also questions the view of children being passively compliant to parents in traditional collectivist cultures such as India, and calls for a closer examination of the dynamics of parent-child relationships in such contexts.

With reference to the complexity in children's thinking it is interesting to see children thinking beyond the approval or disapproval of the mother. Apart from perceiving the parental act as fair or unfair, younger children also focus on other aspects, namely, nature of interpersonal relationships, reference to harm to persons, and welfare. This is evident in the reasoning expressed by the children and indicates complexity in their reasoning.

This is in contrast to Piaget's view, which has underestimated young children's ability to reason about moral events (Turiel and Smetana, 1998). In the vignette I (good intention-bad outcome vignette) for example, on the one hand, more young children stated reasons focusing solely on the outcome of the act, and on the other hand, they also gave reasons which justified the mother's act of disapproval, which might indicate the authority orientation.

However, in Vignette II (bad intention-good outcome), although children approved the mother's act and also focused on the outcome, an issue of relevance is whether children agree with the mother's act because of an authority orientation or because of the likely severity of the outcome which involves saving the child from the passing car. This complexity may be attributed to children's ability to consider more features of the intention or consequence information when making moral evaluations, that is, it is likely that children may refer to the differentiated aspects of the information rather than deciding to place an emphasis on either type of information, a perspective that has not been adequately addressed in research in the area of moral development (Grueneich, 1982). This also has implications for the construction of vignettes in such research studies, especially in terms of ensuring equivalence of intention and outcome.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The present study aimed to examine the developmental and gender differences in children's moral reasoning with reference to Piaget's justice based framework. The results support Piaget's

theoretical views on moral development within the cognitive perspective, to a certain extent. As anticipated, developmental patterns were observed in children's heteronomous and autonomous moral thinking. However, with reference to the authority orientation, unilateral respect for authority was not revealed completely. No significant gender differences were observed in the children's moral judgments or moral reasoning.

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