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Domain theory: A critical review



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A B S T R A C T

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The domain approach of Turiel and colleagues has emerging as the dominant paradigm in the field of social development, moral development in particular. If it is proven correct, Piaget's and Kohlberg's structural accounts of moral development must be radically modified and possibly even discarded. After an introduction where we set the context for our critical view, this study has three parts. In the first part, we present the main propositions of the domain approach. In the second part, we show that despite of its strengths, the domain approach suffers from several conceptual and methodological flaws. In the third part, we summarize the main ideas of our analysis, suggest avenues for future research, and articulate what can be learned for future research from our critique of the domain approach. Our main conclusion is that the domain approach should be seen more as complementary rather than an alternative to, existing accounts of moral development. Thus, despite some of its insights and power to stimulate empirical research and theoretical debate, the domain approach is not yet an unquestionable and complete alternative to existing accounts of moral development because of its conceptual and methodological flaws.

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Since its appearance in the 1970's, the domain approach of Turiel (1983, 2002, 2006a,b, 2008a,b,c,d, 2010a,b,c), Nucci (2008), Smetana (1984, 1993, 1995a, 1999, 2006a), and many others (Killen & Smetana, 2007, 2008, 2010; Wainryb, Smetana, & Turiel, 2008) has become a dominant theory in the field of social development and is often presented as an alternative to structural-developmental theories of moral development, particularly to Kohlberg's (1984) and Piaget's (1932) approaches (Smetana, 1995b, 2006b; Tisak, 1993, 1995; Turiel, 1996, 2010a; Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987).

As evidence of its dominance, consider that: (1) Articles written by proponents of the domain theory regularly appear in the major journals of development; (2) prestigious books on moral, social and personal development, and on many other topics, such as children with cognitive abnormalities (Blair, Monson, & Frederickson, 2001),

children's concepts of authority (Yau, Smetana, & Metzger, 2009), abortion, implicit bias, and so on (see Helwig, 2006), are written, edited, or include chapters by domain researchers (Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983; Helwig, 1998, 2008; Helwig, Tisak, & Turiel, 1990; Laupa, 1991; Smetana, 1981a,b; Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Turiel, 2006c; Turiel, Nucci, & Smetana, 1988; Turiel & Smetana, 1984, 1998; Vainio, 2011; Wainryb, 1991); and (3) as it is usually the case with dominant paradigms (Kuhn, 1962), the domain approach is resistant to criticism. For example, when the approach is faulted for some methodological or/and conceptual flaws (Campbell & Christopher, 1996; Glassman & Zan, 1995; Haidt, 2001; Huebner, Lee, & Hauser, 2010; Keefer, 2006; Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007; Nichols, 2002, 2004; Nisan, 1987; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999), its proponents dismiss these criticisms by countering that the "... characterization of [their] work is severely limited" (Turiel et al., 1988, p. 141), "... omits important features and key studies" (Turiel & Smetana, 1998, p. 293), and takes "... individual studies out of the context of the entire body of research" (Helwig et al., 1990, p. 2071).

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However, nowhere in the vast domain literature have we seen answers to the following questions: (a) What would be a severely limited characterization of the domain approach?; (b) What are, besides Turiel's (1983) seminal book on morality and convention, the other key domain studies among those published thus far?; and (c) How can it be determined, in a principled manner, whether an issue is problematic for domain theory?"

Domains theory's conceptual distinction among moral, conventional, and personal domains is worthwhile, and its impact on research in several fields is indisputable. In 1995, Tisak stated that "Turiel's domain model of social development has stimulated over 85 articles in the United States and in other cultures, such as Australia, Korea, Turkey, India, and Israel." (p. 96). The number of articles is now more numerous than that mentioned in Tisak's (1995) review because the approach has been applied to other cultures, such as Columbia (Ardila-Rey & Killen, 2001), Finland (Vainio, 2011), and China (Yau et al., 2009) and to a myriad of topics (see above).

It is worth mentioning that these more recent extensions of domain research to cultures and topics not mentioned in Tisak's (1995) review do not modify any of the four main propositions of the domain approach, nor do they change its standard methodology (see Part 1 and Section 2.3, respectively). In addition, some aspects of the approach that were highlighted in the 1980's, such as Turiel's (1983) seven major changes in social-conventional concepts (see below), seem to have almost vanished from discussions. This indicates that issues judged to be central in the 1980's have been downplayed as the domain theory has expanded to other cultures and been applied to new topics.

Domain researchers usually claim is that their approach challenges existing structural-developmental theories of moral development. In Smetana's (1995a) words, "[t]his view of children's social understanding stands in contrast to earlier theorizing by Piaget ... and Kohlberg ..." (p. 121). That is, domain researchers reject Piaget's and Kohlberg's claim that the distinction between moral and non-moral concepts occurs out of a global fusion of social concepts through a process of differentiation and hierarchical integration. By contrast, according to domain theory, moral, conventional, and personal domains are separate, self-regulating developmental systems that are not developmentally ordered or hierarchical, and are hypothesized to coexist from early age, although concepts in each domain change qualitatively with age.

However, despite domain theory's challenge of some tenets of structural-developmental accounts of morality, its conceptual distinction between social domains and its power to stimulate research and debate, the theory has been the target of various criticisms (Blasi, 1997; Haidt, 2007; Keefer, 2006; Nichols, 2004). For example, the role of reason in one's moral judgments and decisions, which is central in Turiel's (2008c), Piaget's (1932), and Kohlberg's (1984) moral theories, is now being dismissed by a reductionist, anti-rationalist, and nativist tendency in evolutionary psychology and neurosciences (e.g., Byrnes, 2011; Churchland, 2011; Damasio, 1999), social psychology (e.g., Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2007), and philosophy (Kelly et al., 2007; Nichols, 2002).

This tendency is represented, for example, in Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model, according to which we first form our moral judgments and decisions with basis on intuitions and emotions and then give reasons for them, our reasons serving as *ex-post facto* rationalizations to convince ourselves/others that our moral judgments and decisions are a reason-based process. The above mentioned critique of the domain theory has led Turiel (2010b) to seek rapprochement with Kohlbergian and Piagetian moral psychology, and caused domain theorists to re-examine the relation of their theory to its supposedly (according to Smetana, 1995b) fully surpassed predecessors.

Although this review faults the domain approach for its shortcomings, like domain theorists, we do not embrace that reductionist and anti-rationalistic tendency. To dismiss the role of reason in one's moral decisions and behavior amounts to depriving them of their very nature (Kohlberg, 1984). However, to recognize the central role of reason in one's moral judgments and decisions does not mean that emotions have no effect on one's moral actions and thinking (see Blasi, 1995). Like Turiel (2008c), Piaget (1981), and Kohlberg (1987), we also endorse the idea that emotions and affectivity play a role in moral development. As Turiel (2008c) approvingly notes, "[I]ike Piaget (1932), he [Kohlberg] proposed that emotions of sympathy, empathy (through his general role-taking concept) and respect influenced development and were integrated into moral judgments (he did not attempt to incorporate emotions in his coding system)." (p. 284).

The foregoing considerations mean that (1) we subscribe to Turiel's (2010c) critique of the anti-rationalistic, reductionist, and nativist tendency in the moral field; (2) like domain theorists, Piaget, and Kohlberg, we do not embrace "... the maturationists' emphasis on biological determinism..." (Turiel, 2010b, p. 105); and (3) we sustain, like Piaget (1981), Kohlberg (1987) and Turiel (2008c), that emotions play a role in moral development.

Even if there were no other reasons, these five – (1) domain theory's challenge of central features of well-known accounts of moral development; (2) its conceptual distinction among social domains; (3) its power to stimulate debate and research on a plethora of topics; (4) some researchers' and philosophers' concerns about the approach (see, for example, Haidt's social intuitionist model); and (5) domain researchers' tendency to continuously evade criticism – are reasons enough for a critical review of the entire approach. The domain theory now finds itself in the exalted position where Piagetian and Kohlbergian theories once stood, and like them, needs a critical examination. In contrast to past critiques of the domain approach (Fowler, 1998; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2007; Huebner et al., 2010; Nisan, 1987), the present critique is not focused on a single problematic issue. It presents a synoptic view of the shortcomings of the entire domain theory, though it also, on several occasions, refers to its strengths. To our understanding, such a review has not been undertaken.

This review has three parts. Part 1 presents the main propositions of the domain approach. In the second part, we elaborate on three conceptual and/or methodological flaws of this approach: (1) the theory purports to be a

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