



Aggressive and prosocial children's evaluation and justification of transgressions and their relationship to the teacher–child relationship in Tanzania



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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study examines the evaluation and justification of transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain by children nominated by their peers as prosocial or as aggressive, and their relationship to the teacher–child relationship. Eighty children from ten pre-primary schools, 40 nominated as prosocial and 40 as aggressive, aged 5–7 years ($M=6.0$ and $SD=.64$), responded to hypothetical transgression stories in the moral and non-moral domain. Children from both groups evaluated moral transgressions as more wrong than non-moral transgressions. However, children nominated as prosocial more frequently evaluated the moral transgressions as wrong compared to children nominated as aggressive. Furthermore, children nominated as prosocial more frequently justified moral transgressions on the basis of intrinsic factors, whereas both groups more frequently justified non-moral transgressions on the basis of non-moral factors. Teacher–child relationship was more strongly related to children's peer nominated social behavior than children's evaluation of transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain.

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1. Introduction

Recently, I had a telephone conversation with my 9-year old daughter. The conversation was as follows: (Me) How was your day at school? (Daughter) My day at school was bad. (Me) Why? (Daughter) The teacher whipped me (using a small/thin stick), because I did not put on a neck-tie. (Me) You should always put on a neck-tie because it is part of your school uniform; by not putting on a neck-tie you violated the school rule. (Daughter) Mom!!!! I thought you could have sided with me against my teacher's whip because it was not fair to whip me simply for not putting on a neck-tie. It was only one day – today – on which I did not put on a neck-tie. For sure, it was unfair for the teacher to punish me. She should have given me a warning because it was a first time mistake. (Me) I will discuss this matter with your teacher.

According to the child quoted above, whipping (using a stick) was unfair in this case. Whipping inflicts physical harm. The Tanzanian Law of the [Child Act No. 21 \(2009\)](#) prohibits whipping, which makes teacher's punishment a legal transgression. An action which deliberately inflicts harm on others is a moral transgression (Nucci, 1981; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1999; Turiel, 1978, 1983, 2008). Thus if a teacher whips a child, this can be regarded as a moral transgression. The child was aware that not putting on a neck-tie is a violation of a school rule. However, in her view, the violation of this particular school rule merited a warning (in this case, because it was the first time). Not putting on a neck-tie can be seen as a conventional transgression. The conversation above exemplifies the perception of moral and non-moral transgressions among children in school. In this example, a conventional (non-moral) transgression by the child was responded to with a moral transgression by the teacher which was recognized as such by the child. This was an important starting point for an exploration of how young children in Tanzania evaluate and justify transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain. Evaluation means judging or considering actions as right or wrong. Justification refers to the explanation as to why the action is considered to be right or wrong. Tanzania is dominantly a collectivistic society (McGillicuddy-DeLisi

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& Subramanian, 1994), that strongly emphasizes obedience in children and this could affect children's evaluations and justifications of transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain.

Research has established an association between teacher–child relationship and children's behavioral adjustment (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Myers & Pianta, 2008). However, our example also suggests that children's interpretation of transgressions is related to children's relationship with their teacher. This implies that children's relationship with their teacher is at least partly a reflection of how they interpret their teacher's behavior. A relationship between moral and non-moral interpretation of transgressive behavior and prosocial and antisocial behavior has been established in children and adolescents (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Nucci & Herman, 1982; Smetana, 1985). However, research on the relationships between children's moral and non-moral interpretation of transgressions, the teacher–child relationship, and children's social behavior is lacking. This study aims to investigate these relationships in a sample of pre-primary school children in Tanzania.

2. Evaluation and justification of transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain

Research has shown that children as young as three years of age can evaluate and justify prototypical moral, conventional, and personal actions (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1985, 1999; Turiel, 2002; Yau & Smetana, 2003). For example, Nucci and Turiel (1978) pointed out that young children aged 2.10–5.2 years evaluated moral transgressions as wrong and their justifications were based on factors intrinsic to actions such as harming others physically or psychologically. Children's evaluation and justification of conventional acts were based on whether societal rules were violated or not; in other words, whether a conventional act is wrong or not, is evaluated based on the beliefs of a particular society (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Malti, Gasser, & Buchman, 2009; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1985; Smetana et al., 1999; Turiel, 2008). After the age of four or five years, children's evaluation of moral and non-moral transgressions becomes much more systematic (Yau & Smetana, 2003). Between the ages of six and ten, children start using rules to evaluate more systematically moral and non-moral actions (e.g., transgressions) (Loke, Heyman, Forgie, McCarthy, & Lee, 2011). This implies that as children grow older, they learn to generalize and to reason why the action is right or wrong. Children have been reported to evaluate personal choices (for instance, choosing a friend) as individual matters rather than actions guided by moral or conventional rules (Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci, 1981; Nucci & Herman, 1982; Yau & Smetana, 2003). In the present study, conventional and personal transgressions are regarded as non-moral transgressions.

All the studies mentioned above were carried out in a Western European–American middle class context. No study has been conducted of children's evaluation and justification of moral and non-moral transgressions in the Tanzanian urban middle class context, a society whose cultural norms differ from those in Western European–American middle class context. Tanzania is predominantly a collectivistic, conformist society, which practices an eclectic (authoritarian and authoritative) child rearing approach (Shavega, van Tuijl, & Brugman, 2014). Being a dominantly collectivistic society, it expects children to be obedient and pay respect to authority figures such as parents and teachers, and puts emphasis on cooperation and interpersonal relationships (McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Subramanian, 1994; Song, Smetana, & Kim, 1987; Yau & Smetana, 2003). Because in the Tanzanian culture, obedience in children is strongly encouraged, children not only may justify conventional but also moral transgressions on the basis of adult (dis) approval instead of intrinsic factors (that is whether actions

harm others physically and/or psychologically). In sum, this cultural orientation, stressing the importance of obedience, may affect children's ability to evaluate and justify moral transgressions into the direction of conventional transgressions.

We extended the research on moral and non-moral domain evaluation and justification by relating it to children's social behavior in pre-primary schools. In the current study, one of our goals is to examine the relationship between children's evaluation and justification in the moral and non-moral domain and children's social behaviors in pre-primary schools as nominated by peers.

3. The relationship between children's evaluation and justification of transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain and their social behavior

In the social context of preschool, children with prosocial behavior are regarded as well-adjusted, while children with aggressive behavior are regarded as poorly adjusted (Baker, 2006; Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005). Prosocial behavior refers to positive social interactions that promote harmonious relationships with others, such as helping, sharing, cooperating, and comforting (Carlo, Fabes, Laible, & Kupanoff, 1999; Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, 2005; Scourfield, John, Martin, & McGuffin, 2004). Others benefit from prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior has been reported to share some characteristics with moral acts (Carlo et al., 1999). In contrast, aggressive behavior refers to behavior that harms others physically and/or psychologically (Goldstein, Tisak, & Boxer, 2002; Nelson, Robinson, & Hart, 2005; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Barker, 2006).

Research has shown that children's evaluation of moral and non-moral transgressions plays a fundamental role in their behavioral regulation (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). Smetana (1985) states that in kindergarten children's evaluation of transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain contributes to regulating their behavior. Moral and non-moral hypothetical transgression stories have been used to explore children's ability to evaluate and justify these types of transgressions. Studies have revealed that children in kindergarten and adolescents who evaluated moral transgressions in the direction of the non-moral (conventional or personal) domain have been reported to display aggressive behavior (Leenders & Brugman, 2005; Malti et al., 2009; Nucci & Herman, 1982). Nucci and Herman (1982) have argued that children in preschool who display aggressive behavior are looking for authority sanctions to guide their decision making. Conversely, a child who displays prosocial behavior may focus on the harm produced by a moral transgressor (Gasser & Keller 2009; Harvey, Fletcher, & French, 2001; Leenders & Brugman, 2005; Nucci & Herman, 1982) and the regulation of social relationships (Tisak & Turiel, 1984). The present study focuses on young children aged between five and seven, and examines the relationship between children's evaluation and justification of transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain and their social behavior (prosocial versus aggressive) as nominated by peers. Moreover, the study was extended to the teacher–child relationship.

4. Relationship between children's evaluation and justification of transgressions in the moral and non-moral domain and the teacher–child relationship

Research has shown that adult–child interactions may have implications for children's evaluation of moral and non-moral transgressions (Lagattuta, Nucci, & Bosacki, 2010). According to Buzzelli (1996), children experience the concepts of moral and non-moral through their relationship with their teachers, more specifically through teacher–child discourse. Teachers guide chil-

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