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The Developmental Roots of Respect and its Role in Development

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Respect is an integral part of the social and emotional fabric of human interaction. In their monograph, [The Development of Respect in Children and Adolescents](#), Malti, Peplak, and Zhang (2020) argue for the essential role of respect in human development. After reviewing how respect has been conceptualized by philosophers and developmental theorists, the authors focus on what they learned from administering a semi-structured interview about respect to almost 500 5- to 15-year-old children, and from collecting additional information from parents, teachers, and peers. They examined various aspects of respect including how conceptions of respect differ from childhood to adolescence, how children express respect to others, how they perceive others to be respecting them, and how respect relates to emotions, as well as to prosocial and antisocial behavior.

In my commentary I further elaborate on the attention Malti et al. bring to the important concept of respect by drawing on a process-relational perspective. I first offer a reading of Piaget and his discussion of respect that is more socially embedded than the one described by Malti et al. Second, I expand on their work on the development of respect by discussing the role of respect in human interaction and early development. Third, I argue that it is essential to consider the role of cultural contexts in studying respect. Finally, I discuss detrimental consequences of the absence of respect.

Respect and Relationships: Unilateral versus mutual respect

Malti et al. (2020) compare their findings to Piaget's earlier discussion of respect when they write:

Across age, children frequently used prosocial themes when conceptualizing respect. This observation is inconsistent with Piaget's (1932/1965) position that respect is authority-oriented and rooted in fear during early childhood. The finding instead suggests that even at a young age, children are capable of appreciating and understanding that respect is reflected in the way individuals treat one another. Thus, ethically relevant conceptions of respect emerge as early as 5 years of age. (p. 77)

They also report that the older children they interviewed increasingly focused on fairness as being respect-worthy.

These findings are interesting, but I suggest that judging the consistency or inconsistency with Piaget's position requires a more socially embedded reading of his work. In fact, Piaget (1932/1965) did not explicitly study children's conceptions of respect. Instead, in the course of studying moral development, Piaget considered the nature of the interactions children experience with others, and it was in that context that he described two types of relationships characterized by different forms of respect. The children he studied in Switzerland in the 1920s experienced authoritarian relationships with their parents structured by unilateral respect. Children were constrained by parents' authority and had to accept rules imposed on them without being able to question them, and therefore likely without understanding them (Carpendale, 2009; Piaget, 1932/1965).

In contrast, mutual respect is present in cooperative relationships among equals in which children are obliged to listen to each other and explain their own positions. This type of interaction facilitates considering all positions and reaching mutual understanding, enabling rationality and morality. Instead of coercive rules that are imposed from the outside, often without understanding, in cooperative relationships rules are based on mutual agreement. Although Piaget described relationships of constraint in the context of parents and their children, in contrast to cooperative relationships among peers, he was clear that any actual relationship is some mixture of the two (Carpendale, 2009; Piaget, 1932/1965).

Malti et al. did not actually assess whether the children in their study experienced relationships of unilateral respect with parents or teachers, because, although their method involved using some open-ended questions, their "prompting" stories concerned age-matched peers. It is not that Piaget was claiming that all young children view respect as fear for authority and this changes to mutual respect with development. Instead, Piaget was exploring how the structure of relationships based on different forms of respect either hinder or facilitate understanding others' perspectives. Such understanding of perspectives is not just a matter of individual social cognitive development; it also involves the nature of the relationships children experience, which influences their ability to understand others' positions. Cooperative relationships based on mutual respect facilitate mutual understanding and are the source of justice and fairness (Piaget, 1977/1995).

Relationships of unilateral respect and constraint are unstable because people attempt to oppose oppression and have their voices heard. These forces result in movement toward equilibrium, leading to cooperative interaction among equals: "Cooperation, indeed, seems rather to be the limiting term, the ideal equilibrium to which all relations of constraint tend" (Piaget, 1932/1965, p. 90). Other factors, however, may affect this progressive movement. Considering more perspectives is more rational and moral, and thus, this is development rather than just change (Chapman, 1988; Mead, 1934).

The Developmental Roots of Respect in Early Interaction

Also key to the developmental study of respect is addressing how forms of respect emerge from early interaction. From a process-relational perspective, infancy is an interactive niche in which development unfolds within a social-emotional cradle (e.g., Carpendale et al., 2013;

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Griffiths & Stotz, 2000; Overton, 2015). Human infants are altricial; they are relatively helpless when born and therefore require care (e.g., Portmann, 1944/1990). Thus, biological characteristics set up responsiveness from caregivers as an expectable part of infants' typical environment. As they develop, infants respond to their caregivers' responses, and so on, resulting in the development of turn taking. The care and responsiveness that structure this interaction could be considered an early form of recognition-respect; that is, recognizing everyone as a person and thereby according them respect. Parents treat their infants as persons—as someone, not as something (Spaemann, 1996/2006). These moral pre-conditions for social interaction are presupposed in everyday communication (Carpendale, 2018; Habermas, 1983/1990).

Respect is also evident in conversational pragmatics and politeness, which are structured by concern for others' sense of identity and dignity. Instances of these respectful forms of interaction can be seen in social acts expressing gratitude as well as avoiding imposing on others (Turnbull, 2003). Concern for others is evident, for example, in the way requests are made so that they can be refused, and in the way requests are declined without threatening others' dignity (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Turnbull, 2003). Thus, in this sense, respect is built into the social fabric in the way others are acknowledged as persons. Respect is manifested in thoughtful consideration, recognition, and concern for the dignity of others. Failing to respond to, or interact appropriately with, others can be interpreted as lack of respect (Turnbull, 2003).

From an action-based perspective, children develop social skills within interaction. But there is a lag before they can verbally reflect on how they interact with each other, a process that Piaget (1932/1965) referred to as "conscious realization." Thus, children's respect and trust may be embodied in their interactions with others before they can articulate their understanding. This is an implication of theory that should be considered in designing research with young children beyond Malti et al.'s work.

Respect, as an aspect of interaction, becomes more complex, involving an assessment of persons and their merits. But respect should not be limited to those with great achievements. Malti et al. note that the view that respect should be due to all persons based on equality and dignity is widely acknowledged in philosophical discussions, but they do not expand on the developmental implications of respectful interaction. For example, a teacher can and should respect her students, even though they have less status, for their potential, competence, curiosity, and tenacity in pursuing their questions of interest. In order to do so, teachers must value children's questions or challenges and be open to not knowing all the answers. By valuing and respecting students' interests and questions, teachers can facilitate their students' exploration of a topic. This may also foster students' development of a critical and reflective attitude in general. Thus, respect is both social and interpersonal in the way others are treated, but it also becomes intrapersonal as an aspect of individuals as they master forms of social interaction in the development of thinking (Carpendale et al., 2017; Vygotsky, 1978).

Respect across Cultures

Malti et al. acknowledge that the development of respect is embedded in cultural values. They suggest the need for future studies, but do not themselves examine the role of culture in their study of children's developing understanding of respect. For example, although they report that the groups of children they interviewed were ethnically diverse, they did not report analysis of

responses in relation to children's differing ethnic backgrounds but instead averaged results across such differences. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that all the children studied were drawn from schools in a single major Canadian city.

Just as we cannot study ants without their nest, we cannot study humans independent of their cultures (Griffiths & Stotz, 2000). As Geertz (1973, p. 5) noted, "Man [*sic*] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs." These "webs of significance" are what are valued and respected in a culture, and because people are supported by them, as well as construct them, what is considered significant is likely to vary across cultures.

It could be expected that forms of respect and the processes underlying respect would be found throughout human interaction, but what is respected and the ways in which respect is shown will surely vary. For instance, caregivers' responsiveness to infants seems to be similar across cultures, but what facial expressions they respond to varies (Broesch et al., 2016). Later in development, an example of differences in who is respected in terms of roles and qualities is the Confucian concept of elder respect in East Asian cultures (Wada, 2014). It would also be important to go beyond verbal conceptions of respect to observe how embodied practices manifesting respect such as listening to others may vary across cultures.

Absence of Respect: Contempt

Respect has behavioral consequences for how others are treated. Malti et al. report that conceptions of respect in terms of fairness and equality are positively linked to prosocial behavior and negatively related to physical aggression. Considering positive consequences of showing respect necessarily begs for addressing the negative consequences of disrespect. Feeling respect from others is essential for healthy psychological development, and its absence undermines identity and sense of self, as seen in racism, oppression, and stigma. Because the self is "an eddy in the social current and so still a part of the current" (Mead, 1934, p. 182), this fragile identity is maintained through mutual recognition and respect (Habermas, 1983/1990). Unfortunately, respect from others can vary widely. In extreme forms, an absence of respect can result in the dehumanization known to have occurred in Nazi concentration camps. It continues to occur, as exemplified in the US by the police killing of George Floyd, which led to protests across the world. But lack of respect is evident not only in these extreme examples; it is also apparent in everyday situations in which respect is typically shown in small ways of acknowledging others through simple social acts such as greeting and expressing gratitude. The crucial role that respect plays in human life becomes even more evident when it is missing.

Conclusion

Respect is a core aspect of human interaction. Malti et al. take an important step in studying the role of respect in human development. In elaborating on their work, I have suggested that respect—conceptualized as recognition of others as persons—underlies and structures social interaction, beginning in infancy with responsiveness and turn taking. With further development, respect is evident in everyday social interaction, embedded in the workings of conversational pragmatics and politeness.

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Respect is an attitude toward others that is also manifest in forms of interaction. Relationships based on mutual respect facilitate understanding others' perspectives, unlike unilateral respect. This potential to understand and coordinate differing perspectives is at the root of morality as well as rationality.

The role of others' support in human development is recognized in traditional thinking from Africa to East Asia, where, for example, the Chinese and Japanese kanji symbol for person depicts one person supporting another (Carpendale & Lewis, in press). Although I suggest that the social processes through which respect structures human interaction and development are present across cultures, who and what are respected differ. The centrality of respect in becoming and being a person is, unfortunately, most apparent when it is lacking, revealing the negative consequences of disrespect for human lives.

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