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Introduction
Children’s Moral Experiences at School

1.1 Adults’ Interest in Children’s Morality:
From Indifference to Intervention

What moral issues do children encounter when they are not with adults, and how do they respond to them? This is probably a question we have all asked, whether in response to reading fiction on the topic (such as Golding’s Lord of the Flies or Atwood’s Cat’s Eye), reflecting on our childhood memories, or fretting over our own children’s well-being at school.

But it is also a question of increasing interest to teachers, educational psychologists and other professionals working with children. In the last 25 years, many Western countries have witnessed a sea change in attitudes towards pastoral care in school. Previously, adults at school tended to adopt a ‘hands off’ approach (Troyna and Hatcher 1992), and were generally unwilling to get involved in children’s personal lives. Children were discouraged from ‘telling tales’ to adults about their problems with peers. For example, in his classic book on children’s morality, renowned Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget commented:

Is it right to break the solidarity that holds between children in favour of adult authority? Any adult with a spark of generosity in him will answer that it is not. But there are exceptions. There are masters and parents so utterly devoid of pedagogic sense as to encourage the child to tell tales. (Piaget 1932, pp. 288–289)
This is a psychological work, and it is not for us to take up a moral standpoint. And yet when it comes to foretelling character, it is perhaps worth while raising the question as to which of these two – the petit saint [child who tells tales] or the chic type [child who doesn’t] – will develop into what is generally felt to be the best type of man and of the citizen? Given our existing system of education, one may safely say that there is every chance of the ‘chic type’ remaining one all of his life and of the ‘petit saint’ becoming a narrow-minded moralist whose principles will always predominate over his common humanity. (Piaget 1932, p. 293)

For Piaget, encouraging children to tell adults about their problems was a mistake because it led them to become ‘narrow-minded moralists’ instead of having a sense of solidarity with their peers. This aversion to listening to children and intervening in their peer relations continued until relatively recently. Thus, in the early 1990s, education researcher Peter Blatchford had this to say about adult supervision in British school playgrounds:

I just want to cite what seem to be the competing positions: a ‘hands off’ approach or an interventionalist approach. When one observes life in the playground one is forced to say that the status quo is undoubtedly in favour of the former position. We seem to have little stomach for intervening in any fundamental way with pupil activities in the playground. We have little desire to change behaviour or attitudes, and are more likely to contain misbehaviour in the hope that nothing untoward happens until the bell goes. (Blatchford 1993, p. 117)

However, during the 1990s, the ‘hands off’ attitude that Blatchford identified in the UK was gradually replaced by an obligation for adults to intervene in children’s lives so as to protect them from harm. The transformation is evident in the difference between the first and second editions of Chris Kyriacou’s popular textbook for trainee teachers, Effective Teaching in Schools. Both editions discuss personal problems that may affect pupils’ well-being, but the second edition (published in 1997) places much more emphasis than the first (published in 1986) on the teacher’s responsibility to intervene:

Other pupil worries and anxieties may be the result of reactions to crises at home, such as the death of a parent or marital disharmony, or may be school-based, such as being bullied or having some sort of conflict with the teacher’s style of teaching. In most situations, guidance and counseling may be offered by the classroom teacher or pastoral staff. (Kyriacou 1986, p. 152)
Other pupil worries and anxieties may be the result of reactions to crises at home, such as the death of a parent or marital disharmony, or may be school-based, such as being bullied. Teachers need to be continually sensitive to problems arising from such worries, and in this respect the class teacher and form teacher are in a key position to identify a possible cause for concern. Part of the importance of a sound teacher–pupil relationship is that it allows for teachers to perceive changes in the pupils’ behaviour that may be attributable to an acute worry of some sort. (Kyriacou 1997, p. 117)

The 1997 edition is much less complacent about pupils’ anxieties than the first, and more explicit about the teacher’s obligation to look out for and address these anxieties. Indeed, in the third edition, published in 2009, Kyriacou himself notes that pastoral care has become increasingly important in schools in recent years.

Why did this change of heart regarding adult intervention occur? I suggest that it is the result of an increasing preoccupation in the UK with children’s well-being, particularly the desire to avoid harm and the risk of harm. Adults in the UK have become ever more reluctant to expose children to various sorts of potential danger, including abuse from strangers, physical injury in public playgrounds and bullying (Gill 2007). This desire to protect children may be part of a larger cultural shift in the West towards notions of childhood innocence (Burman 2008).

Adults’ concerns about bullying are particularly relevant to adult intervention into children’s peer relations at school. Research on bullying developed in Scandinavia, partly in response to the suicides of two young Norwegians in 1982, allegedly resulting from their experiences of being bullied. The suicides triggered widespread public concern and a promise of action from the Norwegian government (Roland 1993). An international conference about bullying in 1987, arranged by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and the European Council, nurtured interest outside Scandinavia, and within a few years researchers across the Western world were investigating bullying and evaluating anti-bullying interventions in several countries, including Australia (Tattum 1993), the Netherlands (Mooij 1993), the UK (Sharp and Smith 1993), Canada and the USA (see contributions to Espelage and Swearer 2010). Concern in some other countries developed more slowly. For instance, despite some concerns about violence in schools in the late 1990s, the Austrian government did not take active steps to reduce bullying in schools until 2007, in response to specific events there (Spiel and Strohmeier 2011). There is also evidence that concerns about bullying are increasing in South America (Romera Felix et al. 2011).
Researchers investigating bullying began to challenge adults’ ‘hands off’ attitude in school. For example, Tattum (1993) criticised teachers for accepting bullying as an inevitable part of school life and for discouraging children from telling them their problems. He argued instead that:

Children look to adults to protect them from the excesses of more aggressive peers. Adult intervention may at times be inept or even insensitive, but it can be effective if the response is early and firm. It may involve little effort for the adult but bring serious relief for the child. To do nothing is at best to give the impression that bullying is not regarded as serious and at worst to condone the abuse of a member of the school community by others. (Tattum 1993, p. 3)

In many countries, this ‘call to arms’ either led to or was accompanied by government action. In the UK, a report issued by government body Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) in 1993 recommended that teachers be sensitive and attentive to changes in the behaviour of their pupils, and ‘aware of the need to listen to them and to be seen to be listening’ (Ofsted 1993, p. 13). In British primary schools, the call for adult vigilance and intervention was supported by increases in the average number of adult supervisors on the playground at lunchtime, above and beyond increases in pupil numbers between 1990 and 1996 (Blatchford and Sumpner 1998). There were also some misgivings about increased intervention, with some education researchers concerned that it could diminish children’s culture and friendships (Blatchford 1998; Boulton 1994).

In the UK, the new obligation to intervene was strengthened by public, media and political responses to child abuse. Eight-year-old Victoria Climbié died in London in 2000, following extensive abuse by her guardians. This tragic event triggered a major government initiative, *Every Child Matters* (HMSO 2003). This set out five aims for every child, one of which was ‘stay safe’. As a consequence, schools were assigned responsibility for protecting children from ‘maltreatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation’ and ‘bullying and discrimination’ (DfES 2004, p. 5). Hence concerns about child abuse led to a more explicit articulation of the desire to prevent harm to children and promoted the importance assigned to pastoral care in school (Kyriacou 2009).

Clearly, the sea change that has taken place in the UK and elsewhere places teachers and other professionals working with children under considerable pressure to monitor children’s well-being and to protect them
from harm. This is a big change in child–adult dynamics from the past when children were more or less left to their own devices in the peer group. This book responds to that change by exploring the moral issues children confront in their peer relations, and how these are affected by adults’ new obligations towards them. In other words, the book asks how Western children’s moral experiences are influenced by the culture they are growing up in. This more general question has been a subject of intense debate among psychologists seeking to understand children’s moral development.

1.2 Understanding Moral Development in Culture

1.2.1 Theoretical approaches

Psychologists hold dramatically different views regarding culture and its significance in understanding moral development. Here I summarise the claims of three of the most influential theories, before considering what this book can contribute to the debate.

Cultural psychologists argue that the morality that children develop is a function of the culture they are growing up in. Richard Shweder argues that interpretations of events by ‘local guardians of the moral order’ (Shweder et al. 1987, p. 73) are conveyed to children in three ways: the organisation of everyday routine practices (e.g. mealtimes, school), the language moral order guardians use to maintain those practices (e.g. commands, requests) and their emotional reactions to events (such as anger at a transgression) (Shweder and Much 1991). In this way, guardians of the moral order ‘scaffold’ children’s moral development (Edwards 1987, p. 123). Through repeated participation in these practices, children’s moral understanding is said to be ‘socially produced and reproduced’ (Shweder and Much 1991, p. 203). But the approach lacks a clear developmental theory of how precisely children learn from cultural participation (Miller 2006). In the absence of a more detailed account of how children respond to the interpretations conveyed to them in these various ways, the theory makes children look rather passive, their morality determined by their participation in cultural practices (Blasi 1987).

Jonathan Haidt’s social intuitionist theory combines ideas taken from cultural psychology with an evolutionary model of morality. The theory posits that humans are innately prepared to see at least five domains of human experience as moral: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, authority/respect (which Haidt sometimes calls hierarchy), purity/sanctity and in-group/loyalty (Haidt and Graham 2007; Haidt and Joseph 2004, 2008).
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Each domain is said to have provided evolutionary advantages to our ancestors. For instance, the harm/care foundation encouraged them to care for young or vulnerable kin, and fairness/reciprocity supported dyadic cooperation with non-kin (Haidt and Joseph 2008).

Haidt suggests that children are initially equipotential in all five innately specified moral foundations, such that these five areas of experience are equally prone to become moralised during development (Haidt and Joseph 2008). Children’s sensitivity to each of the five foundations is altered through their immersion in culture-specific custom complexes, defined as cultural practices plus the beliefs, values and rules commonly associated with them (Haidt 2001). For example, in the Indian state of Orissa, many places are structured such that certain areas are seen as more sacred and restricted than others. Children growing up in Orissa thus experience many practices associated with the moral value of purity (Shweder et al. 1987, 1997). Through participating in these practices, these children are, according to Haidt (2001), enhancing their moral concern with purity and sanctity. Children growing up elsewhere will experience different custom complexes relating to other moral foundations, and these will be enhanced accordingly. Meanwhile those foundations that are not supported by a culture’s custom complex are said to attenuate. Haidt (2001) suggests that children’s experiences with their peers may be particularly influential in this process of foundation modification.

According to Haidt and Joseph (2008), the innate foundations that are supported in a particular culture are not simply strengthened but are developed into moral virtues, such as kindness, loyalty, trustworthiness, courage and patience. They define a virtue as a set of skills enabling a person to readily perceive particular moral values in the events around them, and to respond appropriately to them. For example, to be kind is ‘to have a perceptual sensitivity to certain features of situations, including those having to do with the well-being of others, and for one’s motivations to be appropriately shaped and affected’ (p. 386). Presumably, this virtue would originate in the innate foundation oriented to harm and welfare. But the innate origins of some virtues they mention (such as courage and patience) are less obvious (although Haidt and Joseph 2008 do claim that there are likely to be many more innate moral foundations than the five they identify, which might provide more plausible origins).

Children are said to acquire a moral virtue simply by being exposed to examples of that virtue within their culture. According to Haidt and Joseph (2004), such exposure comes about in two ways. Firstly, children experience a virtue through the ‘everyday experience of construing,
responding, and getting feedback’ (p. 62), presumably whilst participating in cultural practices. Secondly, they experience virtues through ‘the stories that permeate the culture’ (p. 62). According to Haidt and Joseph (2008), all cultures employ stories or narratives as a form of moral education. These take various forms, from religious texts such as the parables in the New Testament of the Bible and the hadith in the Quran, to ‘metanarratives’ about history and world affairs, such as the ‘liberal progress’ narrative about Western history commonly employed by American sociologists (Smith 2003, cited by Haidt and Joseph 2008).

Both cultural psychology and social intuitionist theory, then, see culture as an important influence on moral development. They both argue that children learn the morality of their elders through participation in everyday cultural practices. In contrast, domain theory (sometimes called the social interactionist approach) is extremely wary of the notion of culture. Domain theorists’ main concern is that it tends to make us think of a group of people who are basically similar, with the same beliefs and values. Instead, domain theorists argue that within any culture are people with very different perspectives, such that there will always be disagreements and struggles (whether overt or covert) about how things should be done (Turiel 2006; Wainryb 2006). For example, the perspectives of dominant and subordinate members of a social group are unlikely to be the same (Wainryb 2006). If members of a culture subscribe to various contradictory viewpoints and practices, then it does not make sense to generalise across the culture, and to do so will inevitably ignore some people within it – usually those who are most oppressed (Turiel 2006).

Domain theorists also consider the concept of culture to be too deterministic, leaving too little space for the agency of individual people within the culture (Wainryb 2006). This issue is critical to our understanding of how children learn or develop morality. According to domain theorists such as Turiel (2006), children actively construct morality rather than absorb it from their culture (although some culture advocates also claim to view children as active participants in their own development; see Edwards 1987; Haidt and Joseph 2008). Domain theorists observe that if a culture has many, varied norms and practices, then it simply does not make sense to talk of children learning, internalising or accepting them, as if they were unitary and consistent (Turiel 2006).

So domain theory rejects culture and argues instead that children actively construct their own morality during various types of social interaction (Smetana 2006; Turiel 2006), though it remains vague on exactly how these interactions inform moral development (Wainryb et al. 2005).
Turiel (2006) suggests that moral development occurs through children observing the intrinsic effects of particular acts (such as kicking someone leading to injury), which they receive or witness. In addition, children can also learn by observing their own and others’ reactions to specific actions (Turiel 2006), such as how seriously a particular transgression is treated, and from adults’ explanations and reasoning about transgressions (Smetana 2006). All of these are thought to provide children with information about the nature and consequences of particular actions, such that they learn their moral significance.

Turiel (2006) also suggests that conflicts and struggles are important, especially those between peers, which are more likely to address moral issues (by which domain theorists mean issues concerning justice, welfare and/or rights) than adult–child conflicts are (Smetana 2006). Non-conflictual interactions between siblings or friends are also seen as important, providing opportunities to discuss emotions and inner states, which could in turn influence children’s moral development (Smetana 2006).

Finally, domain theorists consider power differences important for moral development. Wainryb (2006) argues that people occupying dominant and subordinate positions in a society are likely to have different experiences, and to develop different goals and interests as a result. Those in subordinate positions frequently oppose and resist their subordination, and Wainryb (2006) suggests that these experiences could influence moral development.

So domain theorists join cultural psychologists and social intuitionists in the belief that children’s everyday interactions with other people (both peers and adults) are sources of moral development, especially interactions around transgressions. All three theories see language as important; cultural psychologists note its use by guardians of the moral order to manage children’s participation, social intuitionists argue for the importance of narratives as a form of moral education, and domain theorists claim that children learn from adults’ explanations and reasoning.

Where domain theory differs from the other two theories is that it does not see these sources of moral development as varying systemically between cultural groups. Thus, while cultural psychologists speak of adults conveying their (culture-specific) interpretations of events to children, domain theorists see only adults providing (objectively more or less accurate) information about these same events.

Recent cultural trends towards harm avoidance and adult intervention have implications for teachers’ everyday interactions with children, for the language they use in those interactions, and for children’s interactions with each other. So all three theories would predict that the trends I have
identified will affect children’s moral development. The question, of course, is how. I suggest that one of the best ways to answer this question is through ethnographic research.

1.2.2 The need for ethnography

Despite a large body of research on moral development, surprisingly little is known about children’s actual day-to-day experiences of moral issues. The reason for this is that most research on children’s moral development takes the form of interviews conducted by researchers with individual children, usually about hypothetical scenarios made up by the researcher (Goodwin 2006). Such research does not tell us much about children’s own experiences of moral issues, for several reasons.

Firstly, the scenarios that children are interviewed about are usually made up by the researcher. Thus, children’s reasoning about these scenarios does not tell us which moral issues they confront in their own lives. Secondly, the described scenarios inevitably fix some aspects of the situation that might in real life be contested, such as who initiated an exchange of punching or who was present at the time. They are thus oversimplified compared with children’s experience of real moral events. Thirdly, the scenarios researchers use are hypothetical, whereas in their everyday lives, children usually experience moral events that matter to them, because they, or someone they care about (a friend or sibling perhaps), are directly involved (Haidt 2001). Fourthly, children are usually interviewed in school by an unfamiliar adult researcher. The child does not know whether she can trust the researcher (for example, not to tell a teacher if she says something that contravenes school regulations), and so may restrict what she tells him or her. Finally, the interview method tells us what a child says about moral issues, but not what he or she actually does in a specific situation (Goodwin 2006).

Some researchers have interviewed children about their own moral experiences, rather than about hypothetical scenarios. These studies have provided important insights into children’s moral lives, for example highlighting differences in children’s perceptions of moral events depending on whether they are perpetrator or victim (Wainryb et al. 2005). However, such research is still limited by an absence of trust between researcher and child, and the lack of evidence of how children actually behave in moral situations.

There are also some observational studies recording events on the school playground and how children react to them (e.g. Nucci and Nucci 1982; Turiel 2008). As with interviewing children about their own
experiences, such research can tell us about what moral issues children encounter in the playground. However, the focus of such research has been to establish whether children respond differently to moral and non-moral events (a question that is of great interest to domain theorists). Researchers coded particular aspects of the observed events in order to produce quantitative data amenable to statistical analysis. This was an appropriate way to address the question the researchers were interested in, but it does not provide much detail of the events or how the children involved experienced them.

To reveal children’s moral lives as they actually unfold, the researcher needs to spend an enormous amount of time hanging about with children, participating in their lives as far as possible as a peer rather than an adult, gaining their trust, and hence gaining access to children’s own moral dilemmas and struggles in the playground. The researcher can then write detailed notes describing children’s moral encounters and how they respond to them. This method, borrowed from anthropology, is called participant observation, and the written descriptions of people's lives that it yields are called ethnography. These descriptions have the potential to reveal the moral issues that children face, the interactions they have around those issues, and the connections (if any) between these and wider cultural discourses. The cultural trend towards adult intervention probably makes participant observation with children easier than it used to be because it normalises the researcher’s interest in children’s lives, rendering his or her presence less bizarre to the children than it might have been to previous generations.

Other researchers have used participant observation to produce fascinating accounts of children’s lives in and out of school (see, for example, Evans 2006; Ferguson 2000; Hey 1997). However, none of these books focus on children’s experiences of morality. A little research on children’s morality using participant observation and/or other qualitative methodologies is starting to appear (Evaldsson 2007; Theobald and Danby in press), but so far researchers have not applied their findings directly to psychological theories of moral development, or used these theories to inform their analyses.

This book has two aims. First and foremost, it is an ethnographic account of the moral lives of primary school children growing up in the UK at a time when adults are far more concerned than in the past about avoiding harm and far more willing to intervene in children’s affairs. Secondly, and at the same time, the book contributes to academic theorising about children’s moral development by addressing the question of whether, and how, children’s moral experiences are affected by the culture they are growing up in.
1.2.3 **But what is morality?**

Before introducing the research itself, it is worth pausing a moment to consider what the term ‘moral’ actually means. Defining morality is an area of controversy in its own right, and the different theories I introduced above employ contrasting definitions. Domain theory has the strictest criteria, defining morality as those obligations, norms and values that are perceived as generalisable (across different settings), inalterable and independent of rules or authority sanctions (Smetana 2006). Domain theorists argue that only obligations concerning welfare, justice and rights meet these criteria. All other obligations are considered to be matters either of personal preference (such as one’s choice of friends; Nucci 1981) or of social convention (including sex-role customs, etiquette, school rules and religious rules; Turiel et al. 1987). There is some evidence to support this distinction. Researchers asked participants whether specific obligations were generalisable, inalterable and independent of rules and authority. They found that both adults and young children, from various cultures, judged only norms concerning welfare, justice or rights to meet these criteria (Smetana 1981; Song et al. 1987).

Cultural psychologists and social intuitionists have attacked domain theory’s definition of morality, arguing that welfare, justice and rights represent the moral values only of liberal Westerners. On the basis of cross-cultural evidence comparing interview responses of Indian and American adults and children, Shweder et al. (1997) argued that there are in fact three sets of values that can be considered moral: an ethic of autonomy (which covers rights, justice, harm avoidance and freedom), an ethic of community (which includes the values of respect, loyalty, duty and interdependence) and an ethic of divinity (incorporating the values of purity and sanctity). These are said to exist to varying degrees in different cultures, with the first dominating in the USA, where most research on moral development has been carried out.

Social intuitionists developed cultural psychology’s critique of domain theory and its definition of morality. In an influential study, Haidt et al. (1993) presented Americans and Brazilians of high and low socioeconomic status with a range of scenarios describing ‘victimless yet offensive actions’ (p. 613) relating to the values of respect and sanctity (such as eating a pet dog that had been killed by a car and cleaning a toilet with a national flag). Since these actions had no implications for welfare, justice or rights, they should, according to domain theory, be seen as non-moral. However, most interviewees saw the acts as universally wrong (even if carried out in a country where the acts were
customary) and deserving of punishment or being stopped. The only participants who judged the acts to be acceptable were American university students. Haidt et al. (1993) thus argued with cultural psychologists that domain theory’s definition of morality as concerning only welfare, justice and rights was inadequate, describing only the moral values of a liberal Western academic elite (Haidt and Joseph 2008). However, the research did not ask participants about alterability or rule independence, so we cannot know whether these obligations really were seen as moral by participants according to all of domain theory’s stringent criteria.

Jonathan Haidt went on to extend Shweder’s account of morality to include at least five domains: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, authority/respect, purity/sanctity and in-group/loyalty (all of which are, according to Haidt and Joseph 2004, evolutionarily prepared). Haidt’s criteria for what makes these domains moral are looser than domain theory’s. Haidt (2001) and Haidt and Joseph (2008) define as moral those obligations, norms and values that are willingly applied by members of a social group to everyone within that group (or belonging to a particular category within it), and transgressions of which are punished (e.g. through ostracism or criticism). Unlike domain theory, this definition does not involve generalisability (since a moral judgement is simply the application of societal norms to specific members of that society, and not necessarily to those outside it), and says nothing about perceived alterability and rule dependence. This definition would seem to mean that morality is defined by a culture’s (or subculture’s) majority or powerful elite, raising questions regarding the status of values held by minorities or subordinates.

This book describes a range of values and obligations that were important to children, focusing on harm avoidance, justice, status, loyalty and toughness. All three theories agree that harm avoidance and justice are moral issues. However, status, loyalty and justice fall outside domain theory’s definition of moral. Status and loyalty qualify as moral according to the definitions offered by cultural psychologists and social intuitionists, falling under Shweder’s ethic of community and Haidt’s authority/respect and in-group/loyalty domains. They also met their criteria in that they were norms that prevailed among the children, who considered them important and penalised those who did not conform to them. Children also penalised those who did not orient to the value of toughness, but this value is harder to fit into the domains proposed by Shweder and Haidt.

Since different theories classify the values differently from one another, in this book I refer to obligations and values without specifying whether these are moral or not. My own view is that all the main values I describe
can be considered moral in that they were important norms to which children held each other to account. But by avoiding the word moral in the main chapters, I acknowledge the controversy that surrounds this definition and leave readers to draw their own conclusions about which values qualify as moral.

1.3 The School

The children whose lives are described in this book all attended Woodwell Green, a large British primary school situated on the outskirts of Woodwell, a town in West London serving a multicultural community. It was a highly successful school, evaluated very positively by UK government department Ofsted.

The school had three classes in each of the seven year groups, each class containing approximately 25 to 30 children. The youngest children were in reception (aged 4 to 5 years), from which they moved through year 1 (aged 5 and 6 years) and subsequent year groups until they completed year 6 (aged 10 and 11 years), when they moved to secondary school. Reception and years 1 and 2 were called ‘infants’, while years 3 to 6 were the ‘juniors’. Infants and juniors had little contact with one another, usually attending different assemblies and playing in separate playgrounds. In addition, the school included a nursery, which took children aged 3 and 4 years on a part-time basis. In this book I focus on the full-time pupils in reception and above.

The school underwent high levels of migration throughout the research period, as families moved to and from the area. For example, over the 18 months I spent with one class, seven children in it left the school and seven joined. Teacher turnover was also high, with over 50 per cent of the staff at the time of my research having been at the school for fewer than four years, partly because housing in London was so expensive. Apart from teachers, most staff (teaching assistants, caretakers, cleaners, playground supervisors, playleaders at the after-school club) lived locally. Most staff were female, and many (but not teachers) were mothers of Woodwell Green children.

The school day began a little before 9:00 with registration in class, sometimes followed by an assembly. Mornings were mostly taken up with maths and literacy, broken by a 20-minute break called ‘playtime’. Lunchtime lasted just over an hour, after which the register was taken again, followed by more lessons, and school finished soon after three o’clock in the afternoon.
Morning playtime and lunch were the periods in which children spent most time with peers, without direct adult supervision, and much of the data I describe in this book were gained during these periods. Usually, children played outside in the playground for both playtime and lunchtime, having their lunch in the canteen. In poor weather, ‘wet play’ was declared and children stayed in their classrooms, except for going to the canteen to eat lunch. During playtime, children were supervised by teachers and support staff, on a rotational basis. At lunchtime, supervision was provided by staff employed explicitly for this purpose. In the book I call them ‘playground supervisors’, but children usually called them ‘dinner ladies’. Generally, teachers and playground supervisors did not get involved in children’s interactions during break and lunchtime unless they believed there to be a problem, whether through direct observation (of children fighting, for example), or because a child approached the adult to request intervention.

1.3.1 Socioeconomic and ethnic composition

Multiculturalism

Most children at Woodwell Green came from ethnic minority backgrounds and were bilingual. Around 1 in 14 was a refugee or asylum seeker, with significant numbers coming from Somalia at the time of the research. According to school records, the religious makeup of the school at the time of the research was 27 per cent Sikh, 26 per cent Muslim, 22 per cent Christian, 11 per cent Hindu, 13 per cent non-religious and 2 per cent other, unknown or refused. As for home language, English was most common (34 per cent), closely followed by Punjabi (32 per cent), then Somali (8 per cent) and Urdu (8 per cent), and a number of others including Farsi, Bengali, Gujarati, Arabic and Hindi (18 per cent in total). Children of Indian ethnicity made up the biggest proportion of the school (38 per cent), followed by English (25 per cent), then Somali (8 per cent) and Pakistani (8 per cent), with the remaining 21 per cent including mixed race, Arab, Afghani and Bangladeshi. Ethnic, linguistic and religious categories did not map neatly onto one another. For example, of the children who had Indian ethnicity on their school record, some were Sikh, some Hindu, and a few were Christian or Muslim.

The categories used on school records are not neutral representations of ethnicity, which is a constructed category reflecting local and national concerns. For example, some ethnic labels map onto countries (Indian, Pakistani, Somali), others onto politically differentiated parts of countries...
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(English, Scottish, Welsh), and still others onto larger regions incorporating several countries (Black African, Arab). These variations can be partly understood in terms of how many children of each ethnicity were present at the school. For instance, most African children were classified simply as ‘Black African’ but, because there had been an influx of Somali families in recent years, ‘Somali’ had been given its own label. Note also that only the ‘Black African’ label explicitly declares a racial aspect to the ethnic categorisation (raising the question of what ethnicity white South Africans, for example, would be labelled), which may nevertheless be implicit in other categories.

Labels given to children were also sometimes contested by parents, school staff and children. For instance, parents and the school administrator responsible for entering data on children’s ethnicities occasionally disagreed on the ethnicity that should be assigned. This might happen for a child whose grandparents were from India but whose parents grew up in Afghanistan: is the child’s ethnicity Indian or Afghan? I also found that some children who according to school records were Christian told me that they were not religious, and vice versa.

What these examples indicate is that ethnic, religious and linguistic labels are complex products of social processes rather than objective information. Nevertheless, they do often map meaningfully onto children’s identity and experience, sometimes in ways that relate to the moral issues they face (racism being the most obvious example; see Chapter 6). For all the major case studies described in this book, I report children’s ethnicity and religion according to school records.

Nevertheless, in this book, I argue that only some of children’s moral tensions and disputes are influenced by ethnicity or religion. More commonly, children’s moral experiences cut across ethnic and religious lines. This claim is supported by my fieldnotes (as we will see in the coming chapters) and also by statistical analyses of the answers children gave to questions I asked them about hypothetical scenarios. I draw on four such scenarios during the book, concerning physical aggression (Chapter 3), exclusion (Chapter 4), possessiveness (Chapter 5) and intention (Chapter 7). I conducted statistical analyses looking for relationships between children’s ethnicity or religion on the one hand, and their assignment of blame to particular protagonists and reporting of similar own experience on the other. Virtually all of my 18 analyses found no relationship. I have nevertheless included an appendix providing information on ethnicity and religion for all children, for interested readers.
Social class

The school was situated in an economically and socially deprived area. At the time of the research, 30 per cent of its pupils were registered for free school meals (compared with a national average of 20 per cent), and this discounts the significant level of suspected under-reporting. The local area had a high crime rate, linked to drugs and anti-social behaviour by local youths.

It is, however, an oversimplification to say that the school served a working-class community. The reason for this is that English families had come, over a relatively short period, to constitute one of several minorities in the area, the largest of which was a thriving Indian Sikh community. While this community could probably be considered working class in terms of income and occupation, it tended to differ from typical English working-class communities in its attitude to education. According to Evans (2006), English working-class parents of course want their children to do well at school, but tend to adopt a ‘hands off’ attitude, handing the responsibility for educating their child over to the school. In contrast, English middle-class parents tend to be much more involved in their child’s education, which they see as part of their parenting role. In this, many Indian Sikh parents (and parents from some other ethnic minorities in the area) more closely resembled the English middle class than working class. I lost count of the number of Indian (and some others, but rarely English) children at Woodwell Green who told me (usually in confidence) that their parents sent them for extra tuition in the evenings and at weekends, often with the aim of preparing them for the test that could win them a place at a secondary grammar school. This valuing of education has been observed elsewhere in the UK among South Asian parents from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Bhatti 1999).

As with children’s ethnic and religious identities, assigning children at Woodwell Green the label ‘working class’ oversimplifies things, but does nevertheless tell us something useful about the general community they are growing up in. I argue in several places in this book that children’s moral encounters are related to their experiences of growing up in a relatively poor and deprived urban area which was in the past more straightforwardly ‘working class’.

1.3.2 Values and discipline

School rules: Harm avoidance

Like any other British primary school, Woodwell Green enforced a host of rules regarding children’s behaviour. At the start of the school year, the
teacher and children in each class together drew up a list of rules and signed an agreement to abide by them. Despite all classes developing them separately, the resulting lists of rules on classroom walls were extremely similar across the school. Most rules were aimed at creating a quiet, orderly environment in which teachers could teach. Typical rules were to work hard, to listen to the teacher and to each other, and to take care of school property.4

In addition to such rules, all classrooms also featured a rule that expressed cultural concerns with children’s well-being and harm avoidance: ‘We never hurt each other on the inside or the outside’. This rule, which focused on children’s relationships with one another, encompassed both physically harmful actions, like hitting, kicking, throwing objects and so on, and psychological harm, resulting for instance from verbal abuse, rumour-spreading and exclusion (‘hurting on the inside’). Thus, the cultural concern with protecting children from harm, described earlier in this chapter, found its way into every classroom at Woodwell Green. As we will see in this book, it set the scene for children’s moral lives by making harm avoidance the most important value in children’s peer relations.

Enforcing school rules: Discipline
In the past, corporal punishment was widely used in British schools to enforce school rules. This ended in UK state schools in 1987, thanks to legislation by the European Court and Commission of Human Rights, which was set up after the Second World War (Parker-Jenkins 1999). It was replaced by a model of discipline based on Skinner’s psychological theory of behaviourism, which uses reinforcement (rewards) to encourage desirable behaviour, and punishment (sanctions) to reduce undesirable behaviour (Davis and Florian 2004; Parker-Jenkins 1999).

Rewards used at Woodwell Green included praise, writing a child’s name ‘on the happy face’ (a smiling face drawn by the teacher on the whiteboard), and stickers and certificates given out in assembly. In addition, children could receive house points or class points (or their equivalent, ‘putting a marble in the jar’, for younger children) for good behaviour. Once a certain number of class points was gained (or once the jar was full of marbles), the whole class was rewarded with (for example) extra play, a party or a favoured activity such as physical education or cookery. All junior children were members of a house, and members of the house with the most points at the end of a specified period also received a reward.

As for sanctions, unless the child’s behaviour was a serious transgression (such as hitting another child), children in all age groups were first given a warning for misbehaviour, explicitly stated by the teacher or conveyed
by a stern look or writing the child’s name on the board (often ‘under the sad face’). If they broke the rules soon after this a more severe sanction would usually be applied, such as being sent to sit outside the staff room or in another classroom, staying inside for part of playtime or lunchtime, writing lines, or parents being contacted. Many of these rewards and sanctions are recommended by government department Ofsted; see, for example, Ofsted (1993). Teachers also encouraged conformity to school rules via other means such as lectures about behaviour and comparisons with other classes.

Many teachers at Woodwell Green combined rewards and sanctions with the concept of choice. Their aim in doing so was to inculcate in children a sense of responsibility for their own actions. When a child disobeyed a rule, the teacher would ask him or her to choose between continuing to disobey and facing a sanction, or obeying the rule and evading the sanction. For example, when a boy wandered around the classroom in the middle of a lesson, his teacher said, ‘You choose to lose your play time if you don’t stay in your seat’. Some teachers spoke with children about the ‘good choice’ and the ‘bad choice’ they could take in specific situations. Teachers presented such choices as having inevitable outcomes that in fact only followed because of the teacher’s own decisions (which were of course based upon the class’s rules).

Teachers mainly used discipline to enforce rules relating to classroom management and their ability to teach, such as rewarding children who worked hard and reprimanding those who chatted when they were supposed to be listening. However, they did sometimes employ the discipline system to manage children’s behaviour towards each other, particularly in the playground. For instance, I witnessed a teacher promising class points for children who asked lonely peers to play with them, and often saw children being chastised and punished for harming one another (as we will see in later chapters).

1.4 The Research

1.4.1 Methodology

The research reported in this book was conducted in the early 2000s. The main method used was participant observation, whereby a solo researcher spends long periods of time (usually at least a year) with the people under investigation, seeking to live like them as far as possible, and writing detailed fieldnotes about their everyday life (Van Maanen 1996).
I attended one year 4 class (of 8- and 9-year-olds) for two days a week for the entire school year. I also spent one day a week in reception (4- and 5-year-olds), year 1 (5- and 6-year-olds), year 3 (7- and 8-year-olds) and year 6 (10- and 11-year-olds) for approximately eight weeks each. On three or four days a week, I joined children in the playground and canteen over playtime and lunchtime. I attended the after-school club (which ran from 15:15 to 18:00) approximately twice a week, and also frequented school discos, Christmas bazaars, summer fetes, football matches, several class trips and local events. For the first three months of the following school year, I continued participant observation during playtime and lunchtime and at the after-school club.

In addition to participant observation, I also used questionnaires and individual and group interviews to investigate children’s perspectives more systematically. Some of these asked children to name their best friends, in order to provide data on children’s popularity and friendship networks. Others asked children’s opinions on hypothetical versions of the various moral disputes and problems that I often saw on the playground, such as acts of physical aggression, exclusion and possessiveness. Children’s responses sometimes aided my understanding of what I was seeing first hand on the playground, and also enabled me to gain a general sense of how common these problems, and particular perspectives on them, were among Woodwell Green children. In addition, I interviewed children in the year 4 class I spent most time with about a range of other topics, including racism and their perceptions of school discipline (some of these interviews took place when the children had moved into year 5).

Throughout the book, when I refer to particular children, I provide their year group. Because my research lasted for more than one school year, particular children may be described as being in two different year groups. This is purely a reflection of precisely when during my research the incident being described occurred.

I gained consent from teachers and children involved in the research, and from children’s parents. I told children that my research was about trying to understand their lives from their point of view. It is difficult, however, for children to understand the ongoing nature of ethnographic research, so where possible, at the end of the research, I told them which incidents I wanted to write about, and only did so with their agreement. In almost all cases, children and adults alike generously agreed to my writing about them, although occasionally they disagreed with my descriptions; I have noted any such disagreements in the chapters that follow. To ensure participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used.
I gathered all my data at one school, raising the issue of how representative my findings are of children growing up in other places. I have tried to gauge this in two ways. One is to give detailed information about how children’s moral experiences arose out of their relationships with each other and with adults, and out of the material and cultural conditions of their lives. If children elsewhere have similar relationships and backgrounds, then we can expect that similar issues might arise for them. In particular, I try to take into account how children’s social class and ethnic and religious identity might inform their experiences. The second way I have attempted to gauge the generality of my findings is to draw on research by others, which can be revealing of the extent to which children struggle with similar issues elsewhere.

1.4.2 The researcher

I carried out the research for this book during my PhD. The question I was most interested in at the time was how best to theorise the relationship between ‘the individual’ (particularly the child) and ‘culture’ (particularly how it is ‘acquired’ by children). I saw morality and moral development as a topic through which that question could be considered. During the research, I realised that there had been a huge change in attitudes towards adult intervention since I was a child at school, and became intrigued by the implications of this change for children’s experiences. Hence, this book was born.

Carrying out participant observation research with children is exciting, rewarding and, at times, very stressful. One common problem is the tension between adult and (honorary) child roles in school (Thorne 1993). Sometimes this dual role drew suspicion or condemnation from adults. Consider the following extract from my fieldnotes, describing a parents’ evening at the school during which I met the mother of Simran, a year 4 girl with whom I had spent a lot of time:

I have been chatting to Simran’s mum about cookbooks, and agree to lend her some of mine. She then tells me that Simran sometimes pretends to be me at home. Simran smiles. ‘This is me,’ she says, writing ‘Miss Wood’ on the whiteboard. We joke about her misspelling my name, and then she opens my bag and starts looking through it. Her mum tells her off. ‘She’s your teacher, not your friend.’ ‘She is my friend,’ Simran replies. Her mum tells me that Simran is too informal with me. Feeling awkward, I smile and say, ‘Yes, I suppose she is a bit.’
In this extract, my success as a researcher in establishing a trusting, peer-like relationship with Simran was met with disapproval by Simran’s mother, who clearly expected a more hierarchical relationship between children and adults in school. But it was not only other adults who challenged my dual role at Woodwell Green; I also struggled with it. If a teacher joked with me about the children, I was drawn into an adult role and felt a sense of betrayal towards the children, while if I chatted with children in class or failed to report or reprimand a child for breaking a school rule, I sometimes felt guilty about not fulfilling adult obligations. These anxieties were particularly acute in situations where I thought a child might be harmed. Sometimes, I switched to adult mode without even thinking (for example, to break up a fight). In other situations, particularly when documenting girls’ interactions, where harm rarely took a physical form, it was more difficult to know how to act. Essentially, I was struggling over whether to prioritise my desire to document children’s lives or my desire to intervene in them and prevent harm.

Even when I tried not to intervene in an adult way, my presence did of course have an impact on what happened between the children, as will become obvious in the chapters that follow. What I was striving for was not to have no impact at all, but, as far as possible, to have the kind of impact a child has on a peer, rather than the effect of an adult on a child. Unless data collection is completely covert, any researcher studying human psychology or social life will have an impact on the people he or she studies. We have to accept this fact, work with it and, where possible, use it to our advantage. For example, in Chapter 3, I consider what we can learn from observing differences in how boys at Woodwell Green behaved in front of different audiences, including myself (see also Evans 2006 for an excellent example of how a researcher can use his or her own impact on participants as a source of data).

1.5 Structure of the Book

Chapters 2 to 6 examine how the school’s injunction not to harm was experienced by the children of Woodwell Green. Each chapter looks at why children did not always conform to this rule, arguing that this is because they had other concerns or values that they sometimes prioritised over harm avoidance, or because they interpreted the situation differently from adults and did not see the behaviour in question as harmful. At the end of each chapter, I consider implications for practitioners; theoretical implications are saved for Chapter 8.
Chapter 2 focuses on children’s acts of playful aggression (both verbal and physical), and shows that differences in how these were interpreted led to misunderstandings and disputes about whether an act was harmful. These differences were not random and could usually be understood with reference to the prior relationship between children, membership of certain categories (adult–child, girl–boy) or the tendencies of particular children. The Chapter also argues that playful aggression was an important way that children could demonstrate toughness and explores how this value challenged the value of harm avoidance condoned by teachers.

Continuing the theme of toughness, Chapter 3 asks why, despite school rules, some boys persisted in physical aggression. I argue that as well as the principle of harm avoidance promoted by the school, aggressive boys had two other considerations, which they sometimes prioritised. One was the value of justice, according to which it is right and fair to hit back if you are provoked, provided that the retaliatory hit is in proportion to the original offence. The other was hierarchy and status, which were produced partly through boys’ acts of violence against one another.

Chapter 4 asks why, despite adults’ admonishments, children routinely excluded particular peers from their play. It argues that adults’ advice against exclusion did not always have the desired effect because acts of exclusion were often more complex than teachers acknowledged. In particular, the chapter highlights three complicating factors: (1) Most children in a group deferred to one child to make decisions about who could play. Thus most children did not view themselves as actively excluding other children, even if they allowed their group leader to do so in their name. (2) Exclusion sometimes arose not through the stereotypical image of a group deliberately telling a lone peer s/he cannot play, but through more indirect and sometimes benevolent processes such as game stability, competitiveness and differential access to desired knowledge and abilities. (3) Children sometimes used exclusion as a means of enforcing other values that were important to them, such as justice.

Chapter 5 explores children’s notions of loyalty. The head teacher of the school was concerned that some children (particularly girls) were excessively possessive of one another, and recommended that children should be free to associate with whomever they wished. This chapter looks at how this advice conflicted with children’s expectations of loyalty from their friends. I describe two different aspects of loyalty: the commitment to always be available to play with a particular friend, and the commitment to share that friend’s enemies. I show how these concepts of loyalty were expressed differently by girls and boys, and how
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girls’ expectations of loyalty often clashed not only with official school rhetoric regarding freedom and indiscriminate inclusion, but also with their competing desires for popularity and status.

Chapter 6 focuses on a form of harm that was assigned particular importance at Woodwell Green: racism. I show how the school prioritised this form of harm over others, such as homophobia. I also reveal disagreements within the school community about what counted as racism. For instance, I describe tensions that existed between some teachers and parents based on their contrasting definitions of racism, tolerance and ethnic identity. I consider how different definitions of racism had repercussions for how children experienced, and adults dealt with, harmful acts.

Chapter 7 considers the implications for children of the nascent adult obligation to intervene in their affairs. I describe how, in seeking to understand and resolve children’s disputes, teachers have come to take up a judge-like role, calling witnesses, making judgements about truth and trustworthiness and meting out punishments. Through detailed examples, I show that children’s and adults’ interpretations of such disputes are often made not in a calm, detached manner but in a heated, disputed setting, in which language (such as claims about intention) and reputation (of accusing, accused and witnessing children) are important contributors to adults’ decisions about blame. Finally, the chapter provides a glimpse of what children’s moral lives might look like without adult intervention, by exploring how children resolve their disputes by themselves.

To conclude, Chapter 8 considers what the preceding chapters tell us about this book’s two main questions: what do children’s moral lives look like in contemporary Britain? And how are their experiences (and those of other children) informed by the cultural context they are growing up in?

Notes

1. A similar attitude has been noted in some non-Western societies too. For example, Fijians and Luo-speaking Kenyans were reluctant to respond to a child’s complaint about another child (Edwards 1987; Toren 1990).
2. The names of the school, the area and all the people I write about in this book are pseudonyms.
3. The analyses concerning ethnicity included Indian, English and Pakistani children. Those on religion included Christian, Sikh and Muslim children. There were insufficient numbers of other ethnic and religious groups in my sample to include them in the analyses. Each analysis involved over 100 children, spanning year 1 (5- and 6-year-olds) to year 6 (10- and 11-year-olds). I used
four $\chi^2$ tests of association to look for a relationship between children’s ethnicities and their allocation of blame to specific protagonists in the exclusion and possessiveness scenarios. Another three $\chi^2$ tests were carried out on the relationship between children’s ethnicities and whether they reported an experience similar to each of the three scenarios. Two one-way ANOVAs looked for relationships between children’s ethnicity and their approval of hitting in the physical aggression scenario, plus their attention to intention in another scenario. In addition to these nine tests exploring ethnicity, nine further identical tests were conducted using children’s religion as an independent variable instead of ethnicity.

Since I conducted so many analyses, and since these were not hypothesis-led, I divided the significance level by the number of analyses (giving a significance level of .003). No analyses even approached significance at this level. Indeed, only one analysis gave rise to a $p$ value below .05. This was for the relationship between children’s ethnicity and whether they reported having had an experience similar to the physical aggression scenario ($\chi^2(2) = 7.550, p = .023$ (two-tailed)). Comparisons of expected and actual counts indicate that compared with the English and Pakistani children, relatively few Indian children claimed to have experienced a situation similar to the scenario. This is an interesting result worthy of further research, but in the context of 17 other (non-significant) exploratory tests, not much can be made of the result here.

The overall lack of significant relationships between ethnicity/religion and children’s responses to my scenarios does not mean that children’s religious and ethnic background had no impact on their moral development. Rather, the results suggest either that children’s religious and ethnic experiences are usually not relevant to the moral issues they face with their peers, or that they are relevant, but in some way or to some degree that I have not been able to detect with my questions and analyses.

4. Such rules would be seen as conventional rather than moral by domain theory, but may be conceived as (at least potentially) moral by social intuitionists and cultural psychologists. For instance, rules prescribing that children listen to the teacher could be seen as respect for authority and hierarchy.