CHILDREN’S MORAL AGENCY
IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

For many children, intersubjectivity has firmly settled in ‘the digital’, understood as something that is not separate, but “increasingly embedded in the infrastructure of society” (Livingstone, Lansdown, & Third, 2017, p. 11). If communicating with other people, telling and listening to stories about other human beings and sharing one’s feelings and thoughts with other persons is pivotal to the construction of the moral self (Luckmann, 1995), it can be argued that the digital has become a crucial practise ground where children make sense of, reflect, and act upon ethical questions on reformulating (Wall, 2011, pp. 7–9) what it means to be human (ontology); what human relations and societies they should try to aim toward (teleology); and how they should treat one another (deontology).

However, the technological affordances of digital media also seem to produce distinct instances of moral uncertainty, disengagement, and harm. For example, extreme cases of cyber-bullying have shown that a one-off intimate selfie, revealing video, or outspoken statement can become a massively exposed ‘faux pas’, condemned by the ‘networked public’ (boyd, 2008) with tremendously serious or even tragic consequences. Many suggest that the affordances of digital media in terms of anonymity, searchability, connectivity, instantaneity, ephemerality, replicability, persistence, manipulation, visibility, etc., rearrange the distance between the self and other, reconfigure a sense of moral responsibility and recalibrate the meaning of obligations to other people and oneself (boyd, 2014; James et al., 2009; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006; Lenhart et al., 2011; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Silverstone, 2007; Turkle, 2011).

This chapter brings these two observations into dialogue and addresses the question of how children and young people themselves are addressing the ethical complicatedness of the digital. The terms children and young people will be used from now on interchangeably to refer to youth aged 10–19. In line with recent approaches to moral agency, this chapter highlights the importance of children’s lived-experience accounts for learning how they construe their moral agency in interaction with their own goals and beliefs and their social surroundings (Wall, 2011). Such an approach has not previously been the central focus in the vast field of literature that deals with children, digital media, and morality. In fact, despite more than two decades of a growing recognition that children are agentive participants to their lives, very little attention has been paid to children’s moral agency in connection with digital media. Instead, the
developmental model remains quite influential, typically resulting in experimental and behaviourist research that ignores the lived experiences of children (as noticed by Frankel, 2012; Krcmar, 2015; Niemi, 2016).

This chapter approaches this debate from a different angle and argues that a focus on the lived moral experiences of young people provides a more constructive approach for understanding how young people themselves are addressing the moral difficulties they face in their everyday life, that is ipso facto digital. Leaving aside the research literature that considers children as “merely undeveloped adults, passive recipients of care, occupying a separate innocence, or, perhaps, in need of being civilised” (Wall, 2011, p. 1), the analysis here is interested in how children navigate trade-offs between what’s morally wrong and socially accepted among peers. Given the key role digital media play in young people’s need for connection, communication, and sharing, the chapter pays particular attention to the ‘moral horizons’ (Taylor, 1989) they rely on in their peer interactions. Across the large range of social media platforms, messenger apps, game chats, and mobile phone texting, issues of identity, participation, and privacy – the latter also identified as one of children’s most important concerns in terms of rights in the digital age (Livingstone et al., 2017, p. 20) – have emerged as ethically significant themes in peer-to-peer interactions (James et al., 2009).

There is little research that specifically investigates the children–digital–moral agency triptych from the perspective of their own worlds, but the growing field of qualitative research that provides a glimpse into children’s feelings and thoughts about their everyday digital media experiences regularly touches upon moral agency. Given the authors’ own ‘social situatedness’ (Vygotsky, 1978), the analysis will focus on the perspectives of young people growing up in the Global North with regular, seemingly uninterrupted access to digital media, living relatively flourishing lives. Based on this literature and the authors’ own research, the analysis argues that children are not only active moral agents, who are already capable of moral experience (i.e., ‘full’ moral beings), but also moral ‘becomings’ who are exploring the “horizons of issues of importance, which help define the respects in which self-making is significant” (Taylor, 1991, pp. 39–40). In doing so, this chapter links to scholarship that has pointed to the ethical complicatedness of the internet, and the ways in which children already actively explore and negotiate norms and values (Flores & James, 2012; Gardner & Davis, 2013; James et al., 2009).

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section sets out a definition of moral agency that contributes to the study of children’s moral experiences in their own right, independent of adult-centric perspectives and concerns (Jenks, 2005). The second section considers young people’s moral agency as the result of the intricate relationship between the moral and the social in digitised peer cultures. The third section discusses young people’s remarkable amount of self-regulation in their narratives, illustrating how they fall back on the given moral horizons of the age of neoliberalism and insecurity. Throughout the chapter, we look at the level of diversity found in moral agency. While gender differences are often discussed in the research literature, there is no systematic examination of questions about how other structural differentials interact with moral agency.

Reconsidering Children’s Moral Agency

In various disciplines there is growing recognition that other approaches, methodologies, and vocabularies are needed to comprehend how children are handling the moral tasks and ethical challenges in the textures of their everyday life (Frankel, 2012; Montreuil, Noronha, Floriani, & Carnevale, 2018; Niemi, 2016; Wall, 2011). In contrast to the developmental approach, childhood studies scholars (working at the interface) have argued that an understanding of children’s morality, which takes its departure from their lived experiences, contributes to a more
constructive theoretical framework which does justice to children’s agency (Frankel, 2012; Niemi, 2016; Wall, 2011). Although they agree upon the importance of mundane meaning-formation, these scholars have also displayed a strong sensitivity for the wider social arrangements and power relations with which children are interacting (Buckingham & Jensen, 2012; Frankel, 2012; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Silcock, Payne, & Hocking, 2016; Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

Complementary to this perspective, recent psychological and ethical theory on moral agency has explained that children’s own stories are pivotal for learning about how they develop their moral agency. Concurring with childhood studies, they have argued that children are already full moral beings “who actively participate and contribute to moral life instead of passively conforming to pre-established moral norms” (Montreuil et al., 2018, p. 25). Narrative approaches define moral agency as a process that is always under construction by way of sense-making processes (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010, pp. 56–9). The crucial point here is that conversations with others are considered as pivotal to the formation of the moral self, for both adults and children (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010, p. 64). As a consequence, rather than considering children as exceptional, a strategy so often applied in research on children (Livingstone & Third, 2017), this definition of moral agency leaves room for the much-advocated view of children as both moral beings and moral becomings, actively constructing moral meanings in larger circumstances not shaped by themselves; already demonstrating ethical responsibility but, at the same time, vulnerable due to lack of power resources (Lee, 2001; Wall, 2011).

Besides, narrative psychological research has indicated that moral agency is a complicated phenomenological experience, also for adults for that matter, and that people’s understanding of moral harm is very often the imperfect result of difficult trade-offs between obligations to other people and oneself and problematical choices between one’s own desires and those of others (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). An approach that starts from the social situatedness of children’s online experiences therefore offers a more adequate entry point to the distinct moral uncertainties that come with digital technologies (Puech, 2016; Silverstone, 2007).

The Trade-Off Between the Moral and the Social

Young people’s narratives display an unremitting negotiation between, on the one hand, the routine social practices that give meaning to their lives, and, on the other hand, the broader horizons about ‘good’ behaviour which constitute their activities and are shaped by societal expectations, requirements, norms, and power imbalances. Although it is often suggested that there are differences between young people’s offline and online moral decision-making, most of the studies that we reviewed for this chapter point out that the online and offline worlds of young people are so interconnected that it is in fact more truthful to acknowledge both the complex and ‘naturalised’ ways in which “the digital bleeds into the material space of peer culture” (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015, p. 210), and vice versa (Lenhart et al., 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Miegel & Olsson, 2012; Pabian et al., 2018; Salter, 2016).

Peer culture has always been very important for children’s becoming (identity development, learning) and belonging (companionship, peer culture); digital media, however, afford constant sharing, connectivity, and performativity which break through boundaries between home and school, known and unknown others, privacy and publicity (Albury, 2015; Bond, 2010; Livingstone, 2006; Riva, 2018). Not only have digital media amplified the communicative scope of peer culture, they are pivotal to young people’s social well-being (e.g., integration, acceptance, actualisation) (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019; boyd, 2014). Consequently, research shows that navigating trade-offs between the social importance of digitised peer culture and the ethical questions it produces is inherent to young people’s everyday life (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019;
Berriman & Thomson, 2014; Betts & Spenser, 2017; Davis & James, 2013). “This navigational complexity”, as Lenhart et al. (2011, p. 12) put it, is at the heart of teenagers’ work “to incorporate norms into their lives at the same time the teen is trying to craft a personal identity”.

In particular, regarding digital exploration of sexual identity, teenage girls’ talk indicates that their own and others’ decisions to share or not to share sexually suggestive images or ‘nudes’ with boys are the result of an intricate negotiating process between social and moral acceptance. In teen cultures and schools especially, where there is an articulate ethos of heteronormativity, girls must become proficient in navigating the social and moral complexities of whether or not to send these type of images (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013). While it is clear that in some peer cultures and school settings, social pressure to digitally perform can be substantial, research also reveals that from the age of 12, girls and boys scan the moral discourses that society and culture provide (Ringrose et al., 2013). Feminist research points in this respect to the pivotal role of gender differences and discourses. Girls reflect profoundly upon the consequences that digital sexual performances can have on what it means to be a girl – mostly expressed in terms of ‘reputation’ – and exploit the affordances of digital media (e.g., by cutting off their heads or greying out their faces in the photos or videos) to resolve the conflict between teen sociality and its social rewards, on the one hand, and conventional gendered norms, on the other. But boys’ narratives also show this kind of ‘negotiating work’, by not sharing with other boys the images they receive from girls – even though some images could promote their status in peer hierarchy – and investing in trustful engagements with girls (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013).

Although ‘sexting’ practices are often regarded as worrisome examples of amoral and immoral behaviour (Gill-Peterson, 2015), they provide a tremendously challenging training ground for moral agency, as they seem to generate a lot of talk among young people (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019); talk that contributes to the formation of moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010, p. 64). Besides, very often teenagers are exchanging self-produced sexual images through smartphones or the internet in consensual contexts of romance and friendship (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Döring, 2014; Hasinoff, 2012; Lenhart, 2009). The fact that these “risky opportunities” (Livingstone, 2008) are labelled in deviant and criminal terms (cf. the application of child pornography legislation and conviction of minor offenders in countries such as the US and Australia) contrasts with the actual moral negotiation and learning that takes place through this type of social intercourse, in terms of how to treat others with goodness and care, or how to sound out ‘permissible’ gendered moralities (Salter, 2016).

Another related realm of practices which is instructive here, is how young people understand privacy. Much inconsistency has been found in the way children feel about their own and other people’s privacy as part of their larger development as a moral self. Young people are concerned about their online privacy, but this does not always show in their disclosing behaviour (boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Davis & James, 2013; Taddicken, 2014). In trying to explain how children are both concerned about their privacy and, at the same time, willing to share personal information online, researchers have suggested that children’s conception of privacy online has less to do with the types of information they disclose than with their desire to exert control over this information and who has access to it (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019; Livingstone, 2008). Moral conceptions and sensitivities regarding self-disclosure are embedded in a general concern about their vulnerability to other, more powerful children and adults in their social networks (Mostmans, Bauwens, & Pierson, 2014).

From children’s stories we learn that their moral understanding of privacy and self-disclosure is inherently “context-sensitive” (Nissenbaum, 2009). During childhood, children’s social and relational contexts change significantly, and increasingly become peer-oriented (boyd, 2014). Knowing the inner ways of a group, with its specific codes, jokes, languages, and routines, can
offer a sense of belonging that many children find appealing (Livingstone, 2006). Humour, playfulness, banter, and drama can sometimes afford social interactions that might be negatively interpreted by adults, but not necessarily by young people themselves (Albury, 2015; Betts & Spenser, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2014). However, disclosures that are not accepted within peer groups can lead to strong moral judgements, negative evaluation, and even social exclusion. In the authors’ own research (Mostmans, 2017; Mostmans et al., 2014), children repeatedly described how implicit, unwritten rules of self-disclosure within peer groups guide their behaviour. They also explained how not subscribing to these rules, for instance how to deal with each other’s photos, could have significant social consequences offline, as one ten-year-old girl illustrated:

If someone would ever write negative comments to my pictures, even if it would be your best friend in class, one day he’ll notice that he doesn’t have a friend left. He wouldn’t be our best friend anymore. And it would be his own fault.

**Risk, Responsibility, and Reputation**

Despite children’s capacity to interact with and respond in agentic, meaningful ways to the worlds they are living in, these worlds are nevertheless designed and coordinated by adults (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Niemi, 2016; Wall, 2011). This not only shows in the power adults have to impose explicit moral rules, but also in dominant discourses of childhood and ‘appropriate and inappropriate conduct’ that circulate in spheres of parenting, teaching, counseling, youth work, industry, policy, media, and research (Buckingham, 2000; Haddon, 2012; Turow & Nir, 2000). From a Foucauldian perspective, these societal discourses can be understood as governmental means to producing moral subjects; trained to a life that meets societal demands and expectations (Guigni, 2011; Silcock et al., 2016). In that way, children are indeed becomings, not in the developmental but in the social sense of the word, as they discover through their encounters and negotiations with these social spheres (and their discourses) what it means to comply, or not, with moral rules (Frankel, 2012; Guigni, 2011; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016).

In the Global North, children’s narratives about their digitised social lives unfold a set of critical concepts they draw upon to explain – to adults though – why they engage in behaviour that gives rise to adult concerns and societal dread. Findings suggest that even though children’s moral agency can seem unruly and inconsistent, young people fall back on given frameworks or, as Taylor (1989, p. 19) puts it, horizons that incorporate “a crucial set of qualitative distinctions” helping them “to function with the sense that some actions, or mode of life, or mode of feeling are incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available” to them. From studies on young people’s experiences with sexting and illegal downloading, we learn that these frameworks are not necessarily complicit with the law; teenagers see no harm, for example, in sending and receiving nude, or semi-nude images in romantic contexts (Albury & Crawford, 2012) or in illegal downloading and sharing of copyrighted material (Flores & James, 2012; Miegel & Olsson, 2012). But, the moral categories that young people fall back on are highly contingent; reflecting the neoliberal and risk-obsessed temporalities (Hasinoff, 2012). Three interrelated concepts, in particular, are at the heart of children’s and young people’s narratives about moral agency. These critical concepts are: risk, responsibility, and reputation.

The practises children display when confronted with liminal digital interactions are profoundly articulated in terms of keeping oneself safe and minimising potential risks. Risk awareness is an important moral compass to fend off dubious digital activities (Berriman & Thomson, 2014). Especially for girls (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019; Albury & Crawford, 2012) and for children
growing up in families where moral rules are not always clearly defined and sanctions are rather limited (Frankel, 2012, p. 186; Livingstone & Setton-Green, 2016), young people are increasingly encouraged to rely on their own sense of responsibility, from which boundaries can indeed be explored and tested and standards readily internalised (Thomson & Holland, 2004). This results in a high degree of self-governance through the enactment of responsible, prudent, and conservative subjectivities (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019; Livingstone & Setton-Green, 2016; Salter, 2016). For example, European evidence covering the past decade suggests that most children have become more cautious and have learned that it is ‘unwise’ to post identifying information on their social networking profiles, such as a photo that shows one’s face or their surname, address, and phone number (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011).

It is argued that the ethical self-responsibility which children articulate in their everyday engagement with digital technologies is congruent with the neoliberal discourses of childhood generally found in Western societies (Silcock et al., 2016), built on entrepreneurship, consumerism, and sovereignty (Cradock, 2007). Researchers point out that children too are appropriating the “individualised neoliberal morals of self-creation and self-responsibility” (Bond, 2010, p. 590; Hope, 2015). Looking back on their digital media practises as a child, adolescents’ talk often echoes the postmodern ‘well-tempered self’ (Miller, 1993); here moral agency amounts to questioning what it means to act responsibly or irresponsibly, and how they have learned to become more in charge of their digital performances. This shows clearly in girls’ talk on sexting (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013; Salter, 2016). But also, regarding larger privacy issues, both boys and girls in a range of age groups regularly use vocabulary that resonates with choice, self-monitoring, and self-surveillance (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019; Berriman & Thomson, 2014; Davis & James, 2013).

Taking ethical responsibility for oneself is closely connected to what Flores and James (2012, p. 837) call ‘individualistic thinking’, i.e., ‘focusing on consequences for oneself’. In young people’s narratives, this form of moral agency crystallises mainly into a sincere concern about one’s reputation and the potential consequences of their digital practices for that reputation. Again, when it comes to digital sexual performances, girls articulate more often than boys a strong concern about self-respect and distinction from girls with ‘loose’ morality (Flores & James, 2012); in certain peer cultures and school settings sometimes labelled in harsh judgemental terms such as ‘skets’ and ‘sluts’ (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013). But also concern about future reputation in the professional and personal life they aspire to carefully guides young people’s moral decisions (Berriman & Thomson, 2014; Salter, 2016). Because a large part of digitised teen sociality has the property of constant visibility and persistence, these findings echo Taylor’s (1989, p. 15) analysis of ‘dignity’ as inherent to the making of modern identity, to our very comportment. The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, of pride or shame.

**Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the growing body of qualitative work that provides a glimpse into young people’s lived accounts of moral experiences in the digital. This field of research is not only relevant in terms of building more knowledge about the ways in which children actually make sense of their ethical responsibilities to themselves, to others, and to society, but also to children’s moral agency itself. If the “creation of narratives in conversations with others is a paramount developmental process for the formation of a sense of self”, then giving children the opportunity
to construct narratives about their moral experiences as “a critical process by which moral agency can develop” (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010, p. 59) is indeed a crucial task.

Whereas the starting point for this chapter was everyday rather than problematic digital media use, research on young people’s moral agency remains particularly occupied with practises that can typically be categorised as ‘moral crisis’ (Hasinoff, 2012, p. 450), such as ‘sexting’ and ‘cyber-bullying’. Remarkably little attention has been paid to the less controversial and more positive aspects of digitised teen sociality that are also a part of their moral lives and which enable them to explore questions, as Taylor (1989, p. 4) puts it, “about what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling”. Research needs to be more open to seeing the moral possibilities digital cultures offer for children’s moral self, even though building this takes place in worlds and structures not of their own making.

This chapter opted to take a helicopter view to discuss key trends in research on children’s moral agency in their digitised social worlds. It reflected the perspectives of young people living in technologically affluent societies in the Global North. A considerable part of the research published in English stems from the Anglo-Saxon regions (USA, Canada, UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand). This can be seen as a serious limitation of the knowledge on young people’s moral agency in the digital; many questions on young people’s values and horizons in other parts of the world remain unanswered (notable exceptions are, e.g., Arora & Scheiber, 2017; Livingstone, Nandi, Banaji, & Stoiiva, 2017).

Focussing on a large age group was a way to avoid the developmental perspective so dominant in discussions on children and moral agency. Although it can be argued that the more older children grow, the more experiences they acquire in “traversing life’s moral terrain” (Wall, 2011, p. 10) and understanding the social complexities of digital media (Davis & James, 2013, p. 21), blindness to age differences contributes to a contextualised understanding of children and young people’s moral agency. Context-sensitivity is certainly inherent to many qualitative investigations on young people’s moral agency; and social stratification and multicultural diversity among children in Western societies and schools are increasingly acknowledged by scholars as a social fact. However, based on the research discussed in this chapter, it is difficult to draw conclusions on how social and cultural differences materialise in children’s moral engagement with digital media. One notable exception is the field of feminist research, which sharply reveals how the frameworks children use to make discriminations between “what is honourable and dishonouring, what is admirable, what is done and not done” (Taylor, 1989, p. 20) are profoundly shaped by gender norms and the common-sense discourses that trickle down through girls’ and boys’ narratives.

Some scholars have argued that children’s moral experiences bear the promise of expanding moral horizons in new ways and destabilising the foundations of established belief and values in society (Miegel & Olsson, 2012; Wall, 2011). It is unclear whether the empirical evidence available today can support this claim. Research on sexting and privacy suggests that young people sometimes articulate conservative, harsh normative judgements on feminine and masculine digital performances. However, other realms of digitised peer sociality, such as the recent upsurge of Global North climate activists, reveal that young people traverse life’s moral terrain with creativity and dynamism, and that they negotiate the specific affordances of the various digital media not only in terms of convenience and sociality (Livingstone, 2008; Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, & Palfrey, 2010), but also in terms of morality.

References


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