Talking About Right and Wrong

*Parent-Child Conversations as Contexts for Moral Development*

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Caught red-handed: How Italian parents engage children in moral discourse and action

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Over the past two decades, studies in discursive psychology, linguistic anthropology, and ethnomethodology have explored *mundane morality*—that is, how people in everyday social interaction produce and are objects of moral evaluations, assign and are assigned blame or praise, and construct arguments about what they perceive as right or wrong (e.g., Antaki, 1994; Buttney, 1993; Drew, 1998; Duranti, 1993; Heritage, 1988; Stokoe & Edwards, in press). These studies have demonstrated that moral considerations permeate mundane conversation (Bergmann, 1998; Sivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011): in everyday exchanges, interlocutors hold each other accountable for their actions, claims, and stances, often via invoking rights and responsibilities to perform those acts.

The study of *morality in action* is thus eminently an investigation of discourse, argumentation, and reasoning. The goal, however, is not that of discerning a grammar of moral judgment from sentences isolated from the context of occurrence, or an abstract logic of moral reasoning that underpins concrete instances of argumentation and proposition. As Bergmann has argued, this would lead to “a decontextualized notion of morality, which leaves out the most salient feature of the ‘lived’ morality of everyday life—its practical character” (Bergmann, 1998: 281). Bergmann perceptively continues: “If one wants to get access to the actual practices in which morality comes to life, one has to abandon the philosophical idea of an independent logic of moral language” (p. 281). Instead, the attention turns to ordinary activities, in which morality is performed and indexed, primarily through language-as-action.

I am grateful to the children and parents whose conversations were analyzed in the course of this study. In addition, I wish to thank Ehlinor Ochs and Clotilde Pontecorvo for their critical advice and insightful comments during the first stages of development of this study. I am also indebted to the editors of this collection, Cecilia Wajnyb and Holly Recchia, for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this chapter.
In another cultural context, that of contemporary Taiwanese families, Heidi Fung has examined “shaming” as a verbal strategy frequently deployed by Taiwanese parents to point to a child’s transgression and prompt normative behavior (Fung, 1999). Fung considered nine families with children as young as two-and-a-half years old and documented ethnographically the families’ child rearing practices for 18 months. Fung has shown that elicitation of shame feelings was typically produced right after the child’s transgression but at the same time these feelings were mitigated by a playful manner of delivery of the shame prompt. Fung’s work illuminates the complex relationship between socialization of emotions and moral learning in the parent-child interaction. Shame is both a culturally appropriate display of being moral in Taiwanese families and an emotion that parents manipulate “in order to teach right from wrong and to motivate the child to amend” (Fung, 1999: 180).

The strands of morality research discussed so far are consonant with a Vygotskian perspective on moral development (Tappan, 1997); in fact, they contribute to articulating such a view, albeit unintentionally or implicitly in most cases: in line with Vygotsky’s theorization on the semiotic mediation of higher psychological functioning, moral understanding and reasoning are seen as mediated by language and forms of discourse (see also Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). The ontogenesis of moral functioning is thus social and dialogic; and moral development is shaped by the particular interpersonal and cultural contexts that the child experiences.

Drawing on the situated approach to morality, in this chapter I examine how moral guidelines are indexed and deployed in everyday family interaction, and how parents apprentice their children into moral reasoning and moral discourse. In particular, I focus on the ways in which parents signal their children’s improper conduct and call on them to remedy it. Parents use a range of priming moves to engage children in moral discourse and action. Those moves highlight different problematic aspects pertaining to the breach, which in turn prompt the production of distinctive remedial actions.

Children’s moral formulations – whether they enact justifications, excuses, apologies, or denials – are thus shown to be linked to the different formats parents have mobilized to solicit those formulations, rather than deriving uniquely and independently from underlying cognitive capacities to articulate moral explanations.

Data corpus and analytical procedures

The present study is based on 60 videotaped dinner conversations among 20 middle-class families living in four cities in Italy. In all 20 families, both parents were present. Selection criteria also included the presence of a child between the ages of three and six, and at least one older sibling. The researchers recruited the families through principals and teachers in several elementary schools. In order to minimize intrusion into spontaneous unfolding of home activities, videorecording of the family dinners was left entirely to the parents. The researchers only instructed an adult family member on the functioning of the video camera and were not present during the videorecordings. The adult in charge of the videorecording was asked to position the video camera, set on a tripod, in a corner or at the side of the room where the family dinner would take place so that all seated at the table would be within the frame. The video camera was turned on a few minutes before the beginning of dinner and turned off after family members left the table. A familiarization period of about a week was included in the research design as an additional device implemented to minimize reactivity – that is, the impact of the video camera on the behavior of those videorecorded. During that initial stretch of time, the families were asked to begin videorecording their meals. These first few videorecordings, however, were not included in the corpus of data then transcribed and analyzed.

Transcription of the dinner conversations was done according to the procedural and notational conventions of conversation analysis (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Besides linguistic production, transcripts contain information about prosodic and nonlinguistic aspects of the conversations, such as emphasis, sound stretch, pauses, overlaps, eye-gaze, gestures, etc.

For the purposes of this study, I identified conversational sequences centered around children’s norm violations and misbehaviors. A total of 243 such sequences were examined. The methodological procedures for data selection and excerpt analysis adopted in this chapter are drawn from discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 2003) and conversation analysis (Drew, 2004; Goodwin & Heritage, 1990; Sacks, 1992). Neither discursive psychology nor conversation analysis is a method as such; rather they are approaches that encompass both theoretical and analytical principles.

A fundamental theoretical tenet of both perspectives is that talk is a form of action and the central medium of human socialization. Thus, ordinary conversational interaction is seen as a valuable locus for investigating various social and cognitive phenomena, notably the construction and transmission of epistemic and deontic stances (Edwards, 1993). In addition, this approach foregrounds the participants’ perspectives; that is, it derives the categories employed in the analysis from the orientations and categorizations exhibited by the participants. By declining to use
predetermined normative categories and instead founding the analysis on what the participants themselves make relevant and utilize in interaction, the researchers aim to attain a better understanding of social and psychological processes in action, such as the spontaneous practice of cognition and morality in everyday activities and interactions. In looking at transcripts I have thus aimed at discerning the categories, strategies, and actions that family members employed in interacting with one another, paying particular attention to the ways actions and positions are linguistically constructed and sequentially situated in the ongoing exchange.

In this chapter I concentrate on how parents signal a child’s improper conduct; in other words I examine the priming move, the discursive action that singles out a problematic event and makes a remedial move conditionally relevant in the subsequent turn. More specifically, my analysis considers: (1) the actions leading up to the signaling of a breach and the signaling itself, which I refer to as priming move; (2) the preferred response projected by the priming move; (3) how the recipient responds to that move; and (4) how the interlocutors in turn react to the recipient’s response, or lack thereof. My analysis shows that different design features of the priming move retrospectively define different aspects of a situation as problematic and prospectively elicit the production of distinctive remedial moves.

The priming move: How parents signal a child’s improper conduct

Parents in my data corpus deployed a range of discursive moves to signal their children’s misconduct. I identified six different types of priming moves: request for an account, correction, reproach, minimal prompt, accusation, and lament. Succinctly, they can be described as follows: a request for an account is syntactically constructed as a question and presents either a semantic or a prosodic element, or a combination of these elements, which gives the question a moral charge (for example, “how come you are so quiet?”). A correction is delivered with an imperative that sanctions the misconduct and/or instructs on the proper behavior (for example, “don’t pull up the fork, twist it”). A reproach is a statement that points to the improper conduct and signals it as recurrent and as having already been sanctioned (for example, “I told you already that singing is not allowed at the dinner table”). A minimal prompt is a deictical (often nonverbal) form for signaling a breach (for example, a stare, a pointed index finger, an exclamation such as “hey”). An accusation highlights personal responsibility for the improper conduct (for example, “I brought you a croissant yesterday and you said nothing in response”). Finally, a lament is an expression of disappointment for the occurrence of the improper behavior (for example, “I am so tired to see that mess in your room”).

This variety of strategies for marking a child’s improper behavior is significant in that each priming move accomplishes its pragmatic aim in a distinctive way, which in turn has implications for the child’s moral positioning and expected response. In other words, the different linguistic formats of the priming moves cannot be thought of as merely formal variants of a same underlying action. While all priming moves may be assumed to share the same goal of signaling a misbehavior and promoting appropriate conduct, the moral work that each type of move launches is distinctive along several lines, notably responsibility and expected response.

In what follows I present the six types of priming moves found in the data corpus, in descending order of frequency of occurrence (see Table 6.2). The analysis focuses on the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features of the priming moves as well as on the relationship between priming moves and subsequent remedial moves.

Request for an account

Requests for an account in the corpus present two main formats. They may comprise the interrogative “come mai” (roughly translated as “how come”) and the definition of conduct as improper. Alternatively, they consist of narrative elicitations: this second kind is a more open-ended format and refers only indexically to the problematic event, without labeling or further describing it.

How come + description of conduct as improper. Come mai (how come) is an Italian cause/purpose adverbial phrase that can also be used as interrogative marker. As interrogative marker it usually introduces inquiries with moral implications. The deontic valence of come mai distinguishes it from the interrogative perché (why), which functions prevailingly as an epistemic interrogative marker in Italian.

Consider Extract 1: as is customary in the Tanucci family, the first part of the dinner conversation is devoted to each member’s report about his/her day. Three-year-old Leonardo has not volunteered a report of his day at preschool and has been reluctant to respond to his parents’ attempts to engage him in the conversation.
Extract 1
Tanucci family: Mamma (Paola), Papà (Fabrizio), Marco (10;6 years), Leonardo (3;9 years).

1 Papà: Leonardo
2 ( ) ((Leonardo looks at Papà))
3 Papà: ascolta una cosa.
listen to this
4 → come mai oggi hai graffiato a- a Ivan tu?
how come you scratched Ivan today?
5 (2.5) ((Leonardo looks at Papà))
6 Papà: eh?
7 (1.0)
8 → Papà: come mai? che t’aveva fatto Ivan?
how come? what had Ivan been doing to you?
bec- because I was before that ((kid)). true.
10 ((Papà nods))

The father warns his son Leonardo to listen (lines 1 and 3) before proceeding in his request. Such care for establishing good communicative conditions presages the seriousness of what is coming. Once Leonardo’s attention is secured, the father delivers a request for an account, using the interrogative formula come mai (how come) followed by a description of Leonardo’s behavior (at school with Ivan) as aggressive and untoward (line 4). A morally negative evaluation transpires from the father’s characterization of Leonardo’s behavior. The act of requesting the child’s response serves to position Leonardo as responsible for his actions and potentially capable of providing arguments for his conduct. Leonardo, however, remains silent (lines 5 and 7). Only after the father revises his question to hint at the possibility that Leonardo’s conduct was provoked (line 8), the child replies with an account that characterizes his conduct as reactive to a prior offense (line 9). With a nod and withholding further inquiry (line 10), his father ratifies Leonardo’s account as acceptable.

Requests for an account, such as that in Extract 1, present normative infractions or improper behavior as indisputable facts. While positioning the recipient (i.e., the one who is requested to provide an account) as responsible for the problematic episode, the request offers him the possibility of mitigating the alleged moral charge and offering a remedy for the conduct in question.

Extract 2
Fanaro family: Mamma (Teresa), Papà (Silvano), Sergio (7;5 years), Stefania (5;5 years), Andrea (Sergio’s friend: 7 years).

((Laughing with his mouth full Sergio spills something onto his plate))

1 → Papà: Sergio allora che è questa cosa?
Sergio so what’s that?
2 Sergio: papà:: ((in toto lamentoso))
daa::d ((with complaining tone))
3 (5.0) ((Sergio and Andrea giggle))
4 Sergio: no, ho fatto uno scherzo, mi so’ messo a ride’,
no. I made a joke. I started laughing,
5 e siccome stavo a mangiar’ m’è venuto di fa’ così.
and since I was eating I felt like doin’ like that.
6 (3.0)
7 Sergio: perché a te quando ridi se mangi non
when you eat while you’re laughing,
8 succede la stessa cosa? ((a Papà))
doesn’t the same thing happen to you? ((to Papà))
9 → Papà: eventualmente mi metto la mano davanti ( .) eh.
in that case, I put my hand in front ( .) mhm.

The nth burst of laughter between Sergio and Andrea occurs when the former has his mouth full. The boy cannot avoid spilling some food back onto his plate. The father witnesses the event and immediately calls on Sergio to account for his conduct. Papà’s request is severe in tone, with the delictic questa (that) and the adverb allora (so) adding emphasis to the negative connotation of the request. Nevertheless, the request does not contain an explicit formulation of the misbehavior.
that the father has just witnessed. Sergio has thus considerable freedom for argumentation. The account the child articulates presents a causal chain of events (lines 4–5). The close tie of cause and effect between sequential components makes the untoward behavior look unavoidable, thereby mitigating Sergio’s responsibility for it: a joke inevitably causes laughter, and if laughter happens while one is eating, then keeping the food in one’s mouth becomes extremely difficult! In other words, Sergio constructs his acts as incontestable and their consequences as unavoidable. He then concludes his intervention by employing a highly effective rhetorical stratagem (lines 7 and 8), a generalization that aims to invalidate the request for account by claiming that in similar circumstances his father would do exactly what Sergio did. Papà does not deny his son’s argumentation, thereby implicitly acknowledging the possibility of incurring a similar incident (line 9). However, he admonishes Sergio that a remedy for the untoward conduct (i.e., to put one’s hand in front of one’s mouth) is required anyway. Thus, we can observe that, within the space of three turns, the meaning of Sergio’s conduct is transformed: initially indexed by the father as problematic (with no more specific negative characterization), it is then presented by the child as unavoidable. Sergio does not deny responsibility for his act but justifies it – as perhaps unfortunate but inevitable given the circumstances. Papà admits, then, that in exceptional cases the improper act cannot be avoided, but he admonishes that such inevitability does not constitute a justification; therefore, a remedial act to repair the breach must yet be provided.

Extracts 1 and 2 have illustrated the two formats of the most common strategy that Italian parents employ to signal their children’s misconduct. The sequences we considered also revealed that the accounts provided by the children are designed contingently, in ways responsive to the specific circumstances established in the preceding moves. Indeed, as we shall continue to observe with all other priming moves, parents’ different ways of signaling and formulating the problematic event activate different dimensions of moral reasoning and project distinctive preferred responses for overcoming that event.

**Correction**

A behavioral correction characterizes the conduct at stake as inappropriate and indexes at the same time the norm to be observed. Corrections are delivered with an imperative format that either sanctions the misconduct or instructs on the proper behavior, or both.

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Caught red-handed

Consider Extract 3: the Soldano family is having pizza for dinner (except for eight-month-old Marina, who is spoon-fed a vegetable soup). Gianluca is eating his second slice and has left the crust of his first slice on his plate.

**Extract 3**

Soldano family: Mamma (Raffaella), Papà (Vittorio), Stefano (8;10 years), Gianluca (4;3 years), Marina (8 months).

1 → Papà: Gianluca si mangia anche questa parte qui. Eh? Gianluca this part is good to eat too. Ok? ((pointing to the crust Gianluca left on his plate))

2 Gianluca: no. (.) è dura. no. (.) it’s hard.

3 Papà: infatti apposta c’abbiamo i denti. that’s precisely why we have teeth.

4 ((Gianluca continues to eat his second slice, which he finishes entirely, crust included))

In this sequence Papà delivers the correction via an impersonal construction, typical of prescriptive statements. He closes his turn with a tag question, which invites assent and commitment from Gianluca (line 1). Signaling an improper conduct through a correction thus projects a quick resolution of the breach, without articulating considerations around responsibility for the misconduct or reasons for the correction. The child, however, opposes his father’s directive arguing that the crust is too hard for him to eat (line 2). Papà promptly responds by adducing information to support his correction (line 3), to which eventually Gianluca complies (line 4).

**Reproach**

A reproach is a statement that points to an improper conduct and signals it as recurrent and previously sanctioned. A reproach thus always contains a correction, even if it is often left implicit. Reproaches, however, are graver charges insofar as they cast the child as twice at fault, for the improper conduct and for failing to conform to previous injunctions.

In the following extract the Minelli family is beginning dinner. Papà and Luca are already seated; Mamma is bringing food and cutlery to the table. Papà has asked Luisa to take some cheese for him from the fridge on her way to the table. In addition to the cheese, Luisa brings salami and puts it on the table near Luca.
Caught red-handed
not deemed satisfactory either. It is only when Luca produces an explicit apology (line 11) that Mamma closes the reproach sequence (line 12).
This sequence is illustrative of the moral entailments related to the signaling of a breach. Morality is a key dimension for interpreting not solely the conduct being identified as problematic but also the very activity of handling the breach as such. Luca failed to thank his little sister for her generous act. This lack of recognition had already been the target of parental correction. Thus, its reoccurrence is also a display of disobedience, and when the reproach is delivered the child has to respond to both the charges. Luca was responsive to his sister, nonverbally by beginning to slice the salami that Luisa brought to the table for him (line 9), but he also needed a remedial move toward his mother, i.e. the apology (line 11).

Miniml prompt
Severe stares, gestures of dissent, a raised hand threatening spanking, and minimal verbal prompts, such as exclamations or summons, are indexical forms parents sometimes deployed for signaling a breach. These prompts function deictically, establishing an immediate relationship with the misconduct. The breaches thus signaled by minimal prompts are not only apparent because of having just occurred but also because of their recurrence. As such, minimal prompts worked similarly to reproaches, soliciting rectification of behavior and formulation of an apology.

Extract 5
Minelli family: Mamma (Sara), Papà (Matteo), Luca (10;9 years), Luisa (3;10 years).

1  →  Luca:  Andrea::a [sc nè-
Andrea::a is gone- ((singing))
2  →  Papà:  ((((throws a severe look at Luca))
3  →  Luca:  mhm:: ((stops singing by placing a hand on his
mouth momentarily))
4  scusa. sono smesso. ((sic.)) mi sono corretto.
I'm sorry. I'm stopped ((sic.)) I corrected myself.

Among the Minelli's, singing is not welcomed at the dinner table. Luca, however, is caught singing a few times within the same meal as well as across dinners. In Extract 5, Luca cuts off his singing as soon as he notices Papà's severe gaze. Luca marks the interruption of singing with two response cries (Goffman, 1978), namely the interjection “mhm” and the hand placement on mouth (line 3): they mark Luca's misbehavior as
an attention/memory lapse rather than an intentional rule violation. The child immediately follows with an apology and a statement of conduct correction (line 4), which further display Luca’s realignment with the family’s dinner table etiquette.

**Accusation**

In charging the recipient with improper conduct, an accusation highlights the accused’s personal responsibility for the breach. Accusations most often include an explicit characterization of the problematic behavior, while also considering responsibility and intentionality of conduct. As such, accusations leave little space for the accused’s defensive maneuvering. Most frequently, accusations were acknowledged as grounded, and apologies were offered as remedial responses. Sometimes, however, attempts to reject the accusation were produced, and these defenses worked precisely to negotiate the responsibility/intentionality charges.

Consider the following segment, extracted from the last few minutes of a dinner of the Quinto family. Adriana has been declining food and behaving in ways that prompted her parents to engage in several corrective interventions.

**Extract 6**

Quinto family: Mamma (Flavia), Papà (Sergio), Samuele (11;11 years), Adriana (4;4 years).

1  →  Papà:  oggi proprio non hai voluto fare la brava tu.  
you really didn’t want to be good today.  
did you?

2 (1.5)  Papà:  eh?

3  Papà:  eh?

4 Adriana:  ma papà sono ancora malata io. te lo ricordi?  
but dad i am still sick. do you remember this?

5 Papà:  ah già.

6 Adriana:  ah, ok.

After the occurrence on another breach, Papà formulates an accusation pointing to Adriana’s unwillingness to “be good” (line 1). So, it is not solely the fact that Adriana has not behaved well that is the target of her father’s critique, but also that she did not display the intention to “be good” and that this problematic stance was protracted (the time reference is a whole day). Silent acquiescence, which Adriana displays in line 2, is no adequate response to the accusation. Papà reiterates his prompt for a response, in line 3, to which then Adriana follows via invoking extenuating circumstances to excuse her behavior (line 4). In other words, the little girl does not deny that she had not been good that day, but argues that being sick exculpates her. The father’s acceptance of her account closes the sequence (line 5).

**Lament**

A lament is an expression of dissatisfaction for a state of affairs, most commonly in my data referring to a child’s enduring or recurring untoward conduct. Laments highlight the misbehavior’s negative consequences on the parent’s well-being. The most frequent lamentation formulae found in the data corpus are “I am so tired of …”, “I get a headache when I have to …”, “you drive me crazy with …” When addressed with a lament, the child is expected to produce an apology and rectify her behavior immediately or commit to fixing the improper state of affairs as soon as possible. In only three instances of lament (out of the 18 occurrences found in my data corpus) the child failed to offer the expected response and attempted a defense via account production. Those accounts were not accepted as valid by the parent and the child was eventually persuaded to express sorrow and promise to rectify her conduct.

We see one such episode in the following extract:

**Extract 7**

Quinto family: Mamma (Flavia), Papà (Sergio), Samuele (11;11 years), Adriana (4;4 years).

((Adriana and Samuele are engaging in a little physical confrontation, with reciprocal pushing and pinching))

1  →  Mamma:  sono così stanca di vederti litigare  
I’m so tired to see you fight

2  in continuazione.  
continuously

3 Adriana:  ma mamma ha cominciato lui  
but mom he started.

4 e mi ha dato un pizzico qui.  
and pinched me here. (showing forearm to Mom)

5 Mamma:  niente scuse. mamma mia o:h.  
no excuses. ooh mamma mia.

6 (1.0)  ((Adriana departs from Samuele, gets close to Mom  
holding grasp of her arm affectionately))

7 Mamma:  e tu?  
and how about you?

8 Samuele:  scusa.  
I’m sorry.
Table 6.1 Types of priming moves and expected remedial responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priming move</th>
<th>Expected response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Request for an account</td>
<td>Account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correction</td>
<td>Rectification of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproach</td>
<td>Apology + rectification of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal prompt</td>
<td>Apology + rectification of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusation</td>
<td>Apology/account + rectification of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lament</td>
<td>Apology + rectification of behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upon noticing her children engaged in a fight, Mamma expresses the discouragement she feels upon witnessing, once again, undesirable sibling conduct (line 1). Adriana attempts to save face by arguing that it was her brother who provoked her and started the fight (line 2). Mamma is unwilling to accept any excuse and adds another expression of frustration and fatigue (line 3). At this point Adriana responds with a reparative action, disengaging from Samuele and touching Mamma gently to offer her comfort (line 4). Samuele, on the other hand, has not offered any remedial move. Mamma requires it from him, in line 5. Samuele follows with an apology (line 6), which closes the episode.

As Extract 7 illustrates, signaling a breach via a lament does not invite moral argumentation or negotiation. It urges contrition, appealing to the interpersonal, notably psychological and emotional, valence of misconduct and moral behavior. It promotes interpersonal perspective taking rather than abstract reasoning.

In summary, we have considered six main strategies that Italian parents deploy to signal their children's improper conduct. We have seen how each move has distinctive entailments in terms of responsibility for the breach and the proffering of a remedial move. We have also seen that no one remedial move may be deemed satisfactory as a response to all the different types of priming moves. I have identified a system of expected relationships that links different priming moves with specific remedial moves (see Table 6.1). These findings compel me to argue for an understanding of children's moral stances and perspectives not simply with reference to milestones along a general developmental process but rather as context-specific actions organized by discursive practices that encode and reproduce the group's morality of human action.

Now that we have completed an overview of the repertoire of parental priming moves, and the moral work they solicit and accomplish, we shall consider briefly their frequency and distribution in the data corpus. Italian parents participating in the study displayed a clear preference for requests for an account as prime discursive strategy to invite remedial work from their children (128 occurrences out of 243 priming moves, 52.7 percent) (Table 6.2).

Elsewhere (Sterponi, 2003), I have argued that requests for an account as the preferred form to signal a child's misconduct, and accounts as preferred remedial moves, index a moral perspective that promotes moral reasoning and thereby the negotiation of norms. By being requested to provide an account, children are positioned as moral agents, responsible for their actions. At the same time, they are solicited to enact their moral agency. In this sense, requests for an account realize a practice of morality among Italian families that tends to be inquisitorial rather than condemnatory, offering the benefit of the doubt (versus condemning until proven innocent) and the opportunity to mitigate the ascription of fault prior to guilt allocation and punishment.

The priming move directed to children of different ages

In order to shed further light on the situated nature of children's moral reasoning, hence on the contextual dimension of moral development, I
have considered a subsample from my data corpus, divided in two different age groups. More specifically, I have selected ten children between the ages of three and six years who had a sibling between seven and ten years old. A total of 30 dinner table conversations were thus considered. From those I have then tabulated the distribution of parental priming moves in the two age groups.

The findings presented in Table 6.3 are worthy of several considerations: at the most general level we can observe that older children are less frequently targeted by parents' moral initiations than younger children: 39 priming moves are addressed to seven- to ten-year-olds versus 63 priming moves for three- to six-year-olds. This difference can be easily understood as a result of learning: older children have mastered many of the rules related to dinner table etiquette as well as expected behaviors related to other activities of their daily lives.

It is also interesting to observe that despite the substantial age-related difference in the overall frequency of parents' moral initiations, the request for an account remains the preferred parental priming move for both age groups. Furthermore, if we consider together the priming moves that call for an account (i.e., requests for an account and accusations), we can appreciate the extent to which Italian parents solicit their children to exercise moral argumentation across age groups: 63.4 percent of priming moves directed to younger children, and 46.1 percent of priming moves directed to older children prompt the production of an account as the appropriate remedial move. It seems thus reasonable to argue that moral argumentation represents a key component of the ethos of the Italian families in our corpus.

Two types of priming move are particularly interesting to consider in the two age groups: accusation and lament. Both appear in considerably higher percentages in the older age group, which arguably is indication of increasing sophistication and nuancing of moral reasoning. As already discussed in the previous section of this chapter, accusations are claims that the child has done something wrong. In addition to an explicit formulation of the misconduct, the accusation highlights the personal responsibility of the accused. When faced with an accusation, the child's grounds for defensive maneuvers are limited. Undoubtedly, it takes more refined argumentative capacities to challenge an accusation than to respond to a request for an account. Thus, it seems that as children grow older parents increase the complexity of the moral reasoning tasks. They continue to be receptive to their children's accounts but require them to be more sophisticated and convincing.

Laments are expressions of dissatisfaction with a state of affairs and are expected to be remedied with an apology and rectification of behavior.

While prima facie laments seem to handle breaches in a quick and formulaic manner, they in fact mobilize multiple axes of moral reasoning at the same time, notably an intersubjective dimension, which promotes perspective-taking and empathy, along with a more abstract dimension, which invokes normative standards to honor. Laments are five times more frequently deployed to target older children's misbehaviors than younger children's breaches. As their children grow older, Italian parents thus seem to foster a link between morality, family well-being, and interpersonal harmony.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have taken a situated approach to the study of morality, examining moral reasoning as a discursive practice, inextricably linked with the social and cultural contexts in which it is produced. My study has revealed that Italian parents mobilize a range of formats to signal their children's misbehavior. These formats are not superficial and inconsequential variants of an underlying singular action, insofar as they make salient different dimensions of responsibility and call for distinctive remedial moves. Thus, the ways Italian parents frame violations, invoke norms, and call for remedial moves are informed by and enact their ethos and their ideas about the quintessential traits of moral conduct. The prevalence of priming moves that invite children to account for their conduct indexes a moral orientation that fosters moral reasoning and argumentation. Even when caught red-handed, so to speak, the Italian child is given the benefit of the doubt and offered the possibility to articulate an account that demonstrates her being a moral person. Thus, the capacity to develop a compelling moral argumentation is an important component of moral personhood within the Italian families considered in my study.

My analysis of children's responses to the signaling of a breach has highlighted that children's moral argumentation is highly sensitive to the constraints and affordances set up in the parent's priming move. Thus, if we were to single out a child's moral thought, extract it from its context of occurrence, and evaluate its quality in terms of, for example, its abstractness, without taking into account what triggered the production of that line of reasoning, we might end up formulating an inaccurate evaluation of the child's moral reasoning abilities and moral development.

Children's moral reasoning and sense of morality develop in the dynamic and fluid contexts of everyday social interaction (Snow, 1987). Therein, moral thought is social action and is shaped in a highly argumentative fashion, as accusation, excuse, justification, praise, blame,
etc. As we continue to shed light on the nuances of the child’s moral development, I invite the field to give serious consideration to situated perspectives, which recognize the contextual and argumentative nature of morality. This line of research can also contribute to consolidating a Vygotskian perspective on moral development, by discerning culturally situated mechanisms of semiotic mediation and the dialogic underpinnings of the moral self.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

- The period indicates a falling, or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence.
- The question mark indicates rising intonation, not necessarily a question.
- The comma indicates “continuing” intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary.
- Colon indicates stretching of the preceding sound, proportional to the number of colons.
- A hyphen after a word or a part of a word indicates a cutoff or self interruption.

word Underlining indicates some form of stress or emphasis on the underlined item.

WOrd Upper case indicates loudness.

> < The combination of “more than” and “less than” symbols indicates that the talk between them is compressed or rushed.

< > In the reverse order, they indicate that a stretch of talk is markedly slower.

= Equal sign indicate no break or delay between the words thereby connected.

(() Double parentheses enclose descriptions of conduct.

(word) When all or part of an utterance is in parentheses, this indicates uncertainty on the transcriber’s part.

() Empty parentheses indicate that something is being said, but no hearing can be achieved.

(1,2) Numbers in parentheses indicate silence in tenths of a second.

A dot in parentheses indicates a “micropause,” hearable but not readily measurable; ordinarily less than two-tenths of a second.

Separate left square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with utterances by different speakers, indicates a point of overlap onset.

→ A horizontal arrow to the left of the transcript indicates a turn that is the focus of analysis.

REFERENCES


