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‘RIGHT’ AND ‘NOT RIGHT’

Representations of justice in young people

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This article analyses the results of a study of conceptions of justice among Italian teenagers. The aim was to examine young people's representations of issues of justice, and to determine whether the experience of active participation can influence such representations. The study was designed in accordance with the most recent approaches in sociology of childhood; it involved young people attending higher secondary school, some of them members of a youth organization. Most of the teenagers were interviewed individually, others in focus groups. The interviews were conducted through the presentation of scenarios based on questions of justice, while the focus groups were presented with a variety of moral dilemmas.

Children's moral reasoning and agency

Traditionally, the social sciences have dealt with children by treating them as 'dependent variables, appendages to, some category of adults' (Alanen, 2005: 31). They and their specific phase of life in fact were studied for a long time in relation to other subjects – adults – and other conceptual fields, such as theories of education and socialization (Corsaro, 1997; Hengst and Zehier, 2005; Jenks, 1982). They were never spoken of as autonomous actors in their own right.

This approach arose from the fact that children were not considered in the present tense as children, but as what they would become – future adults – and this derived also from the traditional concept of socialization, according to which children are social becomings, beings that are not yet social, and for this reason sociologically uninteresting (Corsaro, 1997).

Today, however, sociologists of childhood consider children to be subjects that actively participate in social life, starting with their own, specific perspective on the world, and according to models of action that may differ from those of adults (James et al., 1998). They are no longer understood to be passive recipients of the teachings of adults, but rather as actors who play an active role in their own developmental process, which is not just a natural and universal biological event but a process that is strongly influenced by social and cultural factors. Therefore, children, like adults, actively participate in the

social construction of the social world that surrounds them, of childhood itself and of the interpretative reproduction of their shared culture (Corsaro, 1997; Prout and James, 1990b; Qvortrup, 1991).

One of the tasks of the sociology of childhood today is precisely that of making explicit the social skills that children possess in their daily relationships with peers and with adults: in peer groups and in their families, as well as in myriad other environments in which their social action takes place (Alanen, 2005; Jenks, 1982; King, 2004; Prout and James, 1990a; Qvortrup, 1985).

This conceptualization of children leads us to the question upon which this study is based¹: in what sense are children capable of moral agency? Supporters of the new sociology of childhood claim that children in their everyday interactions are continuously faced with issues of justice and fairness, as well as with decision-making situations that carry moral implications and require them to take responsibility. According to the philosopher Gareth Matthews, children are individuals capable of moral action, and from a very early age they develop a working knowledge of moral notions on the basis of their everyday experiences (Matthews, 1994). Other scholars are of the same view, including the psychologist William Damon (1981), who sees the topic of justice and fairness as occupying a central role in the social life of children, starting from their early years.

However, adults who are confronted on a daily basis by children's moral agency and expect children to take responsibility in their interactions and relationships, nonetheless tend not to recognize them as moral actors (Matthews, 1994; Mayall, 2002, 2004). The results of a number of studies provide evidence of children's competence in terms of moral action, and also of their perception of the gap between their moral competence and the low moral status attributed to them, especially outside the home. What is of greater significance, though, is that children often believe that adults are correct in not acknowledging that they are capable of moral action, thus demonstrating that they internalize the low status they are assigned in society (Mayall, 2004). More specifically, findings of a study reporting young people's accounts of their own and others' moral development (Holland et al., 2000) showed that teenagers internalize a developmental model of moral growth. This 'is based on an adult subject position, and so when drawn by young people in their own moral discourse, it provides them with no subject position' (Holland et al., 2000: 278). These findings confirm that the social position attributed by adults to children in that they are children, and the standard representation of childhood, also influences children's self-image (Alanen, 2005; Holland et al., 2000; James, 2005; Qvortrup, 2005).

Justice and moral development

Questions concerning the formation and development of a moral sense and a sense of justice have been subjected to extensive analysis, especially in the

domain of cognitive psychology and developmental theories (Kohlberg, 1958, 1976; Piaget, 1932). Experts in this field claim that moral development always occurs in the same way for everybody, and that it comes about in a progression of qualitatively different stages, which are increasingly sophisticated in terms of cognitive skills. Evolutionary and cognitive models of moral development suppose a 'de-spatialized' and 'de-contextualized' representation of children and childhood (Qvortrup, 2005: 3) and lead scholars to neglect how children use their knowledge and competence to deal with moral issues in their daily life experience (Mayall, 1996).

However, the latest trends in the study of the foundations of justice have produced doubt about the existence of a single universal psychological process underpinning moral reasoning and criteria of justice. Current psychological and sociological literature suggests that the development of feelings of justice and moral reasoning and behaviour is influenced by a variety of social, cultural and historical variables and that, moreover, it is a maturation process in which moral and physical competences are intertwined. It must not be forgotten that it is through the internalization and embodiment of social practices that the child becomes 'civilized' and a competent social agent. Holland's research showed that 'whilst the ideal typical developmental model . . . is discursively dominant', children 'follow a route to moral competence strewn with complicating domestic, social, structural and cultural factors and they develop strategies for dealing with the complexity and diversity with which they are confronted' (Holland et al., 2000: 277–8, 293).

This view is shared by social learning theorists, who argue that people form their moral judgements by using a wide range of criteria that vary according to each given situation and relational context (Kellerhals et al., 1995). More specifically, it has been observed that people use different moral principles selectively and in a complementary way, depending on the interplay of circumstances and the domain of functioning. Hence, these scholars maintain that moral development produces 'multiform' moral thought, and that moral reasoning is steered by personal and subjective preferences rather than by the level of cognitive competence (Bandura, 1996). According to this approach, reaching a moral judgement by means of a set of complementary criteria reveals a higher competence in moral reasoning, and the stages identified by Piaget and Kohlberg do not represent progressive superior levels of moral reasoning, but different – yet equally valid – perspectives for analysing moral issues. For this reason, it would not be possible to think in terms of hierarchical levels of moral reasoning and thus assert that the most complex reasoning from a cognitive viewpoint is always also morally superior (Bandura, 1996). This view is also held by some moral philosophers, who assert the existence of a pluralistic system of judgement (Carter, 1980; Codd, 1977).

Recently, a number of studies have placed considerable focus on cultural and, above all, relational and social factors (such as being involved in

participatory practices with other peers and adults) as key elements of the development of moral reasoning and notions of justice. Damon (1990), for instance, asserted that children's natural engagement with moral issues develops and improves thanks to the guidance and encouragement of adults. Edward Sampson (1981) – drawing on Vygotsky's (1987) work – suggested that justice and its meaning are social constructions because 'the justice motive' is an inter-personal process whose origins are not found in the mind.

Some cognitive psychologists also agree with these new approaches. They believe that discussions that take place in associative and participatory contexts influence and favour moral development and utilization of moral and justice criteria (Crain, 1992; Turiel, 1966). Moreover, Kohlberg (1976) in his later studies had already pointed out that the stages of moral development he had identified were not the result of cognitive development or a direct out-come of socialization. Increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive forms of reasoning – which take into account different standpoints, needs and claims – are achieved especially through dialogue, where everyone's point of view is considered and exposed to criticism and disagreement.

The importance of participation and involvement with adults and peers is also stressed by the results of the research conducted by Holland et al. (2000). They emphasized that young people's moral discourse 'is laced through with relationship and sociability, with parents, with family, with friends' (Holland et al., 2000: 288).

To sum up, all these scholars have established that children from an early age possess moral competence, and that this ability develops best if it is practised together with peers and adults (Dunn, 1988; Mayall, 2002; Pritchard, 1996).

The research

Theoretical premises

The main theoretical premises of the study are as follows:

1. The sense of justice cannot be thought of in abstract terms; it must be examined in a specific relationship. There is not only one absolute criterion of justice, but a wide variety of criteria from which people pick the one they deem most suitable for a given situation.
2. Judgements on questions of justice are the result of the interplay of several subjective and objective criteria, which vary according to different cultural and social contexts.
3. Participation on the part of the subjects concerned and the consideration of their opinions are important factors when judging the fairness of the procedure and the correctness of a decision (Leventhal, 1980; Tyler et al., 1985).

1. Actual experiences of participation have an impact on the selection of justice criteria and on the shaping of social representations of issues of justice.
2. Gender is a key variable in the choice of moral criteria and notions of justice (Gilligan, 1982).

Study design and implementation

The research was conducted in Lombardy (Milan and Brescia) between 2003 and 2005. It was based on a sample of 141 young people (69 boys and 72 girls) aged between 14 and 17 years old, attending higher secondary school. In order to assess whether the engagement of teenagers in participatory practices involving peer groups had an impact on the formation of the notion of justice and moral reasoning, our sample included some members of the non-denominational youth association Centro Nazionale Giovani Esploratori Italiani (CNGEI [National Explorers Youth Corps]), based in Milan.

A total of 125 young people attended one of the four secondary schools selected in Brescia (one *liceo* [high school], one technical school and two vocational schools), while 16 respondents were members of the youth association.

Girls and boys were presented with questions that ranged from simpler issues concerning respondents' everyday lives (decisions occurring in the family or among friends), to situations that were not part of their everyday experience and that interviewees were less familiar with (administrative and political decisions). Respondents were also asked to have joint discussions on some moral dilemmas.

The study was carried out using a qualitative method. Questions of justice were dealt with by means of semi-structured interviews; moral dilemmas were presented in focus group situations. The individual interviews involved 99 teenagers (90 pupils of the sample schools and nine members of the CNGEI), while 42 teenagers were involved in eight focus groups (six of which were at the schools in Brescia and two at the Milan office of the youth association).

Questions of justice

In the interviews, various scenarios were presented relating to distributive justice, procedural justice, allocation of responsibility and how far injustice could be tolerated. In this article, only the results concerning items related to distributive and procedural justice are presented.

With regard to distributive justice, research scenarios in this work focused on the choice of distributive decisions among traditional criteria of merit, need and equality. As for procedural justice, on the other hand, attention was focused on the rules and procedures implemented in decision-making processes.

Moral dilemmas

In the focus group situations, moral dilemmas were presented with the goal of assessing whether young people were able to develop complex reasoning concerning equally complex questions of justice and dilemma, and whether their arguments, as happens with adults, drew on a broad array of rules and moral principles to be chosen in a selective and complementary way according to each given situation.

Five dilemmas were developed. In this article, only the results concerning the first one are presented. The scenario for this was inspired by one of the moral dilemmas created by Kohlberg in the late 1950s for his well-known research on the moral development of children (Kohlberg, 1958).

Results

Fair distribution

Studies of justice have paid particular attention to issues related to distributive justice (Ferrari, 1995). More specifically, a great deal of research conducted with adults indicated that:

1. The context – as well as gender, age and social status – influences distributive decisions;
2. Judgements around distributive justice issues come from the interaction and balance between more than one criterion (Bandura, 1996; Carter, 1980; Codd, 1977);
3. These judgements vary according to different cultural, social and even relational domains (Kellerhals et al., 2001; Miller, 1992);
4. Rules of justice are influenced by the personalization² of relationships. More specifically, highly *personalized* relationships are governed by the rule of equality. On the other hand, it is deemed fair to govern bureaucratized relationships on the basis of merit (Lerner, 1977).

Research on distributive justice has also been carried out in cooperative contexts. These studies showed that stronger self-awareness appears to lead to an increased inclination in favour of the proportional principle. Conversely, stronger group awareness seems to lead to a preference for the rule of equality (Greenberg, 1980; Wegner, 1982).

Let us turn to the results concerning the first two scenarios.

All for one

The first scenario shows a situation characterized by a cooperative relationship (team work), as well as being set in a personalized relational context.

First, it is important to stress that respondents often claimed that there was not a single criterion that could be defined as fair in absolute terms. They

Scenario 1

Carlo asks Gianni, Luca and Elisa, the children of some neighbours, if they want to earn 15 euros in exchange for washing his car. The children accept the offer. When the job is finished, Carlo has to decide how to distribute the money among the three children. How do you think Carlo should distribute this sum?

- Should he give them 5 euros each?
- Should he give more money to Gianni, because he worked harder and better than the others?
- Should he give more money to Luca, since Carlo knows that Luca's family is experiencing financial problems?
- Should he give the 15 euros to the children and let them decide how to share it?

thought that the decision should be driven by the needs of the specific situation. In this case, some thought that the friendship shared by the children was decisive when choosing one criterion over the others. Therefore, they declared that when people share a strong friendship, it is correct to use the principle of equality.

Let us now analyse the breakdown of responses (Table 1). As a whole, results supported the findings of research carried out in personalized relational contexts and also corroborated the findings of the surveys involving cooperative contexts.

As a matter of fact, most interviewees (34 girls and 26 boys) chose the rule of equality. Their reasons were mostly based upon the fact that all three children had worked on the job.

More than one-quarter of the interviewees (15 girls and 13 boys) thought that it was right to let the children decide themselves how to share their pay.

With regard to the variables considered in our sample, we identified some overall trends. In particular, the choice to let the three friends decide themselves was more frequent among interviewees from families with a higher educational and occupational level. In addition, as opposed to what is usually found in studies conducted among adults, the respondents coming from families with a low socioeconomic and cultural status displayed more meritocratic attitudes.

Scenario 2

In the Municipality of Papalla, a benefactor gives the Mayor a sum of money to offer some scholarships for lower secondary school graduates. The Mayor must decide how to distribute the money. Which choice do you think would be the fairest?

- Should he give the money to the 10 children who passed the final exam with the best marks?
- Should he give the money to the 10 children from the most financially disadvantaged families?^[a]
- Should he give the money to all school graduates in equal parts?
- Should he draw by lot the names of the 10 children who are to receive the money?
- Should he organize a competition for all lower secondary school graduates and award the benefactor's money to the three best essays?

a) This option was suggested by some of the respondents themselves.

The Mayor of Papalla and scholarships

In the second scenario (see p. 282), the decision to be made is embedded in a bureaucratized relational context.

Here, the interviewees' responses are distributed equally between considerations based on need and those based on merit (Table 2). More specifically, 25 girls and 19 boys thought it was fair to award the scholarships to those children who were worse off, in agreement with the findings of other studies with adults about similar issues (Elster, 1992). On the other hand, 24 boys and 21 girls thought that it was right to reward the top students of the course or give the scholarships to the top three essays in a competition.

Most of those who chose the principle of need thought that families should be helped in order to allow their children to continue their studies. Some others stressed the fact that considerations based on need should be accompanied by assessments based on merit.

Among those who opted for a merit-based principle, the ones who chose to give the scholarships to the top students of the course claimed that it was important to reward the work done during the whole school year. Otherwise, the interviewees who decided to reward the winners of an ad hoc competition thought that this was the only true meritocratic criterion, since the money would be given to the winners of a competition that would be the same for everybody and that would be evaluated by the same judges.

It is important to stress that nobody among the respondents considered it right that the receivers of the scholarship should be drawn by lot. An analysis of the cultural and socioeconomic status of the parents of our sample shows,

Table 1 How should the money for washing the car be distributed?

	%
Give 5 euros to each	60
Give more to Gianni for working harder and better	7
Give more to Luca because he needs it the most	4
Let the children decide	28
<i>Total</i>	99

Table 2 How should the scholarships be awarded?

	%
Award scholarships to top 10 students	28
Award scholarships to 10 most needy students	44
Distribute the money to all students in equal parts	8
Award scholarships to top three essays in a competition	17
Give scholarships to best performing disadvantaged students	2
<i>Total</i>	99

n this scenario too, that respondents with a lower status deemed it fair to base decisions on a principle of merit, whereas interviewees from more advantaged backgrounds mostly opted for a principle of need.

In conclusion, the findings of our survey support the assumption that, among young people, assessing what is right or not right with regard to the distribution of resources results from considerations that combine several factors, such as the importance of the relationship between the receivers of the goods or services, the evaluation of the characteristics of each subject and the perception of self with respect to other potential receivers of resources.

The findings also support the hypothesis that the equality principle is mainly chosen in personalized relational contexts. However, the results do not confirm the assumption that the merit principle is preferred in bureaucratized relational contexts. As a matter of fact, our interviewees' responses are distributed equally between principles of merit and need.

Fair procedure

As illustrated, the scenarios concerning procedural justice paid particular attention to the procedures implemented in the decision-making process. To this end, respondents were then presented with two other scenarios (Scenarios 3 and 4), each with two different versions that the children looked at in succession. In the first version of each, the decision was made without discussion (autocratic decision-making). In the second version, the decision was the result of a participatory process (participatory decision-making). The two scenarios were placed in two different relational contexts, in order to verify

Scenario 3 The judge's decision

First version

A social worker wrote a report to a Juvenile Court judge concerning the case of two siblings who were suspected of having been abandoned. The social services report stated that the children's family lived in conditions of serious deprivation: both parents were unemployed; the two children were neglected, and on various occasions the social worker had found them at home alone. On the basis of the social services report, the judge determined that the children were exposed to serious risk. Consequently, she ordered that they be immediately removed from their parents' custody and placed with another family.

Do you think that the judge's decision was right?

Second version

A social worker wrote a report to a Juvenile Court judge concerning the case of two siblings who were suspected of having been abandoned. The social services report stated that the children's family lived in conditions of serious deprivation: both parents were unemployed; the two children were neglected and on various occasions the social worker had found them at home alone. The judge ordered an inspection; she listened to the social worker; she invited the children's parents to appear before her and asked them to explain the reasons for their behaviour; finally, she also summoned the children and listened to them. After careful consideration, she determined that the children were exposed to risk; she informed both the parents and the children of the decision she intended to make, and finally she ordered that the children be removed from their parents' custody and be placed with another family.

Do you think that the judge's decision was right?

Table 3 Is the judge's decision to remove the children from their parents' custody right?

	<i>Non-participatory decision</i>	<i>Participatory decision</i>
Yes	69	92
No	28	7
Don't know	2	0
<i>Total</i>	99	99

their influence on respondents' choices: the bureaucratized relational context involved a judge's decision, while the personalized relational context presented a decision occurring in a family setting.

The judge's decision

The two different versions of the judge's decision are shown in Scenario 3 (on p. 284). The results of the children's responses to each version are shown in Table 3.

With regard to the first version, where the judge made her decision in an autocratic way, without carefully analysing the situation but, above all, without listening to the parents and their children, about two-thirds of respondents (35 boys and 34 girls) believed the judge's decision to remove the children was right. In the second version, where the judge decided to take the children away from their parents after a more accurate analysis of the situation and after listening to all the subjects involved, almost all respondents agreed with the judge's decision to remove the children.

Most of respondents who agreed with the judge's ruling in the first version believed that the judge had acted in the children's best interest: It's only fair to give these children a chance; I'm sorry for their parents, but they will understand that it's in their children's best interest.

Other interviewees pointed out that:

The children should have a family who can give them good care and attention; it's their right.

Several respondents thought that the removal of the children from parental care should only be temporary:

When the parents find a job and get back on their feet, they'll be able to provide proper care for their children and then the judge will probably place the kids back with them.

Some interviewees focused on the situation of danger and the parents' irresponsible behaviour.

Most of those who did not deem the judge's decision to be right thought that the procedure was too hasty:

We need to have more information. Here it doesn't say all that should be known.

Some respondents claimed that, first of all, social workers should have helped the parents:

This type of decision doesn't help: the parents' situation will remain catastrophic, they should help the parents – in finding a job, for example – and not take away the kids.

Only one boy and one girl pointed out the fact that the children had not been involved in the decision-making process and considered the judge's decision wrong because she had not listened to the children's opinion.

Moreover, it is also interesting to analyse the answers of the 24 interviewees who opposed the removal of the children in the first version while they supported it in the second: 12 boys and 12 girls. The reasons they gave for agreeing with the judge's decision in the second case concerned the manner in which such a decision had been reached. They noted that, in the second version, the analysis of the situation had been more accurate and that consequently the judge came to the delicate decision of taking the children away after having ascertained the actual danger involved. Several respondents stressed the fact that, in this case, the decision-making process involved the judge listening to all the parties implicated in the decision and especially to the children themselves:

She considered everybody, she listened to the children's and the parents' desires; she went into the matter more deeply.

Other respondents, who had agreed with the judge's decision in the first version, declared they agreed even more with the decision of the second version. They emphasized the fact that, in the second case, the procedure had been more correct, since it was based upon more detailed information and also because the judge involved the parties concerned.

Only three girls and one boy deemed the judge's decision to be wrong in both cases. They believed that separating children from their parents was always wrong:

The judge should help the parents anyway; listening to everybody was a good thing: once she knows what the problems are, she can find a different way to help them out.

Finally, as few as six respondents thought that it had been inappropriate for the judge to listen to the children. They held that it was wrong to involve them in the decision-making process because their age made them unreliable subjects.

Luca's pocket money

In this fourth scenario (see p. 287), a further difference between the two versions was introduced: when the child was involved in the decision, the result was less advantageous for him. This factor was introduced to prove Tyler's theory of *value-expressive effects* in judgements of procedural justice, whereby individuals are ready to accept an unfavourable decision if it is the result of a fair procedure (Tyler, 1990).

Scenario 4 Luca's pocket money

First version

Luca is 12 years old. He asked his parents if he could receive some pocket money every week. Luca's parents, without asking him what he thought, decided that 7 euros a week was a suitable amount.

Do you think that the decision made by Luca's parents was right?

Second version

Luca is 12 years old. He asked his parents if he could receive some pocket money every week. His parents deemed it useful to decide on the amount of pocket money by discussing it all together. Luca claimed that 7 euros a week, which was roughly what his friends received, could be a fair amount. Luca's parents agreed with him; however, they pointed out that they were also incurring several expenses, like the monthly instalments of their mortgage and their car loan. In the end, they decided to give Luca 5 euros a week.

Do you think that the decision made by Luca's parents was right?

Table 4 Decision on the amount of pocket money

	<i>Non-participatory decision</i>	<i>Participatory decision</i>
Yes	66	94
No	33	5
<i>Total</i>	99	99

In many respects, the findings are similar to the preceding ones (see Table 4). The respondents who agreed with the parents' autocratic decision were 34 girls and 32 boys; this number rose to 94 when the child was involved in the decision-making process.

First of all, it is interesting to point out that almost all interviewees agreed with the decision in the second version, in spite of the lower amount of pocket money. Second, it should be noted that those who considered the decision made by Luca's parents in the first version to be right explained their answer by focusing on the amount of pocket money and totally disregarding the process that led to that decision. In fact, only five of them pointed out that they should have sought Luca's opinion before deciding:

It may have been fairer to look into the boy's needs; they should ask what Luca would like to spend that money on.

Conversely, among the 33 interviewees who did not agree with the autocratic decision made by Luca's parents, as many as 21 of them explained their choice by openly addressing the issue of the decision-making process. According to these interviewees, Luca should have been given a chance to articulate his needs and opinion:

I don't agree, not about the amount of pocket money, but because it had not been discussed together. If I had discussed it with them, and the decision had been made

all together, I would have happily settled for a smaller amount, because it wouldn't have been imposed on me.

Those who agreed with the parents' decision in the second case pointed out the importance of the child's involvement in the decision-making process. However, they also stressed the relevance of the financial problems of the family as well as Luca's involvement in his family's matters. The very fact that he was made party to his family's problems and was empowered made it acceptable for him to receive a smaller amount than the one he was expecting:

I think that the way the decision was made was right; they explained to him why they had decided to give him 5 euros and thus made him feel more important within the family.

After analysing the answers given for the two items, it appears that, as far as procedural justice is concerned – as opposed to what happened concerning distributive justice – the different relational context, whether bureaucratized or personalized, did not seem to have any influence on respondents' choices. In both cases, most of them asserted that the decision-making procedure involving the participation of all the parties concerned was more correct. This finding seems to corroborate the results of other studies carried out with adults, which affirm that correct procedure is a commonly accepted criterion to define a proceeding and its outcome as fair. Moreover, the answers given for the second item corroborated the importance of what Tyler termed the value-expressive effect of the decision-making process.

It is also important to observe that respondents' motivations were largely homogeneous and cut across social statuses and age.

A moral dilemma: 'I lied, but . . .'

Finally, we illustrate the findings of one of the dilemmas presented in the focus group situations. It shows a daily life scenario: a situation of conflict of loyalty between parents and children, and between siblings (see below).

Most participants in the focus groups thought that it was not fair for the mother to go back on her promise. Some respondents, however, admitted that

A moral dilemma

Chiara is 14 years old. She wanted to go to the concert of her favourite rock star and asked her mother if she could go. Her mother promised her that she would let her go provided that she earned the money to buy the ticket. Chiara agreed and managed to earn the money she needed. In the meantime, though, her mother changed her mind and decided that Chiara should use the money she had earned to buy some new schoolbooks since this would spare the family great financial strain. Chiara was very disappointed and decided to go to the concert anyway. She told her mother that she had only managed to earn 15 euros; she then bought the ticket with the remaining 25 euros and went to the concert. After a week, Chiara told her sister Veronica that she had been to the concert and that she had lied to their mother saying that she had stayed at a girlfriend's house. Veronica is not sure whether to tell their mother.

the reason that drove the mother to forbid her daughter to go to the concert was important:

I think it's right for her mother to change her mind. She's entitled to do so on the grounds of family difficulties.

Some other participants, on the other hand, focused on the different points of view deriving from the different positions of mother and daughter. On the one hand, there is Chiara's perspective: what she wants first of all is to go to the concert. On the other hand, there are the claims of the mother, who is mainly concerned about family needs.

Finally, there are those who questioned the way in which the mother made her decision: she did not involve Chiara, and she did not try to reach a compromise with her.

The considerations and the judgements expressed by the participants in the focus groups about this first question show that they evaluated this specific situation by weighing the different interests involved. They considered the mother's promise as a sort of 'contract' that had to be abided by, and when formulating their judgements, they used value orientations and principles as well as their own conscience.

Then, they were asked to express a judgement about Chiara's lying to her mother. In this case, too, most of the sample shared the same opinion and considered her lying to the mother wrong. Nevertheless, several interviewees recognized that Chiara had extenuating circumstances for her behaviour. They thought that her lie was justified by the fact that, first of all, Chiara 'deserved' to go to the concert because she had been promised so and second, because she had earned the money to buy the ticket:

A lie is a lie, and for that reason it is wrong. However, Chiara had worked to earn that money. So, I think that in this case she was right in lying to her mother in order to go to the concert.

Then again, there were also some divergent opinions. Some of the teenagers, although they approved of the fact that Chiara had decided to go to the concert, thought that she should not have lied.

However, it is important to note that the majority of participants declared that were they in Chiara's shoes, they would try and achieve their objective of going to the concert: some of them would do so by lying; others would try and earn more money; still others would try and make the mother change her mind.

In conclusion, in principle, lying is considered wrong by almost all the participants in the focus groups. That said, they thought that the choice of whether to tell the truth or not depended very much on the actual situation. Here, there is an apparent gap between, on the one hand, what is deemed right on a conceptual level and, on the other hand, what is considered right – or rather appropriate – when such a concept is applied to specific, concrete situations.

The answers that were given to the following question support this orientation. When the teenagers were asked: 'Is it always right to tell the truth or does it depend on specific circumstances?' almost all participants in the focus groups thought that it depended on the context and, more precisely, on the possible consequences of the lie and on the relationship between the subjects involved.

The issue of loyalty between siblings and between parents and children was introduced by presenting the participants with a case of conflicting obligations (Williams, 1987). Focus groups were asked how Chiara's sister should have behaved: 'In your opinion, should Veronica tell their mother that Chiara had lied about the money, or should she keep what her sister told her to herself?' Almost all participants thought that the secret should be kept. Some exceptions were made in cases where, as noted earlier, not saying what you know might have serious consequences. Some participants added that the choice between 'squealing' or 'keeping the secret' depended on the bond of affection between the people involved rather than on an objective assessment of right and not right. This indicates the influence of relationships on judgements concerning justice.

When asked whether it was more important for Veronica to be loyal towards her sister or her mother, participants gave different answers. Many of them based their reasoning on the fundamental rule at the heart of the conflict – the need to be loyal – and they asserted that, since loyalty is a value, one should be loyal towards everybody. Other members of the focus groups, on the contrary, immediately recognized the case of conflicting obligations carried by the application of this rule (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1988). They attempted to resolve the dilemma by identifying the 'lesser evil', knowing that both possible decisions would inevitably produce a form of injustice: being loyal to her mother would necessarily mean not being loyal to her sister and vice versa. These teenagers decided that loyalty between siblings was more important. In their opinion, the relationship between siblings is usually characterized by complicity, solidarity and trust. They thought that their mother should understand the reasons why siblings do not betray each other, but they form alliances. Therefore, Veronica's silence should not be understood as an act of betrayal of the mother. Here again, it is stressed that behaviour is considered right or not right with regard to the object of the conflict as well as to the relationship between the people involved.

Conclusions

On the whole, the results of the research confirmed the study's key hypothesis: young people are social actors who possess the reasoning skills to face even complex questions of justice and moral issues with regard to situations affecting their everyday life, as well as more complex situations that are not part of their experience. Moreover, as happens with adults, they draw on a vast array

of rules and moral principles to be chosen in a selective and complementary way according to each given situation.

With regard to the results presented in this article, the assumption about the influence of the relational context on the choice of justice criteria has been supported with regard to distributive justice. The rule of equality was the most frequently chosen principle when the subjects involved had a personalized relationship; on the contrary, in bureaucratized relational contexts, respondents usually opted for criteria of merit and need.

As for procedural justice, in contrast, respondents' choices did not appear to be influenced by the relational context. In both situations, the one involving the family and the one involving institutions, interviewees thought that it would be fairer to adopt a participatory decision-making approach rather than using an autocratic method.

Participatory experiences did not seem to have a bearing on respondents' choices with regard to distributive and procedural justice, where almost all the sample shared the same opinion. On the other hand, with regard to the attribution of responsibility, which has not been analysed here, participatory practices appeared to increase an ethic of individual responsibility, heightening the awareness of the need to take responsibility for the consequences of one's actions.

As for the influence of gender on the choice of justice criteria, the analysis of answers, on the whole, does not show any significant and generalizable differences; it only led to the identification of some trends with regard to single items. Such trends seemed consistent with those detected in the literature and research results on normative socialization and moral development, whereby, when forming their notions of justice, girls are more socialized towards ethics of responsibility, loyalty and need (ethic of care), while boys, on the contrary, develop a sense of justice that is more grounded in notions of rights and duties that stem from social, legal and political conventions (ethic of justice) (Gilligan, 1982).

In the focus groups, teenagers not only showed that they could argue their case and discuss the complex questions with which they were presented, they also made it clear that they had a good practical knowledge of moral concepts. The discussions held on the dilemmas presented clearly showed that the participants in the focus groups were aware of facing particular moral problems and were also aware of the impossibility of finding a satisfactory and fair solution in all levels of judgement.

Most importantly, they were aware that morals could lead to distinct assessments of situations in consideration of some specific criteria and values such as loyalty, trust, family ties and friendship.

In general, focus group discussions and survey answers show that young people have a strong and realistic perception of the complexity of different moral situations and that, when deciding what is right or not right, they use a well-structured set of core values. Among these values are family and friendship – as shown also by the findings of well-known studies on the value

orientations of young Italians and young Europeans in general. Other values include respect for others, rejection of violence and a sense of individual responsibility for one's actions.

In conclusion, the fact that the answers rarely showed one single orientation when choosing between different criteria should not be considered a sign of reduced confidence in the use of such principles or, worse still, a sign of moral chaos among young people. Rather, it goes to show that they are able to evaluate and choose which of several criteria best fits a given context, and therefore choose on the basis of the specific circumstances and situations involved, while retaining a core set of firm general principles.

Note

1. The inquiry is part of the research program: 'Culture, rights and normative socialization of children and adolescents' coordinated by Guido Maggioni, and financed by the Italian Ministry of University and Research in the area of projects of national interest (Protocol n. 2003147971_003).
2. The term 'personalized relationship' defines a relationship between individuals who recognize each other as persons and not exclusively for the role they have.

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