It’s all good: A fresh look at ethical relativism

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Epistemology research

  - adolescents and adults
  - dualism (right/wrong) to contextual relativism
  - single developmental strand (within domains)
  - contextual relativism evolves from understanding that knowledge is uncertain
Problems

• Lower levels based on performances of adolescents (Dawson, 2002, 2003)
• Assumption that lowest level (rarely observed in adolescents) is dualistic not empirically supported
• Scoring systems, laden with conceptual content, are based on small construction samples (Dawson, 2003, 2004)
Addressing problems

• To determine what early behavior looks like, study epistemological development in children

• To eliminate bias introduced by content-laden scoring systems based on small construction samples:
  • base developmental assessments on structural features of performance
  • analyze conceptual content independently
Questions

- Does strict dualism characterize young children’s epistemologies?
- Does relativism (truth is context dependent) emerge from increasing awareness of the uncertainty of knowledge?
- Is relativism a culturally mediated phenomenon?
Method: Data and developmental assessment

- 108 respondents, age 5 to adulthood
- Television dilemma
- 2 to 7 protocols per case
- Lectical™ Assessment System, 5 phase version
  - domain independent
  - level of abstraction and logical structure
  - reliability and validity
- Mean complexity level across protocols
Television dilemma

• Dilemma for children: Parents disagree about whether television is good or bad for children. Some parents say it is good for children to watch as much TV as they want. Other parents say that all TV is bad for children. What do you think: Is TV good or bad for children? When adults disagree, how can you tell which adult knows best? Can you ever be sure which side is right?

• Dilemma for adolescents and adults: Psychologists disagree about the impact of violent television on children. One group argues that the evidence suggests that television violence causes children to engage in violent behavior. Another group argues that the evidence suggests that television violence prepares children for the realities of adult life, much like fairy tales did before the invention of television.
## Distribution of scores

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Method: Content analysis

• Responses to probe 7, “Is there anything that everyone can agree about?”
• Coded responses into thematic categories
• Examined distribution of themes by complexity level
• Analyzed texts in light of patterns
# Themes by complexity level

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Results

- “Truth is uncertain” and “truth is relative” appear at every complexity level
- Notions that truth is uncertain and that truth is relative develop on separate strands
- Relativism, uncertainty of truth, and absolutes coexist at every complexity level
Truth & lies, real & fake, same & not same, right & wrong

Single principles

Abstract systems

Abstract mappings

Single abstractions

Representations

Truth is certain/uncertain

Truth is absolute/relative

Concrete precursor insights into the objective world
Representational mappings

• Truth is certain/uncertain
  • Conceptualized in terms of truths/lies or real/fake. Children demonstrate an awareness of objects and events (things) in their taken-for-grantedness. Distinctions are made between real and fake or pretend, truths and lies. Children performing at this level may assert that the truth can’t be found if someone lies or fakes something really well or if it is a truth that is too hard to find.

• Truth is relative
  • Aware that two authorities can disagree and may claim that both are right. The rules at Tommy’s house are true in his house and the rules in my house are true in my house.
Representational systems

• Truth is certain/uncertain
  • Conceptualized in terms of what is known. There is an emerging understanding that certain types of things tend to be true, while other things should be categorized as untrue or uncertain (categories of things that can be true or not). Some attempts to seek out reasons for thinking something is true or not (concrete evidence).

• Truth is relative
  • Disagreements between people are understood as common and as a kind of proof that people do not agree with one another. Truth—the right thing or right decision—is something that people will argue about.
**Fact:** A phenomenon that is consistently observable

- Single principles
- Abstract systems
- Abstract mappings
- Single abstractions
- Representations

Truth is certain/uncertain

Truth is absolute/relative
**Proof:** A consistently observed or unchallenged event/phenomenon

- Truth is certain/uncertain
- Truth is absolute/relative

- proof

- concrete precursor insights into the objective world

- Single principles
- Abstract systems
- Abstract mappings
- Single abstractions
- Representations
Belief: Version of the truth that results from a particular opinion

- Truth is certain/uncertain
- Truth is absolute/relative

- Single principles
- Abstract systems
- Abstract mappings
- Single abstractions
- Representations
**Opinion:** What different individuals may think about a phenomenon

- Truth is certain/uncertain
- Truth is absolute/relative

- Single principles
- Abstract systems
- Abstract mappings
- Single abstractions
- Representations
Single abstractions

• Truth is certain/uncertain
  • Conceptualized in terms of abstract notions of fact (non-facts) and proof (or lack thereof). These are general concepts about differences between types of things that summarize a variety of insights into the given-ness of objects and events. At this level, facts, which are things that can be proven, are often the only things considered to be true.

• Truth is relative
  • “Everyone has their own opinion,” appears as the dominant conception at this level. The main insight is that people have different opinions, which means they will not agree on things, and this means there isn’t really a truth.
Information: Multiple types (expert, scientific, experiential)

- Single principles
- Abstract systems
- Abstract mappings
- Single abstractions
- Representations

Truth is certain/uncertain

Truth is absolute/relative
Accuracy: Some types of information are better than others

- Fact: concrete precursor insights into the objective world
  - Truth is certain/uncertain

- Proof: concrete precursor insights into the objective world

- Belief: concrete precursor insights into the objective world
  - Truth is absolute/relative

- Opinion

Single principles
Abstract systems
Abstract mappings
Single abstractions
Representations
Bias: People choose the information they take into account

- Single principles
- Abstract systems
- Abstract mappings
- Single abstractions
- Representations

Truth is certain/uncertain
- fact
- proof
- concrete precursor insights into the objective world

Truth is absolute/relative
- bias
- belief
- opinion
- concrete precursor insights into the objective world
Perspective: People have different sets of beliefs that impact decision making

- Truth is certain/uncertain
- Truth is absolute/relative

Single principles
Abstract systems
Abstract mappings
Single abstractions
Representations
Abstract mappings

• Truth is certain/uncertain
  • Emphasis on the need to make a distinction between things that are factual and things that are not. This is facilitated by a more fully elaborated conception of accuracy, which involves differentiating between different types or sources of information.

• Truth is relative
  • The abstract mappings concept of belief captures a distinction between the sciences and the everyday world of human interaction. Science is about facts, religion, values, and views are about belief. Science can be proven, belief cannot.
Evidence: Procedures for determining the accuracy of information

Single principles
Abstract systems
Abstract mappings
Single abstractions
Representations

Truth is certain/uncertain
Truth is absolute/relative
Limits: General social or cognitive constraints on capacity to agree

Truth is certain/uncertain

Truth is absolute/relative

- Information
- Accuracy
- Fact
- Proof
- Concrete precursor insights into the objective world

- Bias
- Perspective
- Belief
- Opinion
- Concrete precursor insights into the objective world

- Single principles
- Abstract systems
- Abstract mappings
- Single abstractions
- Representations
Abstract systems

• Truth is certain/uncertain
  • A central concern with evidence characterizes reasoning at this level. Respondents provide systematic descriptions of evidence and how to generate it. There is an increasing differentiation between scientific evidence and other (interpersonal) kinds of evidence and an emerging recognition of the ways in which human nature impacts the evaluation of evidence.

• Truth is relative
  • Relativism results from differences in perspective and the bias that results from the inevitably limited nature of individual perspectives. Two different perspectives can reveal two different valid truths, even if these truths contradict one another.
Paradigms or models

Paradigms or models

- evidence/validation
  - information
    - fact
    - concrete precursor insights into the objective world
  - proof
- cognitive/social limits
  - bias
  - belief
  - opinion
    - concrete precursor insights into the objective world

Truth is certain/uncertain

Truth is absolute/relative

Single principles

Abstract systems

Abstract mappings

Single abstractions

Representations
Single principles

• Truth is conceptualized in terms of models or paradigms, which are built upon precursor conceptions of perspective and bias. Paradigms are conceived as responsible for the existence and maintenance of individual and group perspectives. They are intersubjectively constituted frameworks of meaning and life practices that create a kind of meta-perspective. At this level relativism and the uncertainty of truth are seen to be a result of differences between paradigms (differences between overarching approaches to living, culture and inquiry) or evolving models (differences in explanation due to the advance of knowledge).
Answers?

- Early forms of contextual relativism are apparent in the performances of 5-year-olds.
- The roots of relativism are in the social world.
- Gradually, over the course of development, conceptions of social relativism are integrated with conceptions of truth in the physical world.
Download this presentation

- www.devtestservice.com/PDF/EpisRelative.pdf
The developmental spiral

Sensorimotor Actions

Representations

Abstractions
What is a good leader? 6

A good leader is in front.
What is a good leader?

A good leader is in front so she can show you the way.
What is a good leader?

A good leader will show you how is fun to have because she knows where to go and knows what to do and will show you how.
What is a good leader?

A good leader

- is good with people
- is fun
- is helpful
- is friendly
What is a good leader?

A good leader is in front.

so

she can show you the way.

A good leader is good with people, which makes them trust her intentions.
A good leader will show you how is fun to have because she knows where to go and knows what to do. A good leader is competent, inspiring if she is trustworthy and arrogant without appearing.
What is a good leader? 

A good leader is:

- is good with people
- is fun
- is helpful
- is friendly

A good leader is a highly competent servant to her organization.

inspiring

visionary

deeply committed