Children's Moral Agency: An Interdisciplinary Scoping Review

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Inconsistencies have been noted in how moral agency is conceived in childhood, leading to variations in children's levels of inclusion/ exclusion from discussions and decisions affecting them in children's services and research. Through a scoping review of 261 articles, we examined the different ways in which children's moral agency is imagined in the literature across different disciplines: education, health, law, psychology, and social services. A developmental psychology perspective dominated the results, while other viewpoints were less prevalent (e.g., children as active moral agents). We discuss how the different perspectives could be bridged to advance more integrated perspectives on interdisciplinary knowledge and practices related to childhood ethics.

Keywords: children; moral agency; scoping review; interdisciplinary

Inconsistencies have been noted in how moral agency is conceived in childhood (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016). These inconsistencies have led to variations in children's level of inclusion and exclusion from discussions and decisions affecting them, both in children's services and research. Through a scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac, Colquhoun, & O'Brien, 2010), we examined the different ways in which children's moral agency is imagined in the literatures across different disciplines: education, health, law, psychology, and social services. This work aims to shed light on how these different perspectives on moral agency affect service providers' interactions with children, as well as how these perspectives could be bridged to advance interdisciplinary knowledge in childhood ethics and promote practice improvements. Some background information on the concept of children's moral agency and its importance is presented first, followed by a description of the methodological approach used to guide the review. We then present the five perspectives identified through the analytical work, and discuss the importance of the review results for practice disciplines and research.

Background

The concept of children's agency, a key concept in the field of interdisciplinary childhood studies, is increasingly discussed in the literature (Esser, Baader, Betz, & Hungerland, 2016; James & Prout, 2015; Montreuil & Carnevale,

2016). There has been a long-standing view of children as incapable of decision making and meaningful participation in social life, which has increasingly been challenged (James & Prout, 2015; N. Lee, 2001). In a concept analysis undertaken in 2016 on children's agency within the health literature, there was a growing recognition in recently published papers situated within childhood studies that children are active agents who reflect on and construct their social world (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016). However, various perspectives prevail within different disciplines, especially with regard to moral agency, in reference to children's capacity to act in the light of considerations of right and wrong (Carnevale, Campbell, Collin-Vézina, & Macdonald, 2013). Are children perceived as agents capable of moral experience, who are making sense of, reflecting on, constructing, and acting on what they perceive as right-wrong, good-bad, just-unjust in their social world?

Children are sometimes described as morally incompetent and unable to participate in decisions affecting them, with adults being in charge of decision making for children in their best interests, because they are considered vulnerable. This limited participation from children has important implications for them, as it is unclear how what is considered as in the child's best interests is decided.

Adults with authority often decide what is in the child's best interest, without considering the child's perspective (Carnevale, Campbell, Collin-Vézina, & Macdonald, 2013). There is a recent movement toward seeing vulnerability and moral agency, not as binary opposites, but as coexisting in every person, including children (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Wall, 2010). From this view, which is central within childhood ethics, children are considered both vulnerable and moral agents: They do need a form of protection based on their vulnerability, but are agents with moral outlooks and experiences whose perspectives should be recognized (Carnevale, Campbell, Collin-Vézina, & Macdonald, 2013).

In light of the various inconsistencies that have been noted in how moral agency is conceived in childhood, we examined the different ways in which children's moral agency is imagined in the literature through a scoping review across different disciplines. We analyzed the prevalent and dominant views that are present in the literature, comparing and contrasting the views that we identified. To clarify how children's moral agency is imagined has important implications regarding children's potential inclusion or exclusion from discussions, decisions, and actions that affect them. Ultimately, this work aims to shed light on how these different perspectives on moral agency could be bridged to advance interdisciplinary knowledge in childhood ethics and promote practice improvements in disciplines that provide children's services.

Purpose

The main aim of this scoping review was to map the different ways in which children's moral agency is imagined across various disciplines that provide children's services, to help advance interdisciplinary knowledge and practices. Disciplines included education, health, law, psychology, and social services. We addressed the following questions: (1) What are the prevalent/dominant views in how children's moral agency is imagined? (2) What are the intra- and interdisciplinary patterns, as well as temporal trends? (3) What are researchers' assumptions in relation to children and childhood, and how do they relate to how moral agency is imagined? Research strengths and gaps are then discussed, as well as the implications of adopting various perspectives.

Methodology

A scoping review framework was chosen to structure the article identification and analysis (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac, Colquhoun, & O'Brien, 2010). This framework is considered optimal to address broad review questions such as the ones guiding this review, and permits the inclusion of various disciplinary perspectives and

types of publications. Moreover, the flexibility of this framework allows for reconsideration of which aspects to chart in light of the available literature, as well as ongoing reflection on articles relevant to include. This flexibility was highly relevant in light of the breadth of articles included in this review.

Data sources

Considering the interdisciplinary nature of this review, key databases were identified in collaboration with librarians specialized in law, education, and health. Searches were performed in each database (CINAHL, ERIC, HeinOnline, ProQuest Social Sciences, PsycInfo, PubMed, SCOPUS, Social Work Abstracts, Web of Science) using different combinations of the words moral, agency, agent, child*, adolesc*, and teen. In this review, "children" refers to all minors up to 17 years old (and 20 years old in certain countries).[1]

Article selection

The searches combined yielded a total of 3,096 articles, with 261 articles remaining after removing duplicates and going through the inclusion and exclusion criteria using the articles' title and abstract. Articles were retained if they were (1) published between 2000 and 2016 (to highlight recent perspectives, while allowing for the identification of temporal trends), (2) related to children's moral agency, (3) published in English, and (4) authored by a primary researcher based in Canada, United States, Great Britain, Australia, or New-Zealand. This last criterion was added to include countries with similar legislative and cultural outlooks, specifically in relation to child law perspectives. Since we were scoping the literature from diverse disciplines, it already offered a wide breadth of articles to compare and contrast. These decisions were made to balance the breadth of the review with issues of feasibility (Levac et al., 2010). Also, only electronic sources were included, which could have prevented the inclusion of relevant documents that were available only in other formats. As is common in scoping reviews, all relevant literature was included whatever the research design. The article search was done using an iterative process to enhance diversity in examining how moral agency is imagined (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; i.e., we did additional searches as we were selecting the articles, e.g., based on ancestor and offspring searches of included articles).

Data charting

Data collected from the articles were charted using an Excel worksheet with the categories: (1) full bibliographic details, (2) year of publication, (3) discipline of the first author, (4) database, (5) type of study, (6) age of child participants, (7) how moral agency is imagined, (8) author assumptions about children and childhood, and (9) study abstract.

Data analysis

An Excel table was developed including the charted information from all the included articles. The charted data were then compared and contrasted by two reviewers closely involved in data collection (MM and NF) as to how moral agency was imagined, using categories 7 and 8 to guide the analysis and answer the review questions. Articles sharing similar perspectives were grouped together, and descriptive summaries were written for each, further analyzing similarities and differences within each perspective. Additional analyses were then performed to identify trends in how the different perspectives held similarities/disparities in relation to other categories included in the table (categories 2, 3, 5, and 6). A final synthesis was then produced for each perspective identified, with exemplar articles identified for each. Exemplars were articles that illustrated clearly the different perspectives and enhanced the understanding of the similarities and differences between them, in line with Benner's (1994) definition of the term.

Results

We have identified five broad perspectives as to how children's moral agency is imagined in the literature reviewed (i.e., within Canada, United States, Great Britain, Australia, or New-Zealand), labelled as (1) moral agency within developmental psychology; (2) moral agency as a competence influenced by the context; (3) moral agency as absent in children; (4) moral agency as a narrative construction; and (5) children as active moral agents. A brief description of the search results is presented first, followed by a presentation of the five perspectives. For each perspective, we present only the exemplar articles that were selected, as there were too many articles to include them all here.

Descriptive analysis

The discipline of psychology dominated the search results, with 61% of the 261 articles retained for analysis falling in this category (see Figure 1). Certain articles from other disciplines, such as law, education, health, and social services, also referred to perspectives from psychology, particularly in reference to children's moral development. A large proportion of the documents included were quantitative studies (44%). Other types of documents comprised qualitative studies, theoretical papers, book chapters, and commentaries. A few articles were retained even if primarily from related disciplines other than the ones selected at the beginning of the review (e.g., anthropology), when resulting from the databases searches.
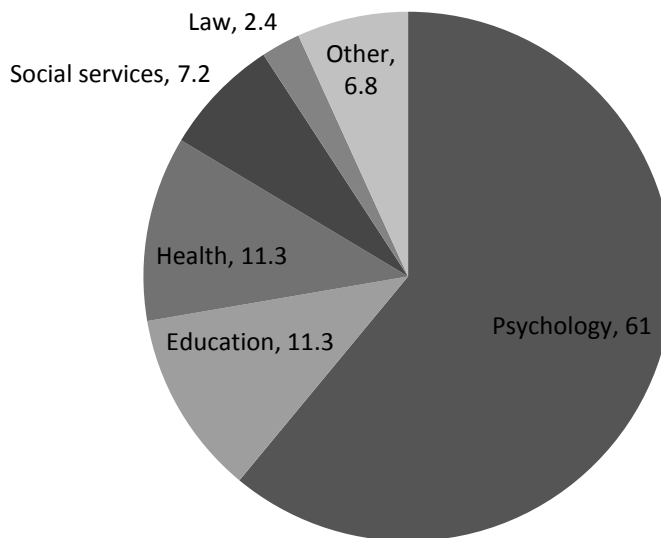

Figure 1. Articles by discipline (%).

Perspectives

Moral agency within developmental psychology

The field of developmental psychology possesses a vast literature on children's moral development, which dominated the search results. Within this perspective, a child with moral agency is often implicitly described as having the advanced cognition, reasoning, and/or moral judgement that an adult would have, as assessed by how children

adhere to what are considered established social norms. The main focus of this field is on identifying the factors leading to acquiring a sense of "morality," describing its features and what this process will entail through different stages. This process of moral development is generally presented as universal, not differing between cultures, and based on the development of children's cognitive, reasoning, and moral judgment capacities. From this view, as children age—or through their past experiences—they develop a sense of morality and later become what can be referred to as moral agents, that is, individuals who act in a goal-oriented manner in light of right or wrong. Some articles referred to Piaget (1997) or Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977), building on them (e.g., Schonfeld, Mattson, & Riley, 2005), as well as to theory of mind, highlighting the social-cognitive development of young children (e.g., Lane, Wellman, et al., 2010; Sokol, Chandler, & Jones, 2004).

The developmental perspective dominates the literature within the field of psychology, and is also present within education, sociology, health, and neuroscience. Most of the studies from this perspective were conducted with preschool or school-aged children to examine how children develop moral capacities. The predominant research method employed in these studies was quantitative. The studies from neuroscience described morality as being related to brain state and function, investigating the different brain areas involved in the development and exercise of moral reasoning (e.g., Beauchamp, Dooley, & Anderson, 2013; Pujol et al., 2008).

We identified specific intradisciplinary trends within psychology as to how moral agency was imagined, related, for example, to Bandura's social-cognitive theory and Turiel's perspective on the transgression of moral norms. Studies related to Bandura's social-cognitive theory were mainly related to moral disengagement. Bandura considered that "moral conduct" should be examined together with moral reasoning, stating, "A complete theory of moral agency must link moral knowledge and reasoning to moral conduct. This theory requires an agentic theory of morality rather than one confined mainly to cognitions about morality" (Bandura, 2001, pp. 8–9). Bandura emphasized the need for the exercise of moral judgement in acting in a "humane" way and not acting in an "inhumane" way. He identified this capacity as key to being a moral agent. Studies on moral disengagement appeared as a more recent trend and were conducted almost exclusively with adolescents, examining how adolescents can become morally disengaged—for example, in cases of bullying—and how their peers can affect that process (e.g., Bauman & Pero, 2011; Bussey, Fitzpatrick, & Raman, 2015; Caravita, Sijtsema, Rambaran, & Gini, 2014; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Coker et al., 2014; D'Arripe-Longueville et al., 2010; Quinn & Bussey, 2015; Robson & Witenberg, 2013; Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011).

From his perspective, Turiel (1983) views transgressions of moral norms as different and as more severe than the transgression of social norms. Young children (e.g., school-aged) are perceived as having the capacity to enforce both types of norms, but do so differently for social norms as compared to moral norms (Atkin & Gummerum, 2012; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012). Children are described as usually committing to morality above group loyalty, though they encounter more difficulty expressing it the younger they are (Cooley & Killen, 2015). However, in certain situations, children might think social norms should dictate their moral judgment, while in others, they believe moral norms to be paramount (Helwig, 2002). This view was also present within education and law (e.g., Fox, Kvaran, & Fontaine, 2011; Nucci & Turiel, 2009), and contrasted with other views within developmental psychology by this distinction between social and moral norms, as well as the view that moral understandings change with the context of the activities the children are engaged in, and are thus not universal.

Moral agency as a competence influenced by the context

Another trend we identified presented moral agency as a skill or competence that can be taught and that is influenced by the socio-political context in which the child develops. In these articles, moral agency was said to be formed mainly through outside influences and teaching, for example, from parents, teachers, peers, sports

coaches, and religious leaders, or the "moral atmosphere" of the community that they live in (e.g., Carson & Banuazizi, 2008; Chow, Murray, & Feltz, 2009; Ferguson & Cairns, 2002). Ultimately, the children themselves were described as having the agency to make their own decisions, but influences from the community (such as from peers for making a particular decision, from a sports coach to follow the strategy decided on for the team, or, in some particular cases, from the moral norms of a community) very often sway children's viewpoint, so that the decision they make may be different from the decision they would have made for themselves upon evaluating the situation (Brenick & Killen, 2014; Lee, Whitehead, Ntoumanis, & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2008; Ntoumanis, Taylor, & Thøgerson-Ntoumani, 2012; Thornberg et al., 2012).

Within this perspective, the articles were also mostly from the field of psychology, with some articles from education and health. Some articles studied how outside influences affect children's moral development, and shared similarities with the articles in the section above on developmental psychology (e.g., Walker, Hennig, & Krettenauer, 2000). However, moral development was generally not referred to as following a universal process, and the focus was not on the cognitive processes involved in moral development, but on the context in which the children live and how it affects moral development. Moral agency was rarely defined explicitly in these articles, but could be inferred to be similar to the field of moral development, that is, as children's capacity to act in accordance with established social norms. Still, a difference within this perspective is that moral agency often also entailed accepting outside influences, usually from people in a position of authority, in identifying what is considered "moral," in addition to following social norms. For instance, parental influences were described in various articles as being more important than community influences in fostering moral agency in children, as parents were described as the primary guides and authority figures in their children's lives (e.g., Daddis, 2011; Hardy et al., 2010). Some authors studied how parenting styles can lead to distinctly different moral development paths in children, sometimes delaying them (e.g., Ttofi & Farrington, 2008; Laible, Eye, & Carlo, 2008; Trentacosta et al., 2011; Vieira, 2015). Cultural differences were also studied in certain articles as to how children develop moral understandings (e.g., Fu et al., 2007; Woods & Jagers, 2003; Jensen & McKenzie, 2016), as well as how the political climate can affect the development of morality in children (e.g., Ferguson & Cairns, 2002).

Some articles also referred to interventions that can foster a sense of morality in children (e.g., Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014). This perspective was present in the fields of education and psychology and, to a lesser extent, in sociology, social work, and health. For example, some articles referred to the development of a tool to measure moral competence in order to assess youth intervention programs fostering moral development (e.g., Mouratidou, Chatzopoulos, & Karamavrou, 2008; Park & Peterson, 2006).

Moral agency as absent in children

In some of the articles, children were assigned no moral agency. From this view, a person becomes a moral agent when entering adulthood; children and adolescents were viewed as still gaining the experience they need to be able to make their own "fully justified" and "acceptable" moral decisions (e.g., Sturdevant & Spear, 2002). As within moral development, morality was imagined as a series of stages that are universal, but the last stage was described as being reached only in adulthood, and thus children and adolescents were thought of as relying on adults to make moral decisions for them, most frequently without children's involvement. This view was prevalent within law and medical ethics (a subcategory of the health literature), and included both children and adolescents, often with no specific age range. For example, some of the authors assigned little or no moral agency to children as a way for them not to be punished by criminal law as adults would (e.g., Scott & Steinberg, 2002).

The literature related to youth's sexuality also widely perceived youth as not having the moral capacity to make decisions considered "rational"; adults were thus described as needing to impose moral norms on youths in regard

to their sexual life (e.g., Bishop, 2011; Froyum, 2010). This perspective was critiqued by certain authors, who considered youth's moral agency was "denied" and claimed they should be involved in decisions related to their sexuality both at the personal and policy levels (e.g., Braeken & Cardinal, 2008; Macvarish, 2010).

Moral agency as a narrative construction

In certain articles within psychology, children were described as "meaning makers" who, while being considered developing beings, morally "make sense" of their experiences. Drawing on the developmental psychology view of moral agency in children, moral agency is described from this perspective as resulting from a narrative construction of experience. Within this theme, which included articles from 2010 onwards, children's sense of moral agency was described as a developmental achievement that emerges when children view their actions as being initiated and guided by justice and welfare. Through the construction of narratives, children are said to develop their sense of morality when taking responsibility for their actions, making choices, and considering other people's perspectives. Moral agency was thus defined as "people's understanding and experience of themselves (and others) as agents whose morally relevant actions are based in goals and beliefs" (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010, p. 55). This definition differed from other views present within developmental psychology, in that moral agency was considered as being coconstructed and contextual, developing once other areas of moral development had been acquired, such as theory of mind and self-identity (Lapsley, 2010; Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne, & Pasupathi, 2014). Children were described as needing to be able to make sense of their experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Studies within this perspective were conducted mostly with adolescents, as they were described as having more developed cognitive capacities allowing for this narrative meaning-making construction.

Children as active moral agents

In very few articles within anthropology, philosophy, and sociology, moral agency was perceived as being present in all children and coexisting with vulnerability (e.g., Brown, 2011). We had not included databases from anthropology and philosophy specifically during the article searches, but some articles from these disciplines were identified and included in the review. In these articles, children were described as agents who navigate and contribute to create "worlds" around them. In this view, children were presented as needing to be included in discussions affecting them, while it was recognized that "children are at once developing beings, in possession of agency, and to varying degrees vulnerable" (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007, p. 242). Children were also described as being both "moral beings" and "moral becomings," in that they already have a moral self, and their experiences contribute to shape their moral agency, as is the case in adults (Britton, 2015). From this perspective, children's moral agency was not perceived as a developmental endpoint, but as present in all human beings, which differed from the other perspectives.

Discussion

The large prevalence of articles related to the psychology of children's moral development highlights the dominance of this perspective in how moral agency is imagined, within this field and others. This perspective is largely recognized, with variations as to how the different stages of development should be defined and are acquired. Moral development theories largely focus on aiming to uncover universal processes leading to developing what could be labelled as moral agency (building on Piaget and Kohlberg), but questions have been raised from within and outside the field of psychology as to whether children's moral development follows a universal process or varies with socio-political factors, culture, and/or life experiences. Within other disciplines, such as law and medical ethics, there were some discussions on children's moral development, questioning whether adolescents should be included in decisions affecting them or not, and at what age they should be consulted (e.g., Mutcherson, 2005;

Scott & Steinberg, 2002). Within education, the school's influence on the development of moral competence in children was examined, to help foster children's moral education (e.g., Brownlee et al., 2012). This vast literature within developmental psychology and across disciplines reveals its importance within Western conceptions of childhood. Children are often viewed and assessed through this developmental lens, which is also applied to children's moral agency.

As we conducted the review, we also identified differences in how research is conducted in different disciplines, which we consider was informed by how children's moral agency is imagined. For example, in relation to how children's morality is studied within the field of moral development, children were frequently presented with vignettes or puppet shows for which they had to answer questions related to what they considered as right or wrong (e.g., asking the child which one of the characters was naughtier or if the child would engage with certain actions or not). Children's moral reasoning or judgment capacities were then measured according to their answer that was considered by the researchers as morally right or not (e.g., Grant, Boucher, Riggs, & Grayson, 2005; Lagattuta, Nucci, & Bosacki, 2010). Some of these studies highlight how even young children act in accordance with what is considered moral. However, as mentioned by Hoffmaster (2011), there is more to morality than formal reason:

> Formal reason hides the real nature and extent of the rationality and the morality in our lives because it denigrates, if not ignores, our experience and our creativity. Attending to both reveals the richness, the complexity, and the power of our rational intelligence and our morality. (p. 31)

To examine children's morality from this latter perspective, there would need to be a deeper engagement from researchers in the "worlds" of children, to explore their experiences. The predominance of quantitative designs in the studies reviewed did not foster such an examination, which was mostly present in the studies on children as moral agents and moral agency as a narrative construction. Future studies on children's moral agency would benefit from using designs that would permit the examination of children's own moral experiences, in addition to what is considered as resulting from formal reasoning. For example, using ethnographic, interpretive, and participatory approaches would be suitable to achieve this aim by fostering children's engagement with the research process and encouraging them to freely share their experiences "in context" (Greene & Hogan, 2005).

This dominance of a developmental psychology model can be limiting in that children are not seen as complete human beings (N. Lee, 2001) because there is a presumed incapability based on children being perceived as not fully developed psychologically. Children are consequently perceived more as passive non-thinking objects of practices or of research (rather than active agents), and are therefore excluded from decision-making processes that affect them. As seen in the results, the literature from psychology is not homogenous, and some subperspectives do recognize a form of moral agency in children. Bridging different conceptions and perspectives could be beneficial to further understand children's moral agency and enrich each other's views. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of children's moral agency would therefore be valuable to foster such a discussion and further practices with children that are more inclusive of their perspectives. This shift would promote the development of child-centred practices that are attentive to children's perspectives, as put forth in children's rights approaches such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and increasingly discussed within Childhood Studies (James & Prout, 2015). We suggest a *rapprochement* between these different perspectives on children's moral agency could contribute to bridging the disciplinary gap. By rapprochement, we refer to Taylor and Gutmann's (1992) notion of a reciprocal understanding of each other's perspectives—including assumptions and values—to encourage reflection and discussion. This process could contribute to identifying what "ought" to be in practice.

In the articles within this latter field, some authors argued that developmental psychology tends to deprive children

of their humanity by not recognizing them as moral agents (e.g., Britton, 2015). A recent trend was observed in this latter perspective referring to children (as well as adults) as both beings and becomings, building on Nick Lee (2001). From this view, children and adults were described as being "full" moral beings, as well as moral becomings, who actively participate and contribute to moral life instead of passively conforming to preestablished moral norms. This view is consistent with views from the field of interdisciplinary childhood studies. However, there were very few articles from this field in the searches conducted. The concept of "children's agency" was present, but "children's *moral* agency" appears to have been scarcely discussed. This review offers a valuable starting point to address such issues within childhood studies, by offering an overview of how moral agency is currently predominantly imagined.

Understanding children's moral agency can contribute to addressing key social and ethical concerns present both in society and, at a more micro level, in professional practices with children. Recognizing children as having the capacity to act in light of moral issues, reflect on their moral experiences, and shape the world around them based on these reflections and actions would change how people interact with children in daily encounters. Furthermore, a greater understanding of children's moral agency could impact children's inclusion in decisional processes that affect them (e.g., in professional practice or in the governance of children's services).

Future research

Future theoretical and empirical research could examine approaches to reconcile the views we have identified to further our understanding of children's moral experiences and advance interdisciplinary inquiry. This work also has implications for curricular preparation and continued education of professionals within children's services, which should be attuned to diverging viewpoints related to moral agency in children and recognize the strengths and limits of each perspective. Adopting a certain perspective can lead to children's potential inclusion or exclusion from discussions, decisions, and actions affecting them, which bears importance on how children's best interests is defined and related practices.

Conclusion

In sum, there were quite distinct views of children's moral agency present in this review. For instance, in some articles children were considered as having no moral agency, while in others moral agency was construed as gradually developing or being fully present. A trend that became visible is that in most of the articles in which children were described as having little or no moral agency, adults were said to be acting in order to protect the child considered vulnerable, in his or her best interest (notably within law and articles on youths' sexual activities). This view highlights the tension present between the protection of children's best interests and the recognition of children as moral agents. Children are often seen as either vulnerable or moral agents, in need of protection or capable of making moral decisions for themselves, with little overlap between the two perspectives. Putting forward a perspective in which children can be seen as both vulnerable and moral agents, as both developing beings and active moral agents, could help shed light on all the complexities involved in childhood and inform practices of child service providers.

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1   Within the article, we use different terms to refer to children, in accordance with the terms used in the article referenced.