Abstract

The present study is an attempt to reveal the local, cultural frameworks underlying the
development of social-moral reasoning in the Indian context. Taking a cultural
psychological perspective, the study attempts to configure the mentality-practice
edifice (custom complex) and unravels the role of tacit socialization in the
development of social-moral reasoning. Using four hypothetical scenarios enmeshing
normative cultural practices and social-moral dilemmas, in depth interviews were
conducted with 120 respondents selected from two caste groups - Brahmins and non-
Brahmin (Maratha) within the Hindu, Maharashtrian community of Baroda city. The
two-generational sample design comprised both middle aged parents and one of their
young adult children (boys and girls) from 40 families. Justifications given by the
respondents to resolve the hypothetical scenarios were coded within the "Big Three of
Morality" framework comprising ethics of autonomy, community and divinity
(Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997; Jensen, 1996). Qualitative analysis of the
data reveals respondents' tendency to find the "madhala rasta" (middle path) and
resolve all four situations such that, to the extent possible, material as well as psycho-
social needs of all agents involved are met amicably. Decisions also highlight that
situational preferences and constraints for each individual are largely determined by
their family roles, gender and position within social hierarchy. Chi-square tests reveal
that the ethic of community is significantly associated with caste. The non-Brahmin
respondents use this ethic more than the Brahmin respondents. Overall, the ethic of
community is used most, closely followed by the ethic of autonomy. The ethic of
divinity is used prominently only for the scenario concerning Hindu death rites. All
three ethics amalgamate meaningfully to create the custom complex for the concepts
of kartavya (duty), samaj (social structure) and antim samskar (Hindu death rites).