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## **Young People as Moral Beings: Childhood, Morality and Inter-Generational Relationships**

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*This article uses the work of Goffman to explore how a group of older children presented a moral self in a study of inter-generational relationships. By reflecting critically on their own behaviour and that of other young people and adults, they presented themselves as morally competent agents, whilst questioning the taken-for-granted moral competence of adults. Their presentation of a moral self involved portraying themselves as moral beings, whilst acknowledging that they are also moral becomings. The findings highlight how the embedded authority and associated moral accountability of adults in relation to children militates against recognizing children's moral agency.*

### **Introduction**

A central theme in childhood studies is the separateness of childhood and how this is characterised by notions of dependency, vulnerability and incompetence (Archard, 1993; Hockey and James, 1993; James and James, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998)., Children are thought to be positioned outside of moral agency and accountability, and adults view themselves as morally competent and accountable for the children in their care (Cahill, 1990; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2000; Frankel, 2012). They are therefore situated as moral 'becomings', who become moral 'beings' in adulthood when moral competence and accountability are thought to be achieved (Lee, 2001; Uprichard, 2008). Children grow up within socially constructed moral boundaries that

adults are supposed to protect them from straying over and are introduced to these as part of the socialization process. They learn about the moral codes of conventionally accepted standards of behaviour, which arise from moral values that can be seen as universal because they are implicit and assumed. Demonstrating an understanding of and compliance with them plays an important part in children gaining a sense of belonging to the social world (Frankel, 2012). For older children, it can also play an important part in gaining social acceptance in society as they make the transition to adulthood.

This article examines how a group of older children, or young people, presented themselves as moral beings in a qualitative study of inter-generational relationships. The key components of morality identified are exhibiting good manners and politeness, behaving with decency and integrity and displaying care and concern for others. The article explores how presentation of a moral self was identifiable in young people's discussions of intergenerational encounters and relationships in which they were involved on a day-to-day basis (Goffman, 1969). It shows how, in presenting a moral self, they portrayed themselves as moral beings, moral actors in their own right, who actively construct their childhood and have views and experiences about being a moral child (Uprichard, 2008). However, they also portrayed themselves as moral becomings, moral beings in the making who do not always behave in morally acceptable ways (Uprichard, 2008). They presented themselves as both by reflecting critically on their own behaviour and that of other young people and adults and, in doing so, drew attention to how dominant understanding of adults as moral beings is necessarily problematic (Lee, 2001).

The article uses a Goffmanian framework to explain, first, how the young people presented themselves as moral actors when providing a narrative account of their actions and the actions of others and, second, how they employed these accounts to align their behaviour with dominant social expectations regarding morality. Goffman focused on the rituals and routines of everyday life and therefore the familiar, ordinary experiences of individuals (Goffman, 1963, 1969, 1975). He was not specifically concerned with children, yet his theories are applicable to them as they operate in the same social worlds as adults and are involved in the same rituals and routines of everyday interaction (Hardman, 1973). His theories also encourage a focus on how rules of moral conduct and established notions of morality, inform interactions between individuals (Goffman, 1963, 1969, 1975). Goffman's analysis of the self is well-known for using the metaphor of life as a theatre, a heuristic device as Goffman's actors do not consciously create a 'stage' performance that is intended to deceive (Musolf, 2003:122-3). Instead, they engage in 'impression management' through which they attempt to present a situationally appropriate self (Jenkins, 1993:93-5). Goffman's work is particularly suited to examining childhood, morality and inter-generational relationships because his social actors endeavour to present themselves as moral beings who deserve to be treated in a morally acceptable way (Goffman, 1969:13). It therefore encourages a specific focus on examining how children are active moral agents in everyday situated interactions with adults, and other children, and the extent to which these interactions make a difference to the relationship of those involved (Mayall, 2002:21). Goffman's work enables consideration of the ways in which the moral agency of young people is discernible through their engagement in impression management to create

and sustain a successful presentation of a moral self (Goffman, 1963; 1969). Importantly, successful presentation of a moral self results in the social actor being viewed by the audience in the way that he or she wishes (Goffman, 1969). Goffman's work therefore also encourages consideration of the extent to which and in what circumstances young people's presentation of self is successful. If successful, young people can be viewed by adults as morally competent and accountable, and treated accordingly. However, the chances of success are far from guaranteed, particularly given that children can be viewed as a minority group that struggles to get its voice heard (Mayall, 2002). The data presented in the article show that it is not straightforward for young people to successfully present a moral self and, as a result, they can struggle to assert their moral agency within inter-generational encounters and relationships as a result of the embedded moral authority in generational positions. The article concludes by considering the implications of this for how children and young people are positioned in relation to morality generally.

### **Presentation of a moral self in childhood**

Goffman's presentation of self refers to how individuals present an image of themselves for acceptance by others in situated interaction and are equipped with systems of classification and identification in order to do so (Cahill, 1990:136; Jenkins, 2008:91-3). During social interaction, individuals engage in 'impression management' through which they attempt to influence the perceptions of others by regulating and controlling the communication of information (Goffman, 1969). Presenting a moral self involves both displaying morally acceptable behaviour and articulating a moral

understanding of the social world. It is integral to being accepted as a member of a society or social group, so is explicitly related to a social actor's desire to belong. For young people, it can play a significant part in their transition to adulthood, amounting to a badge of membership of the social world in which they live and a way of seeking social acceptance and inclusion in adult society. Presentation of a moral self in everyday life is one way that young people can claim the right to be treated as full members of society.

Presenting a moral self is particularly pressing for young people because they have reached an age at which they are increasingly expected to demonstrate morally acceptable behaviour and a moral understanding of the world. The age at which this expectation applies is context-dependent but, in the UK, children as young as ten can be held accountable for their actions and incarcerated for criminal behaviour (Muncie, 1999; Goldson, 2001; Muncie, 2005). Whereas younger children are often forgiven for their poor, morally unacceptable social conduct, older children are increasingly expected to be morally accountable public actors, without the direct intervention of adults (Cahill, 1990:399). Young people are likely to be particularly anxious to engage in impression management to present a morally acceptable self for an adult audience.

This is not to suggest that young people straightforwardly and unquestioningly conform to adult expectations to exhibit moral behaviour and understanding. Studies that have focused on adolescent deviance stand as testament to how different groups of young people attempt to actively challenge dominant moral codes of conventionally accepted standards of behaviour and reject the associated social pressure to present a moral self for acceptance by adults (e.g. Willmott, 1966; Willis, 1977; Robins and Cohen,

1978; Anderson, 1999). They highlight an important distinction between socially dominant morality and the alternative moralities of social groups categorized as deviant. Furthermore, they provide a reminder that dominant moral codes are culturally-situated and are the outcome of negotiation and challenge. It is therefore important to regard young people as reflexive actors with regards to morality (Holland *et al.*, 2000; Thomson and Holland, 2002). Also, to recognize that young people respond in multi-faceted ways to the social pressure to present a moral self, according to the diverse circumstances of their lives (James and James, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). This raises the question of why presentation of a moral self was so evident in young people's discussions in the study. Young people were perhaps keen to present themselves as moral actors because they were specifically asked to compare themselves with adults and to engage critically with stereotypes of different age groups. In doing so, they were critical of dominant social notions of morally competent adults and morally incompetent children, and thus the 'becoming' child and 'being' adult (Uprichard, 2008).

### **The Study**

The study was concerned with intergenerational relationships and their relevance to social cohesion and wellbeing. This concern was highlighted by members of the local City Council in liaison with the University's intergenerational research group. It mapped current generational understandings and concerns by investigating how two groups of people of different ages perceived generations across the life-course. Twenty young people between age 12 and 17 participated, the age range at which children are likely to experience the significant moral distinction between younger and older children.

They were recruited from a secondary school and a youth club and one-off, semi-structured interviews were conducted in self-selected friendship groups of two or three. Seventeen older people over age 55 were interviewed in small friendship groups. Interviews were designed to uncover the understandings that are related to commonly used terms describing age related characteristics, such as 'young' and 'old' people. Participants were asked to identify similarities and differences that apply to the everyday life of people belonging to the two age ranges. They were asked to describe their everyday intergenerational interactions and to talk about the types of stereotypes that were commonly held about people their own age. Themed analysis was undertaken using NVivo and the data sets from the young and older people were analysed together. The study received ethical approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee.

### **I am a moral being**

There were various ways that young people in the study presented a moral self, including demonstrating a keen awareness of the stereotypes commonly attributed to young people and critically engaging with them in their discussions. They acknowledged that, as a consequence of stereotypical views, any young person can appear threatening to older people and that older people can alter their behaviour as a result. They were keen to distance themselves from stereotypical views of young people and drew on perceptions of themselves to give moral meaning to other young people whom they categorised as different to them (Frankel, 2012: 81). They used stereotypes as a meaning-shaping tool for applying separate moral codes to these designated others

(James, 1993). Presentation of a moral self was achieved by contrasting their own behaviour with that of other young people.

Interviewer: And do you think you ever look scary to old people?

Tom: Yeah, yeah, course we do but sometimes, like you see an old woman and you can tell they're scared but we just go like 'hello, are you alright' and we move away and that, no problem, to show them a bit of respect.

Interviewer: So that they can get in and know that you're not going to do anything.

Tom: Yeah, to feel safe in their area and that.

Interviewer: And have you ever, like, been told to move by any old people?

Tom: No, because we just move without even being asked but we're like them, if we saw someone having a go at an old woman we'd probably slap them and tell them to shut up, know what I mean.

Young people perceived other young people, or 'teenagers' and 'gangs', as a potential threat to themselves, as well as older people. This is understandable given evidence that children are primarily victimized by other children and that this amounts to a high level of victimization (e.g. Elliott, 1991; Aye Maung, 1995; Oliver and Candappa, 2003 in Danby; Deakin, 2006). In this respect, young people's understanding was comparable to older people's in the study as both groups use of the term 'gang' reflected that it is synonymous with youth, socially unacceptable behaviour and a high risk of harm (Alexander, 2000; Smithson, Ralphs and Williams, 2013).

Claire:                   The safest place is your garden or your house and that's it.

Interviewer:           And who do you think ...

Claire:                   You need adults around you.

Interviewer:           And who is it then that's making it unsafe?

Jess:                    Young people, like teenagers.

Claire:                   Like gangs.

Jess:                    Yeah, like teenage gangs. Because you wouldn't see an old man  
...

Claire: In a gang with walking sticks coming for you.

Jess: ... in a gang, yeah; you wouldn't though, would you? It's always young and it's always the immature ones and the stupid ones.

Claire: I get why old people say though that it is young people but it's like it's the young people who like don't care about themselves and don't care about other people. But some people do, like I care about everyone and I look after everyone.

A common theme among older people was young people's lack of courtesy and bad behaviour on buses. They claimed that changing social norms had resulted in young people ignoring or being unaware of long-standing, inter-generational social etiquette related to travelling on public transport. They interpreted the reluctance of a young person to give up a seat for an older person as indicative of a decline in moral standards. This can be regarded as reflecting adult concerns over morality and the related view that children and young people are manifestations of moral decline (Lee, 2001). Young people also referred to the bad manners of some young people when using public transport. However, they did so in order to present a moral self by distancing themselves from these designated others, whom they portrayed as not like them.

Will: Like on the bus, it's ... like if an old person comes on the bus, you

could give your seat up for them ... should do anyway. But some people just don't, they just sit there or they like abuse them.

Interviewer: Yeah. What might they do to abuse them, do you think?

Ben: Like chuck stuff at them and stuff like that.

Will: Yeah.

### **I am also a moral becoming**

Young people also presented a moral self by recalling everyday situations in which they had exhibited morally unacceptable behaviour. In these examples, presentation of a moral self involved demonstrating critical self-reflection on the decisions they make and the consequences of their actions (Smart and Neale, 1998:114).

Chloe: And he (*the dog*) like fell down the stairs and then my granddad got really, really upset because he thought he wasn't going to survive. And then like a week after he fell down the stairs he died. And my granddad were just really, really upset and he just didn't know what to do because that dog were like his life. And he's just lost a lot of dogs in his life and he's just getting old and he's just upset.

Interviewer: Yeah. And does he still go for a walk without his dog or does he not bother now?

Chloe: No, he doesn't bother.

Interviewer: He doesn't bother.

Chloe: He doesn't see the point.

Interviewer: So he's inside more?

Chloe: And I say that I like ... because all the time when I used to go and he used to bark and then because he barked we like took him for granted too much and we were like 'Oh shut up, it's so annoying' and we'd like send him off because he were barking all the time. And then you think you're an old dog and you just wanted some attention.

Young people accepted that it is, in principle, sensible to defer to the instruction of adults, who were seen to have their best interests at heart. In this sense, they positioned adults as competent 'beings' in relation to themselves as less competent 'becomings' (Uprichard, 2008). However, the extent to which the instruction of adults was followed depended upon the nature of the advice given, who gave it and the context

in which it was given. Presentation of a moral self was evident as they acknowledged the importance of listening to the advice of significant others in their lives, principally their parents and grandparents. Nevertheless, they also demonstrated how they are active social actors in constructing and determining their own lives because instructions that were considered reasonable and relevant to their well-being, health or safety were followed, whereas instructions that they viewed as trivial or unimportant could be ignored.

Andrew:                    Yeah but we're still young, aren't we, so we've got to listen because we aren't fully grown yet.

Interviewer:            And do you listen, then, when older people say things to you or do you think shut up?

Jack:                      Sometimes.

Jamie:                    It depends, really.

Andrew:                   It depends, yeah, if it's like oh you can't eat that biscuit –

Jamie:                    Say if it's your mum and dad, if it's your relative –

Jack:                      Like you say, 'don't eat that biscuit it's mine' –

Andrew: - and then if she said 'don't play on M1' I'd think oh yeah, I don't want to do that, do I.

Jack: It's like, it depends, like I say, 'don't drink that drink, it's mine I'm serving it' and then 'don't touch that electricity', I'll drink but I won't touch the electricity.

Interviewer: So you're old enough to judge for yourself whether they're telling you for your own good or not.

Jack/Andrew: Yeah.

Interviewer: And do you think old people do that as well?

All boys: Yeah.

Andrew: Everyone does it, don't they?

### **The culturally-embedded moral authority of older people**

In their accounts of encounters with adult strangers, young people placed great emphasis on behaving in a morally satisfactory way. They accepted the well-meaning attention of older people in public spaces, even when the encounters were experienced

as facile and socially awkward. These boys were recalling older women talking to them at bus stops:

Interviewer: And what sort of things do they like to talk about, do you think?

Will: Well they just ask you if like a bus has already been or you start talking about how much it ...

Ben: Like costs and stuff.

Will: And it's like stupid, diabolical and all that.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Will: Just moaning basically.

Interviewer: (laughs) Yeah, they have a little moan to you about bus fares.

Will: Mm.

Ben: Yeah.

Interviewer: And do you think that's alright to do that or does it make you a bit

embarrassed or ...?

Will: It's fine.

Ben: It's fine.

Will: It's sometimes a bit uncomfortable but not uncomfortable in that way. It's like awkward, sort of.

Similarly, young people were prompted to discuss a photograph of an elderly man sitting on a bench in a public place. They struggled to perceive him as a potential threat to them, even with a good deal of probing from the interviewer. Instead, presentation of a moral self was again much in evidence in their insistence on adhering to a high standard of conduct in their encounters with older people.

Interviewer: So if you're in a playground, then, and you wanted to sit down but you saw there was only one bench, and this guy was sat on it, would you go and sit next to him?

Anna: I would, yeah, and try and have a little talk to him even though if he was a stranger, but I'd still say 'you alright' and that, make sure they're alright and feel safe. That's what I would do.

Interviewer:           What about you?

Josh:                    If there's an old guy there sitting down reading a newspaper, I'd leave him to it, because I might disturb him because he might get annoyed.

Young people's discussions suggested a general acquiescence with the culturally embedded moral authority of older adults. They indicated an acceptance that older people should automatically be treated with respect and consideration and an assumption that, as seasoned moral beings rather than moral becomings, older people are both most likely to adhere to decent standards of public conduct and to expect young people to do likewise. This provides a reminder that presenting a moral self requires more effort on the part of young people because they do not have the advantage of the culturally embedded moral authority of older people. Young people need to engage in impression management to a greater extent than adults in general, and older adults in particular, in order to dramatise a situationally appropriate self that an adult audience will accept on moral grounds (Goffman, 1969).

Presentation of a moral self was also evident in discussions of young people's encounters and relationships with older people in their family and neighbourhood.

Claire:                 I always help my nana and granddad like with the tea and stuff and then washing up.

Jess: Yeah.

Claire: And then if they need help or they're struggling when they're getting down, I just go and pick it up for them. Because it's easier for young people to do it because they're right active but old people ...

Jess: More flexible.

Claire: ... would be like 'Oh my back's killing me, can you go and get me that'.

All: (laugh)

Interviewer: And do you feel like you have to help them or do you feel like you're just doing it because you want to?

Claire: Yeah, I do, I just do it because I think that I'm right helpful and I like helping people.

Jess: Yeah, I do the same.

Interviewer: Does it make you feel nice?

Claire: Yeah.

Jess: I think you don't really ... you do have to sometimes but sometimes you just feel sorry for them, so you want to do it for them.

Interviewer: What are they (older people in the neighbourhood) usually doing when you see them?

Matt: Well walking to the shops and that. And I always walk with them, just to make sure that they don't fall over and that. And if they do, I've always got my phone on me, so I can ring the ambulance service.

Presentation of a moral self was clearly evident in the above accounts even though it is questionable whether, or not, Claire always helps with the washing up or Matt always walks to the shops with his elderly neighbours. Both demonstrated acquiescence with the culturally embedded moral authority of older people by acknowledging that they should automatically be treated with respect and consideration.

Young people were also asked to comment on the behaviour and practices of The Simpsons, a well-known cartoon family, as a way of considering inter-generational relationships within families. This technique is similar to the vignette in that it creates distance from the self so as to facilitate critical reflection on aspects of research participants' own lives (Hughes, 1998). Presentation of a moral self was evident as they explained what they should do to behave in a morally acceptable way in specific circumstances. They clearly articulated an acceptance of the moral responsibility of families to care for their elderly members and were critical of the poor treatment of Grandpa Simpson by his relatives, whom they viewed as morally responsible for caring for him.

Interviewer: Do you think his family treat him fairly?

Both girls: No

Interviewer: What do you think they do that's not very fair?

Ellie: Well they've like put him in a home, I don't think I'd put –

Isabel: I don't think I'd put –

Ellie: No, I wouldn't -, I think it's unless they like want something from him they'd go to him, he's a bit vulnerable in a way.

Interviewer: Yeah, so do you think they use him?

Both girls: Yeah.

Interviewer: And do you think that happens a lot with old people?

Ellie: No, not really. I think if my nan-nan or granddad were in a home  
I would go and visit them but -

Isabel: Yeah, I would.

Ellie: But I wouldn't like just go and visit them to ask them, like –

Isabel: Just because I want something.

Ellie: Yeah.

Interviewer: For money.

Ellie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you ever see it as a chore to go and see your grandparents or like older people than them?

Isabel: No, I normally go at the weekend from like being at school.

Ellie: Yeah or like if my mum can't pick us up then I'd have to like walk to my Nan's instead, she doesn't mind I don't think but it's still nice to like see them.

### **Older people as moral becomings**

Young people's moral presentation of self was also achieved by recalling their own personal experiences of older people behaving in morally unsatisfactory ways. Their accounts of the poor moral behaviour of older people suggest that adults can be viewed as moral becomings as well (Lee, 2001).

Ellie: It were my auntie's birthday and I went into a shop to go and get her a birthday card and, like, one woman had, we were in the queue and she were quite old and she went in and she were paying either like gas or something like that and then after she'd finished there, there were like another queue at the other side and because she needed to go there, instead of going to the back of the queue she just like pushed straight in front, so it weren't

like fair on everyone else who were in that queue and I think she thought oh they'll like let me off I'm old.

Interviewer: And was she really old?

Ellie: She weren't really old, she were, I think she were in like 60s but –

Interviewer: And so because she'd queued up once she thought oh I'm not queuing again.

Ellie: Yeah, I think that's like exactly what she thought.

Interviewer: Yeah. And weren't you very impressed?

Ellie: No. I just like put my card down and went out of shop because –

Interviewer: Did you?

Ellie: Yeah, because it isn't really fair and I didn't want to like say anything to her so.

Ellie did not attempt to directly challenge the older woman's morally unacceptable behaviour and this raises the issue of how embedded authority in generational positions

can make it difficult for young people to challenge their elders on moral grounds. It suggests that young people can struggle to assert their moral agency within inter-generational encounters and relationships, a struggle that is compounded by dominant notions of children as becomings and adults as beings (Uprichard, 2008). The following account indicates that young people's acquiescence with the authority of older people can have its limits, although the boys' response amounts to relatively passive resistance by not listening.

Interviewer:           And do old people ever tell you off when you're out and about?

Will:                    Not really. They do sometimes.

Ben:                    Sometimes.

Interviewer:           What sort of things might they say to you?

Will:                    Like playing football on the street or something.

Ben:                    Yeah.

Interviewer:           Like playing balls they tell you off?

Will:                    Playing football.

Interviewer: Yeah. What do they say about it?

Will: Just tell you to move.

Ben: 'Don't play there, it's making a racket' and stuff like that.

Interviewer: And do you move?

Ben: When they ask you to, yeah.

Will: Usually. To be honest, if they're nasty with us, then probably not, no. But they're alright with us and ask us politely, then we probably will move.

Young people also recalled similar incidents in which their older relatives' morally unsatisfactory behaviour went unchallenged.

Charlie: Like, my Nan and Grandad, they don't think about people's feelings, really, they just say what they're thinking in their head.

Tom: Yeah.

Interviewer: And do they ever hurt your feelings by doing that?

Charlie: No, not really.

Tom: My granddad does, he's right horrible to me, like.

Charlie: Like my Nan's (ill) because she had an operation yesterday. I went, I give her some biscuits, right, and then she went 'oh I don't like them, you can take them back!' and then she didn't even say thank you or 'owt.

Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?

Charlie: I felt right pissed off with it.

Matt: Because like ... that's another example of my Great-Nanan because like earlier, I said me, my dad and my mum always say to her to stop cutting trees down and cutting your grass and planting and that because you could always collapse or anything. And she says 'Shut up this minute! I am carrying on doing it whatever you think!'

Interviewer: So she doesn't care what you think?

Matt: No.

## **Conclusion**

The article has demonstrated how young people critically and reflexively engaged with both their own attitudes and behaviour and that of other young people and older people in order to present a moral self. Their presentation of a moral self challenges dominant understanding of young people as morally incompetent and unaccountable and therefore disrupts the distinction between adults as moral 'beings' and children as moral 'becomings' (Lee, 2001; Uprichard, 2008). It highlights how morality plays a central part in their everyday lives and complements other research that has demonstrated how children and young people are creative moral agents (e.g. Holland et al., 2000; Thomson and Holland, 2002:114; Frankel, 2012). It reinforces how children are active agents in constructing and determining their own lives, the lives of others and the society in which they live (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998).

The findings invite reflection on the contradictory nature of dominant understandings of young people who are increasingly expected to exhibit morally acceptable attitudes and behaviour, whilst also being seen as morally incompetent and unaccountable. In terms of parenting, the categories of 'adult' and 'child' are constructed in a way that it appears we are still living in a morally absolute society, which relies on dependent children to sustain morally adequate adult identities (Ribbens

McCarthy et al, 2000:800). This reliance stretches beyond parenting as adults, in general, sustain morally adequate identities through moral accountability for children and young people, and by situating themselves as morally competent in relation to them. Consequently, children and young people present a moral self in a social context in which, ultimately, only presentation of a moral self by adults is likely to be fully accepted by an adult audience.

The findings also draw attention to generation as a dimension of social organisation and as a system of relationships among social positions (Alanen and Mayall, 2001). In particular, it raises questions about how children and adults inter-relate within this system and how both understand the distinctions between dominant notions of childhood and adulthood. Specifically, the construction of moral competence and accountability as a fundamental difference between adults and children militates against recognizing and encouraging the moral agency of children and young people. It helps to support the view of children as a minority group within society, whose rights are neglected and rejected (Mayall, 2002). Young people's general acquiescence with, and related reluctance to question or challenge, the embedded authority of older people has important implications in terms of restricting their moral agency because as active agents they negotiate with other children and adults in interaction and the outcome of the interaction is that it makes a difference to the relationship (Mayall, 2002:21). This raises the question of how young people can assume greater moral accountability for themselves and others when, compared to adults, their moral agency is unlikely to be recognized or encouraged. Likewise, the familiar association of young people with morally challenging attitudes and behaviour further undermines

recognition of them as active moral agents and supports understanding of them as morally incompetent. Challenging this has become particularly urgent given the growing recognition that young people's accounts of abuse and mistreatment by adults are too easily disregarded as unreliable. Greater recognition of children and young people as active moral agents, and therefore as morally competent and accountable, will increase the likelihood that their accounts will be seen as valid and acted on.

The findings indicate that it is useful for researchers to routinely pay more attention to the relationship between children, morality and the different social worlds in which they are embedded (Frankel, 2012). There is much to be gained from having a sharper focus on how children and young people routinely present a moral self and by considering how successful they are in doing so. As Goffman himself recognized, a successful presentation of self is dependent on wider processes of social classification and identification (Goffman, 1969). It is therefore context- and audience- dependent and is related to a range of factors and influences, including social class, gender, ethnicity and family-type. This can draw further attention to the issue of how to acknowledge and accept the moral agency of children.

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