

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL JUDGEMENT DURING CHILDHOOD AND PRE-ADOLESCENCE IN THE ROMANIAN SETTING

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**Abstract:** *The moral development is a classical topic, but still insufficiently investigated in the recent studies in Romania. Our study aimed to compare the results obtained by Piaget regarding the child's moral development with the child's moral development corresponding to the recent cultural Romanian setting. The research method is mixed, qualitative and quantitative. The clinical interview and the short stories were designed after Piaget's model. Our findings suggest the existence of the same classical stages of moral development, but identify numerous mixed profiles that highlight the oscillations of the moral judgments for amoral children and submissive pre-adolescences.*

**Key words:** *moral development, mixed profiles, amoral children.*

## 1. Introduction

In Piaget's works there have been identified distinctive elements concerning the novelty of the research methodology and of the results concerning some characteristics of the cognitive and moral development of the child: the egocentrism, the difficulty to synthesize, or the transductive thinking seen as weak points as compared to adult rationality. The issues of communication between the adult and the child, between the formal and the hidden curriculum for the pre-school and primary school levels are seen as side effects, which make some educational practices of the times be questionable [22]. The moral development had been studied and presented by J. Piaget in his work *The Moral Judgement of the Child* [23]. The author claims that the development of the

moral judgement takes place in certain stages, and he identifies the motor and individual stage, the egocentric stage, the progressive egalitarianism stage, and the moral autonomy stage. The path of moral development is given by the progressive transition from the heteronomous morality, of submission to rules, to the reciprocal autonomous morality.

The stage of heteronomous morality corresponds to the egocentric morality, being chronologically determined by the ages of 4/5-7/8 years old, a stage in which the child encounters difficulties in judging the point of view of the others. His way of thinking is dictated by the moral realism, a mixture of physical and moral rules, where deeds are not judged by the intention of their authors, but by their appropriation to the physical truth, and the moral rule is

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based on authority. The stage of progressive egalitarianism or nascent cooperation (7/8-11 years old) is characterized by the strong will to obey rules and by opposing the principle of equality among brothers or sisters and submission to adult authority. The stage starting after the age of 11/12 years old, named 'the stage of moral autonomy' or moral relativism is mainly characterized by the reciprocal respect of rights and obligations, and the perception of the equality of rights as reported to each and every individual [23].

The transition from one stage of morality to another is, according to Piaget, spontaneous being related to the cognitive development, but favoured by the cooperation between equals. The author points that the notion of 'justice' is not acquired by the child as a result of his relationship to the adult, but rather as a result of his cooperation with other children while participating in common activities.

Some subsequent works confirm the association of moral and cognitive development [19], others extend the association of the moral development of children to the social-cognitive field [26].

Recent studies use the criterion of progressive transition from heteronomous morality to autonomous morality in order to classify the moral development stages, and thus outline three stages of moral development: the premoral stage, up to 5 years old, the stage of heteronomous morality, which encloses the midstages of the Piaget theory, between 5 and 10 years of age, and the stage of autonomous morality, starting after the age of 10/11 [9].

## **2. Related work**

Numerous studies have confirmed Piaget's conclusions and have found that all children appear to go through the same fixed stages [25], [8]. The transition to

moral autonomy is discussed by various studies, being most often associated with the age of 10, when the internalization of norms takes place [3].

In recent history, the studies concerning moral development have been reincluded in the scientific dialogue as a result of the need to search for some valid psychological answers regarding the understanding and solving of some moral and pedagogical issues. The researches included samples of children with distinct features, both children with behavioural and emotional difficulties, and without difficulties. The samples comprising children of different ages are being compared, thus confirming the transition to an autonomous morality and interesting points concerning the children aged 10. The particularly studied conceptual relationships are those between the moral development and violent behaviour, behavioural disorders, attribution [10], [6], [2], the school climate [18], the emotional development [17], [15], the attachment [27], empathy [17], epistemological beliefs, the efficiency of certain educational methods [5].

The idea of a spontaneous evolution of moral judgement and its direct link to cognitive development is quite controversial nowadays. Some studies on the moral judgement of children presenting behavioural disorders suggest that the bullies are cognitively competent, but morally insensitive. Generally, there is a dissociation found between the knowledge that guides the moral judgments and the factors that mediate the moral behaviour and the emotions [12], [10]. Other studies suggest that pre-adolescences presenting behavioural disorders pass immature moral judgements as compared to the ones not presenting behavioural disorders. At the same time, the studies present a large number of pre-adolescences with no behavioural disorders who nonetheless

pass immature moral judgements [6]. Other studies use the comparison between adults and children, building on arguments that suggest the existence of certain contradictions of moral judgement in all the stages of human development.

The scientific research also includes studies conducted in a variety of cultural settings. Research on various cultures were also conducted on Israeli and Druze Arabs children concerning the judgments about social conflicts [28], in China, Greece and Nigeria [13], [19] whose participants evaluated consensus, majority rule, and authority as bases for decisions in peer, family, and school contexts. The authors [13] explain that social and moral reasoning is not consistent with Chinese culture as oriented towards collectivism and rigid adherence to authority. Any studies conclude that the developmental sequence was similar in the differing cultural environments [19]. The research on social cognition suggests that differences among individuals and social contexts within cultures are greater than differences between cultures [20].

In order to explain the differences between the types of judgement, some recent studies claim the existence of a new form of intelligence, named moral intelligence, which refers to the ability to apply ethical norms to personal values, goals and actions. The construct of moral intelligence consists of more competences related to integrity, responsibility, forgiveness, and compassion [7] while others identify a 'gap' between moral cognition and moral action [15].

In order to study the moral judgement, Piaget used modelling and the clinical method. For the latter he wrote some stories which he presented to the children and afterwards asked questions concerning the severity of telling lies, the presence of guilt, or asked them to bring arguments to sustain their answers. The critics brought

to this method concern the tendency of the researchers to induce the answers, to interpret the statements of the child from a significantly adult perspective and the focus of the questions used for a single dimension [16].

In present researches, a large scope of diagnosis methods is being used: from using the original stories Piaget wrote, to adapting them or introducing new techniques such as: completing the sentences [3] or interpreting some stories from a behavioural perspective in certain hypothetical or real situations, directly related to the research hypotheses [26], [10]. Some studies also highlight the variation of results in relationship to the real or fictional type of story: one's own real-life transgressions on moral norms were judged less severe and more justified than hypothetical transgressions [2].

### 3. Research Methodology

The aim of the present research was to explore the moral development during childhood and pre-adolescence. The research methodology was the clinical one. Piaget's stories were adapted to the Romanian Culture (Annex 1). The questions that guided the research were the following:

1. Are the moral development stages identified by Piaget to be found at Romanian children?
2. Are there any differences between the chronological limits and the stage characteristics with Romanian children as compared to the original characteristics given by Piaget?
3. Do the children aged 9-10, who have siblings, state more correct moral judgements than single children?

We consider the used procedure as being ecological: the child listens to the stories, which are appropriate to his lifestyle and answers the questions of an elder person (the interviewer). After listening to the

stories, the participants were asked to evaluate the degree of guilt of the heroes, the type of punishment they should suffer, at the same time being asked to bring arguments in favour of their statements. The investigation has been conducted in 2009-2010.

Both the qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were used in order to interpret the data. The quantitative methodology allowed the correct evaluation of the sample through the descriptive statistic analysis and the calculation of some correlations, whereas the qualitative methodology served at describing the type of arguments used by the children in the construction of their moral judgements, as well as at establishing some resemblances between the final results.

The research participants were 213 children and pre-adolescences, 106 boys and 107 girls, aged between 3 and 13 years old, the average age being of 7 years old. All interviewed children were enrolled in the state kindergarten or school system. The sample is a convenience one, only the children to whom the interviewer had access being interviewed.

The analysis of the results started from the identification of themes and subthemes in the answers the children gave. Reported to the typical answers, identified by Piaget, the following themes were identified:

1. The heteronomous morality, with the subthemes: a) moral realism ('There is no such thing as a dog as big as a cow' 'Two plates are more than one') and b) respect for authority ('Father is always right', 'Father has to know what is going on').
2. The autonomous morality, with the subthemes: c) the intention of the actor is essential ('One mustn't lie', 'Cosmin only overreacted, he got scared by the dog', 'Maria wanted to do a good deed,

but Ana has stolen') and d) moral relativism, the decay in respecting the norm based on authority ('Father did not do the right thing' 'Father is obliged to take care of the children he mustn't ask them to tell on each other').

3. The composite morality, in which two subthemes of one stage (a and b, c and d, respectively) are not normally associated but randomly combined: a characteristic of the heteronomous stage stands beside one of the autonomous morality stage.

The scores for each response are presented in Annex 2.

#### 4. Results

Three types of moral profiles resulted from the analysis of the answers and the identification of the themes and subthemes: the heteronomous morality profile, the composite morality profile and the autonomous morality profile. The age share of the three profiles is presented in table 1.

The answer to our first research question is affirmative: the tendency of evolution of the moral judgement with Romanian children is the same as the one identified by Piaget at the beginning of the last century. As they grow up, children make the transition from the heteronomous morality to the autonomous one. The profiles corresponding to the heteronomous morality are more numerous with the children up to 9 years of age, while the autonomous morality profiles are more frequent with children older than 9. Therefore, our study sustains the idea of universality of evolution in the moral domain. Nonetheless, the test  $\chi^2(2)=2.75$ ,  $p=0.25$  does not reveal the existence of a statistically significant difference between the shares of the three moral profiles on the established age groups.

*The share of the profile types on age groups*

Table 1

Moral Profiles	Age Groups				Total
	3-5 years	5.01-7 years	7.01-9 years	> 9 years	
<b>Heteronomy</b>	10	7	3	3	23
<b>%</b>	18.18	10.1		5,4	11.09
	12.9				
<b>Composite</b>	29	24	36	32	121
<b>%</b>	52.7	60.6		57,89	57,9
	57,79				
<b>Autonomy</b>	16	10	19	20	65
<b>%</b>	29.09	29.29		31.1	31.1
	29.22				
<b>Total</b>	55	41	58	55	209
	154			55	

As far as the second research question of this study is concerned, the answer is also affirmative, but in the present study we notice a new element, namely the large extent of children having a composite profile, profiles that manifest themselves as early as the age of 5 and maintain their existence all the long of the investigated age interval. Out of the 121 children having composite profiles, 65 pertain to the composite type characterized by moral realism and the decay of respect for the norm related to authority. Surprisingly, a relatively large number of children older than the age of 5 (40.4%) consider that the

girl who broke more plates in the attempt to help her mother is to blame more than the girl who broke only one plate while stealing jam. The story for which our results correspond to Piaget's is the third one, probably because it entails a more complex way of reasoning and better motivations in order to explain the moral behaviour.

For the depth of the analysis we have separately calculated the correlations between the obtained results for the chosen answers and the scores obtained for the argumentation of the answers, for each story (Table 2).

*Denomination of the table*

Table 2

Correlations and signification	1 <sup>st</sup> Story	2 <sup>nd</sup> Story	3 <sup>rd</sup> Story
	Moral Judgement score & Argument score	Moral Judgement score & Argument score	Moral Judgement score & Argument score
	r= 0.38, p = 0.001	r= 0.40, p =0.001	r= 0.52, p =0.001

The statistically significant correlations show the internal consistency of the used evidence, as well as the convergence of the answers given by the children. We notice that, as children grow up, they get better

scores in their argumentations. Although the correlation between the age and the argumentation score (Table 3) is weak, it is statistically significant:  $r(208) = 0.18, p = 0.014$ .

*The association between the age of the participants and the scores obtained in the 3 stories*

Table 3

Scores		Score stories	Score argument	Total score
Age	r	.010	.180*	.130*
	p	.886	.014	.050
	N	211	211	211

This result sustains the association between the moral and cognitive development of the children. The correlation between the age of the participants and the score for the answer type heteronomous or autonomous is not statistically significant. Their answers do not correspond to the types outlined by Piaget, however they are correct from the perspective of logical argumentation. The deduced result suggests the superiority of cognitive development over the moral development.

As far as the answers given by the children to the questions related to the third story are concerned, we notice the fact that as children grow up they get better scores, namely, they consider to a greater extent that the father does not do the right thing when he asks the child to tell him everything that his brother does, and that the father should not be obeyed:  $r(210) = 0.18$ ,  $p=0.006$ ). The weak correlation between the total score (including both the choice of answers and the argumentation of the child) obtained in the three stories and the age, confirms the fact that the arguments given by the children are relevant in establishing the stage of moral development.

The qualitative analysis identifies the following types of arguments for the stage of heteronomous morality, of moral realism:

*'There is no such thing as a dog as big as a cow! (very frequent answer) 'No one has ever seen such a big dog!', 'He is*

*guilty because he wants to brag about his big dog', 'Maria is guilty! She broke more plates and now there are so many shards on the floor', 'Both are guilty for having destroyed mom's plates'. These judgements stand as a proof of the moral realism, resulting from the egocentric rational system of the child, who disregards the character and its moral or immoral intentions. In most cases, as Piaget sustained, the notion of justice and being right cannot be separated, at this age, from the submission to the norm ('Father is the boss, he has to know everything').*

For the stage of autonomous morality, we outline the following received arguments:

*'Ana is guilty for having stolen; Maria wanted to do a good deed (very frequent answer), 'Ana is guilty for having stolen, and her tummy is going to hurt' (the argument considers the intention but also states the intrinsic punishment), 'It is a great lie to lie about school. School is the first priority'. 'Father does not have to ask the children to spill the beans. He is wrong. The children can get used to telling on each other. 'Father is wrong. I wouldn't tell him anything, because I don't like to be watched over', 'Father is wrong, the girl needs privacy. I wouldn't tell, the father is wrong, the brother will be upset.' 'Father is wrong, but I would still tell him, because telling the truth is not wrong'.*

As far as the composite profiles are concerned, we notice their presence in all age groups, but mostly in the interval

between 7-9 years old, a transitional one, when a new type of moral judgement is progressively acquired. The third research question of this study concerns the existence of a relationship between the level of moral development of the child and the presence of siblings. On the whole sample, the answer is negative: there are no differences between the children who have siblings and the single children, for neither one of the stories. Although we expected these differences to be obvious, particularly for the third story, the independent sample t test showed that there are no statistically significant differences between single children and the ones who have siblings:  $t_{(192)} = 0.87$ ,  $p = 0.38$ .

Likewise, there are no differences between the single children and those who have siblings, as far as the score obtained for argumentation on the third story is concerned, the Man-Whitney test being statistically insignificant ( $z = -0.99$ ,  $p = 0.31$ ). It is also worth mentioning that there are no differences between the two categories as far as the arguments brought in favour of respecting/ disrespecting authority are concerned.

From the analysis of the arguments given by the children in order to justify the disobedience towards the request of the father, we notice that more children who have siblings (27) give answers which suggest solidarity, as compared to the single children (12) (Table 4).

*The distribution of the types of answers given by the children who have siblings and the single children*

Table 4

		3 <sup>rd</sup> story-answer argumentation						Total
		No	Respect of authority	Contradictory answer	Disrespect of authority	Solidarity among siblings	Complex rationality	
<b>Single children</b>	Count	7	27	17	17	12	4	84
	Expected count	7.4	26	14.3	14.3	16.9	5.2	84
<b>Children with siblings</b>	Count	10	33	16	16	27	8	110
	Expected count	9.6	34.0	18.7	18.7	22.1	6.8	110
<b>Total</b>	Count	17	60	33	33	39	12	194
	Expected count	17	60	33	33	39	12	194

Considering the age, there are some statistically significant differences for the global score of the third story, in favour of the children who have siblings:  $t(52) = 2.14$ ,  $p = 0.03$ . Nevertheless, this is only valid for the age group between 7 and 9 years old.

## 5. Discussions and Conclusions

The tendency demonstrated by the results of this research is similar to the one obtained by Piaget, suggesting the existence of the same stages of moral development; as age advances the rate of children who use heteronomous morality

lowers, whereas the rate of those using autonomous reasoning increases. Although it has been stated that, before the age of 5, children cannot understand moral rules, we have identified children younger than 4 who provided advanced answers, appropriate to the forthcoming stage. We cannot, however, state that moral evolution is faster, these answers being a proof of the children's cognitive capacity, and not of their moral acts.

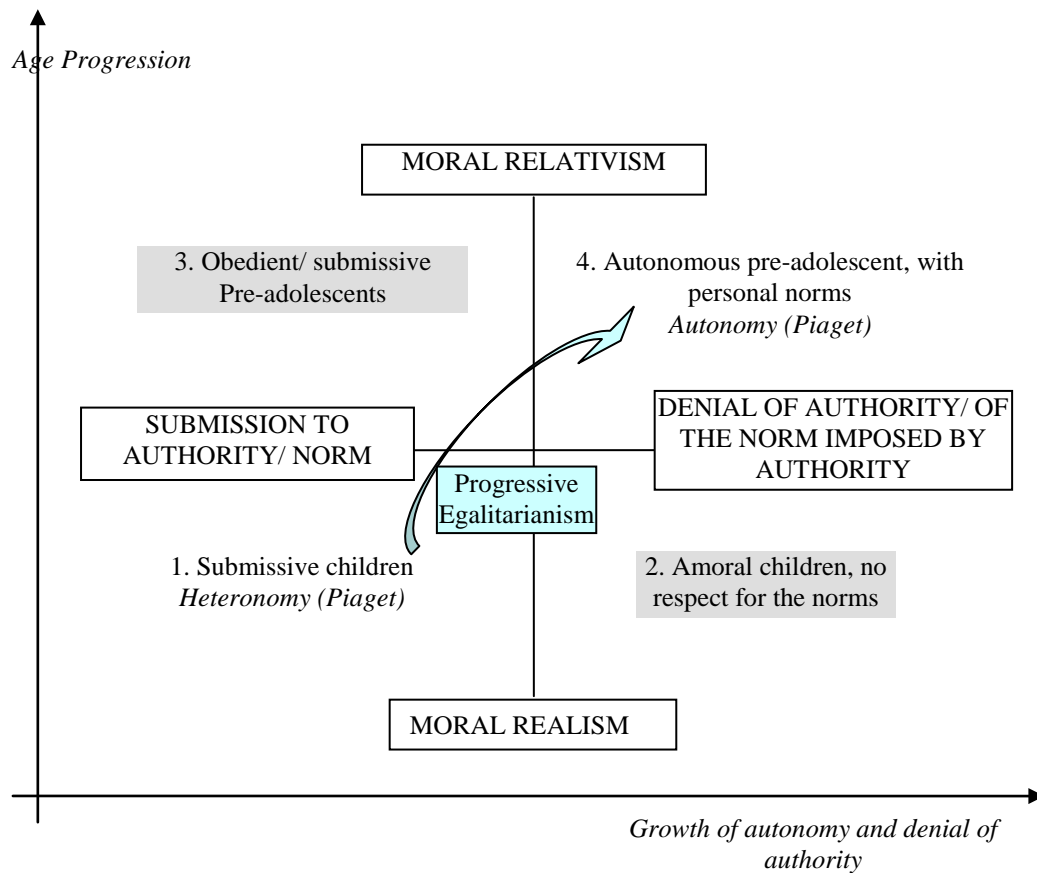
Besides the convergent answers, specific to the traditional moral stages, we have identified various composite profiles, where various levels of the moral judgment are present at the same participant: judgments specific to the stage named 'egocentric' by Piaget coexist with judgments from the 'progressive egalitarianism' stage, or of 'moral autonomy'. The composite portraits suggest oscillations of the children's moral judgment, these oscillations resulting from certain contexts or personal factors which cannot be identified in this study.

Four types of moral profiles emerge from the analysis of data: two mentioned in Piaget's works and two new ones, but pointed to in some recent studies (Figure 1). We briefly describe the composite profiles only: 2 (amoral children, with no obedience to norms) and 3 (obedient pre-adolescences). The type named by us 'amoral children' with no respect for the norms' is characterised by the absence of the difference between the intention to cheat, lie and the fantasy out of which the author does not gain anything for himself in particular (essential from a moral perspective) and the refuse of the

prevalence of the authority, of the norm. The last aspect was presented by Piaget only for the stage of moral autonomy. It is a point of debate if this moral type could be associated with the proliferation of violence in school. The type named by us 'obedient pre-adolescences' is characterised by accepting the rule imposed by the adult, and correctly judging the difference between lies and fantasy, at the same time also correctly identifying the moral intention.

Arguments such as '*Father is wrong, the children can become bean-spillers*' suggest that justice starts to be seen independently from the rule imposed by the adult, the punishments of the adult are no longer accepted, his orders are no longer exclusively obeyed ('*What father does is not right, father is wrong!*'). There is the transition from heteronomous morality to autonomous morality. The child begins to understand that the moral norms are social conventions, and that the intentions of the individual are decisive from a moral point of view ('*Maria wanted to do a good deed*'). The moral rule no longer appears as predetermined and permanent, breaking the rule does not automatically come with a punishment any longer, reciprocity is obvious in the argumentation ('*If I tell on my brother he is also going to tell on me!*' '*Father is wrong. I wouldn't tell him because I don't like to be watched over, either.*'). Other arguments are more complex, associating truth to the good, or to the better ('*I would only tell on him if it were very serious, otherwise, I don't want to spill the beans*').



Fig. 1. *Moral profiles*

## 6. Pedagogical implications

The data obtained in this research could sustain the management of the school group, underlining the fact that the interventions of the psychologist and those of the teacher are differently understood by children pertaining to the same classroom/group, according to the level of their moral judgement or of their real cognitive age. The "gap" between moral cognition and moral judgement is confirmed for a part of participants.

Neither Piaget's work, nor the subsequent ones stop at a psychological perspective but also discuss the field of education. Piaget formulates two questions related to education: a) which is the aim of

education: submission to rules or autonomy; b) which are the ways to help the development of moral judgement: teaching lessons on morality or designing practical activities with the peers. Piaget stands for avoiding the absolute submission to rules and learning and applying them together with the peers. According to the author, in order to intensify the factors helping in moral development, the educational system should use 'natural' resources: the life of the spontaneous groups to which the child pertains, the games he plays, in which he shall learn to respect the other, the equality of people in front of justice, the negotiation and implementation of the contracts with

others. Consequently, the social life of the group/ the class and the self-government of the collective life are essential in the moral evolution of the child, as Piaget states.

The current approaches to moral development envisage various aspects of education, from the student-student and teacher-student relationships, to hidden curriculum. We mention the recommendations concerning the integrated educational interventions: moral emotions and cognitive moral development. They are sustained by the studies focused on strategies for moral education which recommend a problem-based approach in small groups, dialogue and interaction between students [24] developed techniques of moral education using the reflective thinking, the 'why questions', the personal and naturalistic examples, complicating the circumstances [14].

The moral dialogue between teacher and students should be directed towards moral conflict, analysis of the student's beliefs and positions, role-taking and moral empathy, understanding shared norms and moral choice in real actions [21].

In this context, curriculum designers and teachers must define and teach the universal moral values and their sources, using the taxonomy of the cognitive and social-affective domains. This taxonomy can be used to develop moral intelligence and the conative capacity [4]. The taxonomy of the conative domain involves the recognizing problems and conflicts, self-determination, persistence, patience [11] and the skills of self-discipline, decision-making, planning, and evaluation [7], [1]. In school field, the role of the teachers, educational leaders and administrators is to be a model for the students and is to create a just and caring environment [7].

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### ANNEXE 1

The three stories, where the names of the children have been adapted, are:

I. a. Adrian tells his mother that the teacher gave him a good mark and congratulated him. In fact, he is lying.

I. b. Cosmin is taking a walk. On his way, he meets a dog which frightens him. When he comes back home, he tells his mother that he saw a dog as big as a cow.

II. a. Ana steals some jam and breaks the plate on which she ate it.

II. b. Maria breaks two plates while washing the dishes.

III. Father asks one of his children to tell on everything that his brother/ sister does.

### ANNEXE 2

The scoring of the answers for the three stories

Answers	Score	Answers	Score	Answers	Score
<b>Story 1</b>		<b>Story 2</b>		<b>Story 3</b>	
Normal* answer for the chronological age of the child	1	Normal* answer for the chronological age of the child	1	Normal* answer for the chronological age of the child	1
Morally correct answer	2	Morally correct answer	2	Morally correct answer	2
<b>Arguments for story 1</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>Arguments for story 2</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>Arguments for story 3</b>	<b>Score</b>
Moral realism	1	Moral realism	1	Respect of authority	1
Acceptance by the adult	2	Acceptance by the adult	2	Contradictory answer	2
Right answer	3	Hedonist tendencies	3	Disrespect of authority	3
-	-	Contradiction	4	Solidarity among siblings	4
-	-	Right answer	5	Complex answers	5

\* Normal, according with Piaget's approach.