Cecilia Wainryb – January 2016

Research Statement 2011-2015:
Work Conducted Since the Last Tenured Faculty Review

I study moral development. My research examines how children and adolescents further their moral understandings and their sense of themselves as moral agents through their everyday experiences, and how these developments are shaped by war, violence, and inequality.

I started out my research career working within the widely accepted domain-specific theoretical framework, which has a long tradition in developmental psychology. Nevertheless, as evidence from my research accumulated indicating that interpretation and positionality were central to understanding socio-moral diversity, I became concerned that the research methods typically employed in moral development research — methods that rely almost exclusively on the manipulation of hypothetical stimuli — were unable to fully capture the complexities of children’s moral lives. Conceptually, too, I became increasingly troubled by the dearth of attention paid by moral development researchers to children’s experiences of moral wrongdoing. Indeed, moral research conducted from widely different theoretical frameworks had long been consumed by arguments concerning the relevance of children’s thinking about right and wrong, but no one paid attention to children’s actual moral wrongdoing or asked how children’s very common experiences of doing something they knew was morally wrong may prospectively affect their moral development or their sense of themselves as moral people. Thus I turned my attention to narrative methods, in the hope they would provide a richer means for capturing the meanings children make of their moral lives; and I decided to focus specifically on children’s narration of their own moral transgressions, in the hope of elucidating the developmental significance of those experiences. The hunch paid off. What started as an exploratory project developed into a prestigious research monograph (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005) that not only furnished compelling evidence about the role of interpretation and positionality in moral thinking, but also allowed me to take a closer look at how children of different ages bring to bear their moral concepts on their own transgressive experiences. Convinced of the immense potential of this approach, I began serious conversations with Monisha Pasupathi about narrative processes and methods. Soon after, Monisha and I brought together, to great synergistic effect, our distinct sets of expertise, and a few years later, at around the time of my last tenured-faculty review, we had published a set of twin papers (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010) articulating a novel theoretical framework that identified children’s efforts at meaning-making concerning their own experiences of moral wrongdoing as a main crucible for growth. This framework opened the door for us to examine questions of serious import to the field of moral development.

In the past five years (i.e., since my last TFR), we have applied this conceptual framework to examine how youth narrate and make sense of a variety of their own morally-laden experiences including social exclusion (Recchia, Brehl, & Wainryb, 2012; Wainryb, Komolova, & Brehl, 2014), harm and help (Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013; Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne, & Pasupathi, 2015), revenge and forgiveness (Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, under review; Wainryb, Recchia, & Pasupathi, in prep), blame and responsibility (Bourne, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, in prep.), lying and deception (Smetana & Wainryb, in prep.), discrimination (Pasupathi, Wainryb, & Twali, 2012), as well as conflicts with peers and parents and individuation (Komolova, & Wainryb, 2011; Komolova, Wainryb, & Recchia, under review). Collectively, this work has offered a unique glimpse into the complexities of children’s morally-laden interactions; furthermore it made it possible for us to begin considering how children, at different ages,
might make sense of and reconcile their own moral transgressions with their moral concepts, and how this process might become integrated into a developing sense of moral agency. The latter is uniquely important, as the construct of moral agency is likely to be a key conceptual tool for addressing questions with which the moral development literature has wrestled for the last 30 years, bearing on the relation between moral judgment and moral action (Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2015).

The focus on the narration of moral experiences has had two additional generative implications for my research in the last five years. First, this focus brought to the fore the central role of emotion and allowed us to begin examining some of the ways in which emotions and cognitions work together in children’s actual moral lives (Wainryb & Recchia, 2012; Recchia, Dirk, & Wainryb, under review); the attention to the affective side of morality had been sorely missing from the more predominantly cognitive approaches to the study of morality, especially in the literature dealing with children and adolescents. In addition, our work on the narration of moral experiences also allowed us, in our NIH-funded work, to begin looking at how narrating distressing experiences may confer benefits for emotion regulation (Pasupathi, Wainryb, Mansfield, & Bourne, in press; Pasupathi, Billitteri, Mansfield, Wainryb, Hanley, & Taheri, in press) — the import of such regulatory effects for moral behavior are surely quite obvious. We have started examining youths’ narration of anger and sadness, which are integral to many moral experiences; ongoing and future work includes the exploration of narrating guilt, shame, and remorse, emotions whose regulation is likely to be critical for the process of construction of a sense of moral agency and the promotion of moral learning and growth.

Another profoundly important consequence of looking at moral experiences through the lens of narration is that the act of narrating typically happens in conversations with others. Thus what started out as an examination of the stories that children tell about their own transgressions to an experimenter was expanded in the last five years to include the conversations that children have with their mothers about their own moral transgressions (Recchia & Wainryb, 2014; Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne, & Pasupathi, 2014). This is not merely a methodological expansion — the conversations that children and parents have about children’s moral transgressions are at the heart of the moral socialization process (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014; Wainryb & Rechha, in press). Our work begun identifying the varied ways in which children of different ages frame their moral transgressions in conversation with their mothers, as well as the varied socialization goals that mothers bring to these conversations and the distinct ways in which they scaffold children’s sense of themselves as moral agents at different ages. We have also recently edited a volume (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014), in an effort to underscore the role that parent-child conversations have in moral socialization and shape the scholarly interest in the topic. Because moral socialization, especially in adolescence, often includes partners other than parents, some of our ongoing NIH-funded work has recently begun examining the different kinds of conversations that children have about their own transgressive experiences with their mothers vs. with their friends — work that will allow us to examine in greater detail the process of moral agency construction in conversation.

Finally, as our work with samples of typically-developing youth progressed and gave us a sense for how children make sense of their everyday instances of hurt and unfairness, we were able to begin focusing on a set of questions related to the moral sequelae of war and political conflict — questions that presented a longstanding challenge to moral scholars. Given that the everyday experiences of youth in war-torn and conflict-ridden countries involve much more severe forms of violence and injustice, including killings, torture, forced displacement, and extreme inequality, our work in the last five years has asked how youth make sense of such grave instances of interpersonal and group harm, and how their subjective interpretations of these experiences may further — or hinder — their moral
development (Wainryb, 2011; Wainryb & Bourne, in press; Wainryb & Recchia, 2015). Our accumulating data underscored the need to better understand how trauma may shape and constrain moral development and the process of agency construction; some of my ongoing work with Patricia Kerig (Kerig & Wainryb, 2013; Kerig, Wainryb, Twali, & Chaplo, 2013; Wainryb & Kerig, 2013) has aimed to address these issues. Additionally, our work on the potential benefits that narration confer for emotion regulation and moral agency construction (e.g., Pasupathi, Wainryb, Mansfield, & Bourne, in press; Pasupathi, Billitteri, Mansfield, Wainryb, Hanley, & Taheri, in press; as well as our ongoing NIH-funded work) — while presently conducted only with community samples — may in the future be useful for informing work on intervention with war-exposed youth.

But research in war-torn and post-conflict environments presents unique challenges involving, among others, social, economic, and political unpredictability, convenience sampling, linguistic and cultural barriers, as well as many difficulties identifying and addressing the competing agendas of international collaborators who function within impoverished and threatened social and academic environments. Although at first we collected data in various parts of the world (e.g., tribal wars in Papua New Guinea, Bosnia refugees), in the last five years I decided to focus on Latin America because I am fluent in Spanish and also quite familiar with the socio-political and cultural intricacies of the conflicts in the region, all of which facilitates the research process in countless ways. Thus I devoted quite some effort to creating and nurturing a research network of colleagues in Latin America (e.g., Colombia, Chile, Argentina) who want to understand the complex developmental processes in post-war and post-dictatorship environments. Presently, we have a promising project ongoing in Colombia (in collaboration with Posada and Recchia) focused on youths’ experiences with revenge, which is one of the most serious psychological and social aftermaths of the violent civil war there; we also have ongoing work in southern Argentina (Barreiro & Wainryb, in prep.; Barreiro, Wainryb, & Carretero, 2015), among the indigenous Mapuche tribe, investigating the developmental sequelae of a history of persecution, exclusion, and extermination. I have also began conversations with a group of colleagues in Chile who are interested in issues related to the intergenerational transmission of stories and trauma – which has been a serious concern in that group in the post-Pinochet years. And I have also started pilot work in Argentina (in collaboration with Barreiro and Arsenio) that examines youths’ perceptions of economic inequality; our goal is to illuminate the intersection between youths’ perceptions of inequality, their sense of their own moral agency, and their views on violent vs. democratic change processes. I expect that, collectively and over time, data from these and forthcoming projects will yield a wealth of information concerning how youths struggle to build a sense of morality, and a sense of themselves as moral beings, out of the rubbles of lawlessness, violence, and injustice. I believe that a judicious consideration of these struggles — one that neither minimizes nor overstates the devastating effects of growing up in a violent society — is key to understanding the interplay of moral resilience and risk for war-exposed youths and the longer-term dynamics of intergroup conflict.