Rating Ethical Content-Short Form (RECS)

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Abstract:
The *Rating Ethical Content Scale* (RECS) judges the content of stories for positive content, based on the Four Process model of ethical behavior: ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical focus and ethical action (Rest, 1983; Narvaez, & Rest, 1995). For example, a story with Ethical Sensitivity has evidence of concern for others and awareness of the consequences of one's actions. A story with an Ethical Focus addresses the ethical demand in the situation: prioritizing ethical goals and responsibilities over personal ones. A story with Ethical Judgment shows characters deliberating about ethical choices. A story with Ethical Action has a character who perseveres to attempt or complete an ethical behavior. RECS can be used to develop a rating database of children's films and stories. It can also be used in the classroom to develop media literacy. We present the RECS-Short Form, used for rating young children's media. We measured test-retest reliability and internal consistency. Both were good.

We discuss the *Rating Ethical Content Scale* (RECS) used to judge the positive moral content of stories. RECS is based on the Four Process model of ethical behavior that includes four psychological processes involved in ethical behavior: ethical sensitivity, ethical focus, ethical judgment, and ethical action. With RECS we will develop a rating database of children's films and stories. A test-retest study of the RECS-Short Form with untrained undergraduate raters is presented.

Over the years, several ratings systems have been devised in order to guide parents in judging appropriate media for their children. The most familiar system in the U.S. may be the *Motion Picture Association of America* (MPAA) rating system (www.mpaa.org), established by the movie industry in 1968. To construct the system, media executives consulted actors, writers, producers, critics, religious organizations, and directors' guilds to derive ratings; parents, psychologists, pediatricians, and educators were not consulted. Specifically, the codes used to rate films are as follows: G: "General Audiences- All Ages Admitted"(although there is no designation of the work as a "children's film"); PG: "Parental Guidance Suggested. Some

Material May Not Be Suitable For Children"; PG-13: "Parents Strongly Cautioned. Some Material May Be Inappropriate For Children Under 13"; R: "Restricted," possibly including "hard language," "tough violence," nudity within sensual scenes, drug abuse or other elements, or a combination of any of these, and NC-17: "No One 17 And Under Admitted." However, strict terms within any of the above-mentioned classifications, such as what is deemed "appropriate" or "pornographic" are specifically avoided due to cultural differences in these definitions. According to a recent study (Thompson & Yokota, 2004), the criteria for ratings has been slipping. For example, movies rated G now would have been rated PG ten years ago.

Another familiar ratings system in the U.S. is the *TV Parental Guidelines,*(www.tvguidelines.org), which follows a format similar to the MPAA. Again, general age-appropriate categories are suggested to parents in order to help them monitor their children's television use. There are two categories focused specifically for children: "TVY: All Children," which includes programming especially suitable for young children ages 2-6, and "TVY7: Directed to Older Children," geared to children age 7 and above. In relation to the general audience, there are the following: "TVG General Audience," suitable for "all ages," "TVPG Parental Guidance Suggested," unsuitable for young children because of the possible presence of what is judged to be moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L), or some suggestive dialogue (D), "TV14 Parents Strongly Cautioned," with an increased amount of the above material, it is not advised for children under 14, and finally, "TVMA Mature Audience Only," which contains one or more instances of graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S), or crude indecent language (L), and is intended to be viewed by individuals over 17 years of age. Again, parents and professionals were not consulted in the development of this ratings system.

An alternative system, *Common Sense Media*, (www.commonsensemedia.org) was created by James Steyer (author of *The Other Parent)*. The rating system includes a recommended viewing age and specifies four quadrants describing themes which concern parents (S stands for Sexual Content, L for Language, V for Violence, and the C for Content, such as the extent to which the media is humorous, scary, or includes inappropriate actions, such as taking drugs or drinking alcohol), as well as color-coded representations of the extent to which such elements are included in the selection (red represents an inappropriate level, yellow advises caution, and green signals support). The ratings system is designed to be used by parents and educators, and to ideally report upon not only films, but also music (CDs) and literature. Like the other ratings systems, the purpose is to protect children from negative media images by allowing parents to screen their children's media choices ahead of time.

In our survey of media ratings systems, we noted three important things. First, most of the perspectives used to formulate the systems were solicited from individuals associated with media or parents, not psychologists or educators. Secondly, the purpose of the ratings system is to provide parents with some "advance knowledge" regarding the content of a movie or television production, focusing on undesirable qualities of the media. Third, none of the systems focus on the positive moral content of the story. The Rating Ethical Content Scale (RECS) takes a different tack. Specifically, it rates the positive content in media, analyzing what kinds of ethical skills the medium can teach children.

The Rating Ethical Content Scale (RECS)

The *Rating Ethical Content Scale* (RECS) occupies a niche separate and distinct from other media ratings systems for content. The RECS seeks to sharpen the focus of common sense evaluations of media and to precisely identify the moral content of media that psychologists, educators and parents believe to be a valuable positive influence on children.

The ratings system is based on the Four Component Model (Rest, 1983; Narvaez, & Rest, 1995) that identifies four psychological processes that must take place to complete an ethical action: Ethical Sensitivity, Ethical Focus, Ethical Judgment, and Ethical Action. See Table 1 for the list of characteristics tested. For example, a story with Ethical Sensitivity has evidence of concern for others and awareness of the consequences of one's actions. A story with an Ethical Focus addresses the ethical demand in the situation: prioritizing ethical goals and responsibilities over personal ones. A story with Ethical Judgment shows characters deliberating about ethical choices. A story with Ethical Action has a character who perseveres to attempt or complete an ethical behavior.

Research with RECS

The RECS has evolved over several studies. For example, Narvaez (1998) compared the virtue categories in the Book of Virtues (Bennett, 1993) to the Model for Moral Text Analysis (MMTA), finding that the MMTA offered a finer-grained analysis more useful to educators and parents. Narvaez, Endicott, and Bock (1999) tested children and adults with an episode of the television show "Arthur." Children had a difficult time rating anything in the show other than concrete behaviors Narvaez, Endicott, Bock, Mitchell, and Kang (2000) tested groups of teachers using a positive RECS (rating positive behaviors) and a negative RECS (rating negative behaviors), rating an episode from the television show "Family Guy." Because the program had more negative behaviors in it, the teachers had an easier time using the negative ratings system.

The Present Study

Our goal for the present study was to create an online tool that novices could use to rate children's stories. Consequently, we simplified the number of questions, used a 3-point, Likert-type scale to rate at the story-level (not character-level). We expected to find significant correlations between Time 1 and Time 2 testings.

Method

Participants. Participants were 66 undergraduate students (13 male, 49 female, 3 unknown; 46 Euro Americans; 58 spoke English as a first language) from a private Midwestern university who participated for course credit. 37 participants were tested twice for test-retest reliability analyses.

Procedure. The RECS was presented electronically. After reading a practice story, participants read four stories. After each story, they answered questions about the story on the computer using a keyboard and mouse.

Stories. We used the four moral stories from the Moral Theme Inventory (Narvaez et al, 1999). Each story had a complex moral message. Each story contained a dilemma that the protagonist had to resolve. In each story the protagonist resolves the dilemma by affirming the values of the theme. Two stories about helping strangers were developed ("Kim" and "Cal"). "Kim" concerns a girl whose family, while moving across the country, stops at a gas station where Kim receives too much change from the cashier. The moral messages concern being honest with everyone, even strangers, and using self-control to be honest. (See the appendix for the full text of "Kim.") "California" is a version of Hans Christian Andersen's "The boy and the dike." It is about a girl living in Western United States at the turn of the century who saves cattle in which the community has invested by holding closed the gate of a corral during a storm throughout the night. The moral messages are self-sacrifice and perseverance to help others. Two stories about helping friends or family were written ("Jed" and "Malcolm"). "Jed" is about a boy who is tempted away from his home responsibilities. The moral messages concern doing one's duty and being trustworthy. "Malcolm" is about a boy whose friend is an arson suspect and expects Malcolm to lie to keep the friend out of trouble while getting an innocent stranger into trouble. The moral messages are about telling the truth about strangers even at great cost.

Scale. RECS-Short Form consists of one open-ended question about the story ("What is the theme of the story?') and fifty multiple-choice items that include general questions about the story (e.g., does it contain religion, stereotypes) as well as questions about the ethical content of the story (questions about the four processes, as well as conflict and virtues). Here we report on two of the questions: whether or not the conflict was resolved prosocially, antisocially or not at all, and how accurate the respondents were

in generating the moral theme of the story. However, our primary interest was in responses to the four processes.

We measured each of the four processes with several questions. Ethical Sensitivity has 7 questions, but 2 questions were consistently left blank and so we have eliminated those from the analyses. Ethical Focus has 5 questions. Ethical Judgment has 6 questions. Ethical Action has 7 questions. The four process subscales used a 3-point Likert-type scale (0= no emphasis, 1=some emphasis, 2= major emphasis). These scores were then added and turned into a percentage score per component and multiplied by ten to express the score on a scale from one to ten.

Results

We first report on theme generation. Responses were counted as correct if they contained at least one of the parts of the complex theme. For the full 66 participants, the results were as follows: for California, 86.1% of responses were correct; for Malcolm , 91.4% were correct; for Jed, 88.2% were correct, for Kim, 97.1% were correct. Across all stories, participants generated the correct themes 91.4% of the time, showing a high level of overall comprehension.

Secondly, we report on the perception of conflict and its resolution. We asked subjects the question "Was there conflict in the story? How was it resolved?" The subjects mostly identified story conflicts as present and prosocial.

Story	Yes	Not Resolved	Neutral	Prosocial
Kim	58	18%	23%	59%
Jed	66	17%	26%	58%
Cal	66	11%	20%	70%
Malcolm	66	8%	21%	71%

Third we examined the internal reliability coefficients for each process in each story. They were mostly at acceptable threshold. They were as follows:

	Kim	Jed	Cal	Malcolm
Ethical Sensitivity (n= 5)	.67	.72	.75	.72
Ethical Focus (n= 7)	.68	.74	.51	.68
Ethical Action (n=6)	.60	.43	.62	.66
Ethical Judgment (n=5)	.81	.77	.73	.70

Fourth, we also examined the test-retest correlations for each process by story. All were significant.

	Kim	Jed	Cal	Malcolm
Ethical Sensitivity:	.82	.69	.59*	.80
Ethical Focus:	.61	.58	.60*	.81
Ethical Judgment:	.73	.81	.73	.50*
Ethical Action:	.48*	.80	.65*	.61

All p<.001, except *p<.01

Finally, we examined test-retest correlations of the means between time 1 and time 2.

Story	Time 1	Time 2	r	p
Kim	4.08(1.60)	4.43(1.77)	23%	.001
Jed	3.84(1.61)	4.21(1.75)	26%	.001
Cal	4.10(1.58)	4.37(1.79)	20%	.001
Malcolm	4.68(1.63)	4.68(1.82)	21%	.001

General Discussion

We asked naïve participants to complete the RECS online. Half of them were tested twice in sessions two weeks apart using moral stories. The findings suggest that even with naïve subjects there is adequate test-retest reliability for most of the scales within the measure. We conclude with the rationale for and usefulness of the RECS.

The RECS is standardized and practical.

The RECS presents a standardized, scripted analysis for text evaluation. In addition to clarifying standards for developmentally appropriate content, the RECS is a tool to help parents tailor their children's media selections/use to their specific needs within the Four Process Model. Thus, the rating system provides excellent moral developmental suggestions for many different age groups, without making the decision for the user; the experts' ratings inform and assist the consumer, rather than merely labeling a media product and suggesting parents follow these guidelines. Parents and teachers will be able to interpret the results. It is unclear whether or not raters must be trained to carry out evaluations.

RECS is focused on positive ethicality.

The RECS maintains an in-depth focus on a very specific component of media content, namely the elements that support ethical development in children.

The RECS is theoretically supported

As the RECS is based upon the Four Process Model (ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical focus/motivation, ethical action), it is grounded in a strong, theoretically and empirically supported foundation.

The RECS is non-partisan and culturally flexible.

Clear-cut decisions are not and cannot be made in evaluation of children's films and stories. Thus, a purpose of the RECS is to evaluate media not as generally "good" or "bad" for the population at large, but to clarify developmentally appropriate content for different age groups and specific groups. In doing so, the system successfully negotiates a variety of cultures and traditions; individuals may decide for themselves if the materials considered are appropriate for their intended use and audience.

While implicitly informed by general cultural mores, the RECS has a non-denominational, secular orientation to moral development. Therefore, while other ratings systems have made explicit attempts to include and draw upon religious traditions the RECS has purposefully not done so.
The RECS will allow experts and non-experts to collaborate.

In its final form, RECS will be available for use by the public on the internet. We will present expert ratings while at the same time allowing the public at large to rate material as well.

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Table 1. Characteristics Measured by the Ethical Scales

Ethical Sensitivity
*1. Considers more than one social point of view
2. Treats others with empathy (Considers others' feelings & responses)
3. Expresses emotions appropriately (Appropriate for context and age)
4. Counteracts own prejudices
5. Demonstrates intercultural sensitivity
6. Aware of traditions and institutions
*7. Considers the consequences of action

Ethical Focus
1. Reflects on the importance of acting morally
2. Applies an external standard for behavior
3. Acts as community member/good citizen
4. Exhibits selflessness or self-sacrifice
5. Resolves social conflicts peacefully
6. Shows reverence for life beyond survival instinct
7. Affirms others, multidimensional understanding of personality, respect for individual differences

Ethical Judgment
1. Character reasons about actions
2. Character is concerned about following standards or principles
3. Character applies relevant codes of ethics
4. Character makes good choices
5. Shows insight

Ethical Action
1. Considers obstacles and their conquest towards moral goal
2. Shows courage, assertiveness, standing up for others
3. Exhibits persistence
   (repeated attempts to reach moral goal)
4. After failure, tries moral goal again
5. Intervenes to help or an attempt is made
6. Character uses effective coping skills

*Omitted from the analyses because participants left it blank too often.