



Brief communication

Trauma-related predictors of deontic reasoning: A pilot study in a community sample of children[☆]

Anne P. DePrince*, Ann T. Chu, Melody D. Combs

Department of Psychology, University of Denver, 2155 S. Race Street, Denver, CO 80208, USA

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Deontic reasoning (i.e., reasoning about duties and obligations) is essential to navigating interpersonal relationships. Though previous research demonstrates links between deontic reasoning abilities and trauma-related factors (i.e., dissociation, exposure to multiple victimizations) in adults, studies have yet to examine deontic reasoning abilities in children exposed to trauma. Given that social and safety rules (exemplars of deontic reasoning rules) may appear arbitrary for children in the face of trauma exposure, particularly interpersonal violence perpetrated by adults (i.e., caregivers, close relatives), we predicted that the ability to detect violations of these rules would vary as a function of trauma exposure type (no, non-interpersonal, and interpersonal). Additionally, given previous research linking dissociation and deontic reasoning in adults, we predicted that higher levels of dissociation would be associated with more errors in deontic problems.

Methods: Children exposed to interpersonal violence (e.g., sexual abuse by an adult family member, witnessing domestic violence, or physical abuse in the home) were compared to children exposed to non-interpersonal trauma (e.g., motor vehicle accident, natural disaster) or no trauma on their ability to detect violations of deontic and descriptive rules in a Wason Selection Task and assessed for their level of dissociative symptoms.

Results: Dissociation (but not trauma exposure type) predicted errors in deontic (but not descriptive) reasoning problems after controlling for estimated IQ, socio-economic status, and children's ages.

Conclusions: The current study provides preliminary evidence that deontic reasoning is associated with dissociation in children. This pilot study points to the need for future research on trauma-related predictors of deontic reasoning.

Practice implications: Deontic rules are essential to navigating interpersonal relationships; errors detecting violations of deontic rules have been associated with multiple victimizations in adulthood. Future research on violence exposure, dissociation, and deontic reasoning in children may have important implications for intervention and prevention around interpersonal functioning and later interpersonal risk.

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Introduction

Deontic reasoning involves reasoning about “what one may, ought, or may not do in a given set of circumstances” (Cummins, 1996a, p. 161), whereas descriptive reasoning involves reasoning about descriptions of some aspect of the world (Ermer, Guerin, Cosmides, Tooby, & Miller, 2006). For example, a deontic rule states, “If it is cold outside, then you must wear

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* Corresponding author.

a coat.” A descriptive rule, on the other hand, states “If you play soccer, then you take the red water bottle.” Typically developing children and adults are more likely to detect violations of deontic rules compared to descriptive rules (e.g., Cosmides, 1989; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992, 1997; Ermer et al., 2006; Klaczynski, 1993; Light, Blaye, Gilly, & Giroto, 1989), even as young as 3–4 years of age (Cummins, 1996b; Núñez & Harris, 1998).

Deontic reasoning is critical to navigating social relationships and institutions (Cummins, 1996b). Impoverished deontic reasoning abilities are likely to place individuals at high risk for being taken advantage of in relationships or failing to protect against harm (Stone, Cosmides, Tooby, Kroll, & Knight, 2002). Thus, deontic reasoning performance may be particularly relevant to the deleterious interpersonal consequences associated with child victimization, such as peer victimization in childhood (e.g., Shields & Cicchetti, 2001; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2000) and physical and/or sexual revictimization in adolescence and young adulthood (for review, see Arata, 2002).

To date, we are aware of only one study that has examined deontic reasoning and trauma-related factors. DePrince (2005) reported that young adults who reported histories of victimizations both before and after age 18 made significantly more errors detecting violations of deontic rules (both social contract – rules involving a social exchange; and precautionary – rules involving safety) than their peers; the groups did not differ in descriptive reasoning. Importantly, pathological dissociation explained unique variance in deontic reasoning performance after controlling for other trauma-related factors (DePrince, 2005). Dissociation is associated with a host of information processing difficulties (e.g., memory problems; see Putnam, 1997), including disruptions in working memory and processing speed (DePrince & Weinzierl, 2006). Working memory and processing speed have, in turn, been implicated in deontic reasoning (Klaczynski, Schuneman, & Daniel, 2004). In the current study, we evaluated whether dissociation was linked with deontic (and not descriptive) reasoning errors in school-aged children. Specifically, we predicted that higher levels of dissociation would be associated with more errors in deontic (but not descriptive) reasoning problems.

In addition to dissociation, we also examined trauma exposure history in relation to deontic reasoning. While DePrince (2005) argued that poorer deontic reasoning may increase risk of multiple victimizations in young adulthood, certain types of trauma exposure in childhood may be associated with deficits in deontic reasoning. To the extent that traumatic events generally challenge fundamental assumptions regarding predictability, safety, and trust (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992), deontic rules may seem arbitrary and unreliable to children who grow up in environments that include exposure to potentially traumatizing events. Therefore, trauma-exposed children may generally show problems detecting violations of safety and social relationship rules. Thus, we predicted that any trauma exposure (non-interpersonal or interpersonal) would be associated with worse deontic performance than no exposure.

To further qualify this prediction, we also hypothesized that interpersonal trauma exposure would be associated with worse deontic performance than non-interpersonal trauma exposure. In the face of interpersonal violence, deontic rules about safety and social exchange may seem particularly arbitrary and, therefore, be associated with worse performance. Indeed, Freyd (1996) has argued that the close nature of victim–perpetrator relationships (e.g., in familial violence) may decrease children’s motivation to develop accurate reasoning about social relationships because the abusive caregiving relationship violates a fundamental social contract. In addition, violent family environments, in particular, may fail to provide the structure or social learning environment required to develop these reasoning abilities. Thus, we predicted that interpersonal trauma exposure would be associated with poorer deontic (but not descriptive) than non-interpersonal trauma exposure, which would be associated with worse performance than no trauma exposure.

Current study

The current study provides the first examination of trauma-related predictors of children’s deontic reasoning performance. Drawing on theory (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Freyd, 1996) and previous research (DePrince, 2005), we tested the contributions of trauma exposure type and dissociation to deontic reasoning performance in school-aged children. A priori contrast weights for trauma exposure groups that corresponded to the predicted pattern of means were assigned (weights: interpersonal trauma = 1, non-interpersonal trauma = 0, no trauma = –1). The use of planned contrast weights is justified given a priori predictions (Loftus, 1996; Furr, 2004) and minimizes Type II errors that would be associated with post hoc comparisons between multiple groups in a small pilot sample.

Method

Participants

Prior to data collection, all procedures were approved by the University of Denver Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited in the Denver, Colorado, metro area through flyers in social service and mental health agencies, community centers, and local businesses as part of a larger study on parenting and stress that involved additional lab tasks not reported here. Female guardians and their school-aged children were paid for their participation; children received several small prizes throughout the testing session. All participants completed an extensive informed consent process. Of the 72 children who participated in the larger study, we report here on the 63 children for whom we had complete reasoning data. Of these 63 children (Age $M=8.89$; $S.D.=1.36$), 43 were female. Five female guardians did

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