



Children's intention-based moral judgments of helping agents



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ABSTRACT

During preschool years, children's disapprovals of harming actions increasingly rely on intention rather than outcome. Here we studied for the first time whether a similar outcome-to-intent shift occurs in judgments of helping actions. Children aged four-to-eight ($N = 404$) were asked to evaluate the goodness and deserved reward of attempted and accidental help (Experiment 1), and the badness and punishability of attempted and accidental harm (Experiment 2). We found an outcome-to-intent shift both in goodness and badness evaluations. In judging failed attempts, children's intent-based attribution of goodness develops prior to the intent-based attribution of badness. We discuss the implications of the present findings for recent theories on conceptual change and cognitive architecture underlying the development of moral judgment.

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1. Introduction

In judging the morality of an action, people typically consider both its underlying intention and its external consequences. We may follow an *intentionalist ethics* and focus primarily on the intention, rather than the consequences (Abelard, 1971; Kant, 1785/1959). Consequences can be caused by luck, and luck is not a moral factor (Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981). Or we may adopt a consequentialist ethics, e.g. the *ethics of responsibility*, which focuses primarily on the consequences of the action (Weber, 1919/1994). Whether it is right to clone humans does not seem to depend on scientists' intentions, but rather on the foreseeable practical consequences. By claiming that actions have moral value only with respect to the consequences they bring about, consequentialists are opposed to deontologists.

A major concern for deontologists is that valuing only consequences will result in justifying awful actions because they will bring about a greater good for some people. Unlike consequentialists, deontologists claim that some choices or actions are morally forbidden no matter what the consequences of these choices or actions will be. Thus, the role of intentions and consequences in judging other's actions is at the core of the main theories in moral philosophy. A growing body of evidence shows that people's moral judgment is typically based on intentions, but it also relies on outcomes, especially when it is concerned with whether and how much to punish in cases of culpability (e.g., Berg-Cross, 1975; Cushman, 2008; Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2010; Killen and Smetana, 2008; Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932; Young, Cushman, Hauser, & Saxe, 2007).

The emergence of an intent-based moral judgment during childhood has been a core aspect of developmental theories since Piaget's (1932) seminal work. Piaget presented children with stories involving two characters: one who acted in a good-intentioned way but caused serious material damage, and one who acted in a bad-intentioned way but caused less serious

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damage. Piaget then asked children which character was naughtier and should be punished. He reported a developmental change between ages 6 and 10 from a propensity to offer evaluations based on outcome to a propensity to offer evaluations based on intention.

This outcome-to-intent developmental shift has generally been found in a rich set of subsequent studies (Armsby, 1971; Baird & Astington, 2004; Costanzo, Coie, Grumet, & Farnill, 1973; Helwig, Hildebrandt, & Turiel, 1995; Imamoglu, 1975; Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Moran & O'Brien, 1983; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009; Surber, 1977; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005; Yuill, 1984; Yuill & Perner, 1988; Zelazo, Helwig, & Lau, 1996). Complex cases such as failed attempts to harm and accidental harm, where intentions and outcomes lead to conflicting responses, were particularly useful in revealing the outcome-to-intent shift. Research using these cases showed either younger preschoolers relying mostly on outcome (Helwig et al., 1995; Helwig, Zelazo, & Wilson, 2001; Zelazo et al., 1996) or equally on intention and outcome (Cushman, Sheketoff, Wharton, & Carey, 2013; Killen et al., 2011; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Bartholomew, 2016).

After overcoming some of the methodological limitations found in Piaget's initial studies, it became also clear that even preschoolers can use intent information to evaluate moral agents and actions, although it remains true that older children show greater sensitivity to mental states (Farnill, 1974; King, 1971; Nelson, 1980; see Karniol, 1978, for review). Piaget's original tasks were not always suitable to assess the use of intent cues by younger children, since they sometimes confounded intention and outcome, the agents' intentions were not stated explicitly, and the relevant information was difficult to remember (Turiel, 1983). Moreover, during some interviews, Piaget focused on what children thought or expected an adult (i.e., the father, the mother, or the schoolteacher) would do, not on what the child herself would do (e.g., punish or not). These shortcomings lead Piaget to underestimate preschoolers' ability to rely on intention when producing a moral judgment.

According to a recent dual-process model, children' and adults' moral judgments are best accounted for by assuming two distinct underlying processes, rather than a developmental replacement of a fully outcome-based moral reasoning by a fully intent-based moral reasoning (Cushman, 2008, 2013; Cushman et al., 2013). The intent-based process relies on the assessment of agents' mental states and on the automatic assignment of negative values to harmful actions to evaluate agents' moral character; the outcome-based process analyzes actions' outcomes to assess agents' causal responsibility. While moral badness judgments are mostly generated by the intent-based process, punishability judgments are generated by both the intent-based process and the outcome-based process. In fact, by asking participants to evaluate the wrongness and the punishability of attempted but failed or accidental harming actions, Cushman (2008) found that wrongness (or badness) judgments rely mostly on mental states information, and punishment judgments rely on both mental states and consequences factors.

Evidence for this dual-process model comes also from neuroimaging studies showing activation of brain regions associated with cognitive conflict and top-down control when individuals judge cases of accidental harm compared to cases of intentional harm (Young et al., 2007). Moreover, the intent-based process does not develop simultaneously for attribution of moral badness and punishability. These findings lead Cushman et al. (2013) to propose that the emergence of an intent-based badness judgment constrains and promotes the development of a punishability judgment also based partially on the agent's mental states assessment.

1.1. Judging harming and helping agents

Moral competence encompasses the evaluation of what is morally bad and wrong as well as what is morally good and just. However, the vast majority of studies have focused selectively on evaluations of moral violations, neglecting to investigate how people produce evaluations of actions that are generally morally approved, or even admired, and how moral approvals develop during childhood. A recent and clear example of this bias in adult literature is the claim that the fundamental template unifying moral judgment is interpersonal harm (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012). One reason for this neglect in the current literature might be that people are more likely to produce a moral judgment when facing moral violations, rather than praiseworthy behaviors (Rosmini, 1840/1989).

In the developmental literature, moral competence is often conceptualized as the capacity to recognize moral transgressions as some acts that are "wrong because they have intrinsic effects for others' right and welfare" (Smetana, 2006; p. 121). Social domain theory maintains that morality is about the respect of fairness (Turiel, 2014). This view implies that moral violations, unlike the violations of conventional rules, involve a victim and are not contingent on a specific group consensus or authority mandate. This conceptualization has oriented researchers towards a rich set of novel and important research goals and led to a widespread consensus in developmental moral psychology (Killen & Smetana, 2015). However, by building on this rich body of research findings, an extensive work remains to be done in order to reach an understanding of the child's judgment of moral approvals of helping actions that would be comparable to our understanding of the child's moral disapprovals of harming actions.

Helping and harming behaviors are sometimes conceptualized as two sides of the same coin (McGinley & Carlo, 2007), but there are important differences between them. Positive duties or duties of commission, such as 'be benevolent' or 'be charitable', appear to be less narrow, strict, and rigorous than negative duties, or prohibitions, such as 'do not murder' (Kant, 1785/1959). While positive duties do not usually prescribe any particular action and do not specify how much we ought to do, negative duties have less leeway with respect to their violation. The command 'do not lie' is more precise and restrictive than the command 'tell the truth', despite the fact that they appear to be logical opposites. In certain occasions, we are free not to tell the truth by omission and out of prudence, but, according to Kant, we are never allowed to lie. We are freer in the

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