



Original Articles

Can only one person be right? The development of objectivism and social preferences regarding widely shared and controversial moral beliefs



Larisa Heiphetz*, Liane L. Young

Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 December 2015

Revised 16 April 2016

Accepted 21 May 2016

Available online 31 May 2016

Keywords:

Experimental philosophy

Moral cognition

Moral objectivism

Social cognitive development

Social preferences

ABSTRACT

Prior work has established that children and adults distinguish moral norms (e.g., hitting is wrong) from conventional norms (e.g., wearing pajamas to school is wrong). Specifically, moral norms are generally perceived as universal across time and space, similar to objective facts. We examined preschoolers' and adults' perceptions of moral beliefs alongside facts and opinions by asking whether only one person could be right in the case of disagreements. We also compared perceptions of widely shared moral beliefs (e.g., whether it is better to pull someone's hair or share with someone) and controversial moral beliefs (e.g., whether it is better to help someone with a project or make cookies for someone). In Studies 1 and 2, preschoolers and adults were more likely to judge that only one person could be right in the case of widely shared versus controversial moral beliefs, treating the former as more objective or fact-like. Children were also more likely than adults to say that only one person could be right in a moral disagreement. Study 2 additionally revealed that adults were more likely than children to report preferring individuals who shared their controversial moral beliefs. Study 3 replicated these patterns using a different sample of widely shared beliefs (e.g., whether it is okay to mock a poor classmate) and controversial moral beliefs (e.g., whether it is okay to tell small, prosocial lies). While some aspects of moral cognition may depend on abundant social learning and cognitive development, the perception that disagreements about widely shared moral beliefs have only one right answer while disagreements about controversial moral beliefs do not emerges relatively early. We discuss implications for moral learning and social preferences.

© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

From early childhood on, social interactions are rife with moral disagreement. Preschoolers fight about whether it is okay or not okay for one child to take a toy from another (Shantz, 1987), older children disagree about the ethics of excluding peers (Killen, 2007), and adults diverge in their stances on issues such as abortion and the death penalty (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). The current work unites approaches from experimental philosophy, social psychology, and developmental psychology to investigate moral objectivism—the perception that moral statements, like factual statements, can be objectively true or false and that therefore if two people disagree only one person can be right (e.g.,

Sayre-McCord, 1986). The present studies address three questions: (1) Are individuals more likely to report that, in the case of disagreements about widely shared (versus controversial) moral beliefs, only one person can be right? (2) Are individuals more likely to prefer other people who share their widely shared (versus controversial) moral beliefs? (3) How might these behavioral patterns change across development, with social experience and moral learning (i.e., learning about local moral rules and common moral beliefs)?

1.1. The relationship between epistemology and moral objectivism

For centuries, moral objectivism has been the purview of philosophers, who have debated the extent to which moral statements—like factual statements—can be true or false (Harman, 1975; Kant, 1786/1959; Nagel, 1970; Prinz, 2007). Within psychology, many experiments relevant to the study of moral objectivism have targeted epistemological development, or

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Boston College, 3261 McGuinn Hall, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, United States.

E-mail addresses: larisa.heiphetz@bc.edu (L. Heiphetz), liane.young@bc.edu (L.L. Young).

the development of reasoning about various domains of knowledge. For example, three-year-olds judge that disagreements are more acceptable in the case of opinions than factual beliefs (Flavell, Flavell, Green, & Moses, 1990). A number of researchers have mapped positions, levels, or stages of epistemological development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Chandler, Boyes, & Ball, 1990; King & Kitchener, 2004; Kuhn, Cheney, & Weinstock, 2000; Perry, 1970; see Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, for a review). One common theme is that, in general, individuals move away from objectivism (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002).

Prior work has shown that children are especially unlikely to accept disagreement in the case of moral beliefs. In one program of research, children and adolescents were less likely to accept disagreement in the domain of morality than in the domains of fact, opinion, and social convention (Kuhn et al., 2000). In addition to this difference among categories, developmental differences also emerged within categories that lacked a culturally accepted “correct answer,” such as opinions and factual claims about information participants did not know (e.g., why a particular dog was not eating). In these categories, younger children were more likely than older children to say that only one person could be right and less likely to report that it was acceptable for others to disagree with them (Heiphetz, Spelke, Harris, & Banaji, 2013; Wainryb, Shaw, Langley, Cottam, & Lewis, 2004; Wainryb, Shaw, & Maianu, 1998; Wright, 2012). Prior findings of inter-category differences suggest that children may respond differently when asked questions about moral beliefs that elicit consensus versus moral beliefs that elicit disagreement, and prior findings regarding developmental differences suggest that older participants may exhibit less objectivism than younger participants. The current work tested these hypotheses.

1.2. Moral objectivism across development

Work in developmental psychology has demonstrated moral objectivism among children, as discussed above. In one line of work, preschoolers and children in early elementary school were equally likely to report that only one person could be right in a disagreement about moral beliefs and a disagreement about factual beliefs (Wainryb et al., 2004). Preschoolers also reported that moral beliefs, as opposed to opinions, were true “for real” (Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003).

The adult literature has shown a somewhat more nuanced pattern of results. In one study (Goodwin & Darley, 2008), adults were asked to imagine that someone disagreed with them in the domains of morality, convention, opinion, and fact. Participants were more likely to respond that only one person could be right in the case of moral disagreements than in the case of convention or opinion, thereby judging moral disagreements to be more objective, similarly to children in other studies. However, adults were also more likely to respond that only one person could be right when judging disagreements about factual rather than moral statements, showing *less* objectivism in the domain of morality than in the domain of fact. Furthermore, adults’ moral objectivism was attenuated when they judged disagreements about positively- versus negatively-valenced moral items, when they judged disagreements about controversial versus widely shared moral judgments, and when they judged disagreements between two members of another culture rather than their own (Goodwin & Darley, 2012; Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe, 2011).

One aim of the current work was to test children and adults in the same paradigm. Although the existing literature suggests that children are more prone to objectivism than adults, it is challenging to draw conclusions about developmental change from experiments using different paradigms because differences between children and adults could be due to experiment-specific factors,

such as the wording of the items. In any given category (fact, opinion, morality), three patterns could emerge in the present research. First, children could demonstrate more objectivism than adults. Adults could develop a more nuanced understanding of disagreements and become better able to see multiple sides of the same issue. Moral learning could play an influential role in this process; through encountering moral disagreements, adults could learn that different perspectives on the same issue could all be valid. Second, we could find similar levels of objectivism in children and adults. This finding would suggest that objectivism is not dramatically affected by moral learning or other changes that occur between childhood and adulthood (e.g., cognitive maturation). Third, children could demonstrate less objectivism than adults. Greater experience with individuals who hold conflicting views could convince adults that their own views are the only correct ones.

1.3. Children’s and adults’ social preferences

While a significant body of work has compared perceptions of moral beliefs with perceptions of other mental states, far less work has examined children’s and adults’ preferences for those who share their moral beliefs. Comparing the results of the present research with past work on social preferences can shed light on the extent to which moral beliefs function similarly to or differently from other, better-studied cues to similarity (e.g., race, gender), as discussed below.

Children in preschool and elementary school show preferences based on race (e.g., Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Baron & Banaji, 2006), gender (e.g., Martin & Fabes, 2001), language/accent (e.g., Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013), similarity of opinions and physical appearance (Fawcett & Markson, 2010a, 2010b; Heiphetz, Spelke, & Banaji, 2014), and novel groups that are meaningless outside of the experimental context (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2007; Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011). Meanwhile, research with adults demonstrates strong social desirability concerns regarding many of these social categories, such as race and gender. Adults do not typically report preferences based on these cues despite evidence of prejudice on implicit measures (e.g., Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) and reductions in empathy for the pain of out-group versus in-group members (Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011; Decety, Echols, & Correll, 2010). Implicit bias in the absence of explicit animus may indicate adults’ desire to conform to egalitarian cultural norms; adults may fail to report preferences based on race or gender because they have learned that such preferences are socially unacceptable (e.g., Devine, 1989; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). By testing the extent to which children and adults prefer individuals who share their moral beliefs, we were able to determine the extent to which similar social desirability concerns also apply to morality.

The present work makes two contributions to the study of social preferences. First, we investigated social preferences across development. Most previous experiments on social preferences have not tested children and adults using the same paradigm, again making it difficult to directly compare across age groups. Second, we examined the extent to which children and adults report preferring characters who share their widely shared and controversial moral beliefs. Specifically, moral issues eliciting greater cultural consensus may also be associated with stronger preferences (Goodwin & Darley, 2012). However, beliefs about controversial moral issues may provide better diagnostic information (e.g., about group membership) and may therefore be associated with stronger preferences.

1.4. Overview of current research

The current work investigated potential differences between *widely shared* and *controversial* moral beliefs. We define widely

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5041481>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5041481>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)