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## Moral reasoning about everyday situations in adults with autism spectrum disorder



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### ABSTRACT

Little work has explored moral reasoning in adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The present research used two novel scenario-based tasks to investigate how adults with and without ASD reason about moral rules and apply them in everyday interactions. The Rule Transgressions task examined decision-making in situations where breaking a rule might lead to a personal advantage. People with ASD did not differ from control participants in how frequently they chose to carry out the transgressions or their ratings of acceptability. However, they gave fewer sophisticated rationales to explain why the transgressions were wrong. The Social Intentionality task examined how participants judged and reacted to intentional and accidental transgressions performed by a story character. Both groups judged and responded more harshly to intentional transgressions than unintentional ones, but participants with ASD gave harsher responses overall. The findings suggest some preservation of the understanding of moral rules in ASD, but difficulties in applying and reasoning about these.

### 1. Introduction

Moral rules provide people with information about how they “ought to act”; their application and reinforcement helps to minimise conflict and promote cooperation within complex social groups (Staub, 2003). There is evidence that consideration of what is “right” or “wrong” relies on a combination of both reasoned and more automatic socio-emotional processes; cognitive and emotional empathy in particular appear to have an important role in supporting moral reasoning (Blair & Fowler, 2008; Cushman, Young, & Greene, 2010). Through reliance on cognitive empathy, the ability to understand others’ perspectives, people can simulate in their minds what they would or would not like to happen if they were in the same situation (Gibbs, Basinger, Grime, & Snarey, 2007). Emotional empathy, on the other hand, allows people to ‘feel’ for others (Pizarro, 2000). Witnessing someone being harmed elicits congruent affective responses in the observers, which can facilitate their ability to reason about and implement morally prescribed rules (Eienberg & Strayer, 1987; Singer et al., 2004).

Although it is unclear whether emotional empathy is preserved in individuals with ASD, there is good evidence to suggest that cognitive empathy is impaired (Blair, 2008). Given the role of this resource for facilitating moral reasoning (Gibbs et al., 2007), people with ASD might be expected to differ from neurotypical individuals in this. The evidence, however, is mixed, and relates predominantly to children and adolescents with ASD. Initial studies examining the ability to differentiate between conventional versus moral transgressions or anti- versus pro-social acts have shown no group differences (James & Blair, 1996; Leslie, Mallon, & DiCorcia, 2006). Notably, though, there is some evidence that the ability of children and adolescents with ASD to reason about moral problems may not be as sophisticated (Grant, Boucher, Riggs, & Grayson, 2005). For instance, in a study by Shulman et al. (2012),

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they generated fewer sophisticated justifications than neurotypical participants to explain why different transgressions were wrong, containing more nonspecific condemnations (e.g., “that’s bad”) or citing basic rules (“it is forbidden to hit others”).

Some studies within moral reasoning have also explored whether people with ASD show similar sensitivity to intentionality in their judgements. Neurotypical people typically judge others more harshly for pursuing a detrimental course of action if they carried it out on purpose rather than accidentally (Armsby, 1971; Cushman, 2008; Cushman, Sheketoff, Wharton, & Carey, 2013; Lagnado & Channon, 2008). Previous tasks where the agent’s intentions were not clearly spelt out have found that people with ASD often over-attribute intent to unintentional actions, and judge these more harshly than neurotypical participants (Buon et al., 2013; Koster-Hale, Saxe, Dungan, & Young, 2013; Moran et al., 2011; Rogé & Mullet, 2011; Salvano-Pardieu et al., 2016). On the other hand, in studies where the difference in the agent’s intent was more explicit, they correctly differentiated between intentional and unintentional actions (Grant et al., 2005). Indeed, in a study by Channon et al. (2011) participants with ASD not only differentiated between intentional and unintentional transgressions, but did so even to a greater extent than neurotypical individuals, since they judged intentional wrong-doings more harshly and accidental ones more leniently. It is possible that when demands on mentalistic abilities are kept low by spelling out and contrasting intentions, people with ASD can use this information in similar ways to neurotypical people to guide their moral judgements.

A main limitation of previous research is that studies have been predominantly conducted with children and adolescents. Moral reasoning is thought to follow a developmental trajectory, characterised by the succession of different, hierarchical stages (Kohlberg, 1973). Initially, children rely on an utilitarian approach, focusing on the practical consequences of their actions; however, as they grow older and become adults, they increasingly show a more sophisticated ability to grasp and apply universally applicable concepts such as fairness, justice and human rights (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2006). Moral development has been argued to continue throughout lifespan (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983). Since little work has been conducted with adults with ASD, it is currently unclear whether they follow the same trajectory as neurotypical individuals in their moral reasoning. Notably, moral development has been associated with maturation and increased activity in the prefrontal cortices of the brain, particularly the ventromedial and orbito-frontal regions (Fang et al., 2017; Pascual, Gallardo-Pujol, & Rodrigues, 2013). Both structural and functional abnormalities in such areas have been implicated in both children and adults with ASD (e.g., Amaral, Schumann, & Nordahl, 2008; Ha, Sohn, Kim, Sim, & Cheon, 2015). An interesting question is therefore whether moral reasoning remains impaired in adults with ASD, or whether they instead follow an alternative, perhaps slower trajectory in their moral development.

Another weakness of previous tasks is that they typically involved the use of serious and unfamiliar transgressions (e.g., an agent murdering a victim). These tasks are unlikely to reflect the rich and varied types of moral issues that people need to resolve in their everyday interactions; performance on them is thus unlikely to be representative of how people respond to moral problems in commonplace situations and contexts.

The present study aimed to address these limitations in the literature, by presenting adults with and without ASD with two novel scenario-based tasks: the Rule Transgressions task and the Social Intentionality task. Both the Rule Transgressions and the Social Intentionality tasks were developed especially for the present research; however, similar scenario-based tasks have been used in the field of social cognition (e.g., Callenmark, Kjellin, Rönqvist, & Bölte, 2014; Zalla, Sav, Stopin, Ahade, & Leboyer, 2009). In contrast with many previous moral tasks, both the Rule Transgressions and Social Intentionality tasks presented participants with real-life types of situations and problems (e.g., participants had to decide where they would say a small lie, or how they would react to a friend betraying their trust); use of everyday-type of social situations can help to enhance ecological validity and thus our understanding of how ASD may actually affect people’s behaviours in real-world scenarios. Tasks such as the present ones also provide with opportunities to gain a more detailed insight into participants’ thought and reasoning processes and shed light with respect to the more subtle differences found between neurotypical individuals and people on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. The tasks were designed and administered concurrently as they both examined how people evaluate different but related aspects of moral reasoning.

The Rule Transgressions task explored how people evaluate transgressions that may lead them to gain a personal advantage. Self-interest is a powerful motivator for unethical behaviour: people are more likely to break a norm if they think that this could help them to obtain something that they value (Bersoff, 1999), and also to view such transgressions as more permissible (Bocian & Wojciszke, 2014). People with ASD are often described as self-focused (e.g., De Vignemont, 2007), and have been found to prioritise their own benefits over those of others in social situations (Bellesi, Jameel, Vyas, Crawford, & Channon, 2016; Jameel, Vyas, Bellesi, Cassell, & Channon, 2015). Thus, one interesting question is how they perceive transgressions that may be advantageous to their perpetrators. The Rule Transgressions task examined this by presenting participants with situations where a character could achieve something only by breaching a norm (e.g., by lying). It was hypothesised that, compared to control participants, people with ASD might choose to carry out transgressions more often, and rate these as more acceptable. On the basis of previous evidence that children with ASD struggle to justify their moral judgements (Grant et al., 2005; Shulman, Guberman, Shiling, & Bauminger, 2012), it was also hypothesised they would provide fewer sophisticated rationales than control participants to explain why the transgressions were wrong.

The Social Intentionality task aimed to extend previous work examining sensitivity to intentionality in adults with ASD, and also explore their responses to harmful acts. Participants read different variants of the same written scenarios, where a fictional character engaged in either an intentional or unintentional wrongdoing. As reviewed above, when the distinction between intentional and unintentional actions is explicit, people with ASD seem able to differentiate between those in their judgments (Channon, Lagnado, Fitzpatrick, Drury, & Taylor, 2011; Grant et al., 2005). Hypotheses for the present study were made in accordance with the findings by Channon et al. (2011), since a similar methodology and population were used. It was hypothesised that both groups would differentiate between intentional and unintentional actions by judging and responding more harshly to intentional transgressions versus unintentional ones. Moreover, on the basis of previous evidence that adults with ASD may differentiate even more strongly

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