Are young children's preferences and evaluations of moral and conventional transgressors associated with domain distinctions in judgments?

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated associations between children's preferences and evaluations of moral and social-conventional transgressors in a novel puppet task and their links with explicit judgments in a standard interview. Children aged 2–3.25 years ($M = 2.53$ years, $SD = 0.35$) and 3.5–5 years ($M = 4.38$ years, $SD = 0.52$) watched two pairs of live puppet shows depicting actors committing a moral transgression and a conventional transgression and chose which transgressor they *liked* more, preferred more as a *friend,* thought was more *wrong,* and should get in more *trouble;* they also *distributed resources* to the transgressors. At both ages, children allocated fewer resources to moral transgressors than to conventional transgressors, but younger children's other responses did not exceed chance levels. In contrast, older children chose the moral transgressor as more wrong, more deserving of punishment, and less likeable. Preferences were associated with evaluations in the puppet task, particularly among older children. In contrast, all children differentiated between moral and conventional transgressions in their explicit judgments, with age differences found only in rule independence. More mature moral judgments, as assessed by latent difference scores reflecting moral–conventional distinctions, were associated with preferring to befriend the conventional transgressor and evaluating the moral transgressor as more wrong. Together, these results show

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age-related increases in children's moral understanding of—and stronger associations between—preferences and evaluations with age.

Introduction

Developing an understanding of right and wrong is an important task of early childhood, but researchers differ in their accounts of its emergence. For instance, experimental studies have shown that infants as young as 3 months of age prefer "helpers" to "hinderers," as assessed using looking time measures in response to visual scenarios. These findings have led some researchers to claim that infants have an innate moral sense (Hamlin, 2013; Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007, 2010; Van de Vondervoort & Hamlin, 2016). In contrast, researchers from the social domain theory perspective (Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel, 1983) have proposed that moral judgments are constructed through social interactions during early childhood. Therefore, an understanding of morality, as assessed in terms of explicit judgments and distinguished from other types of social norms, might not be evident until the third or fourth year of life. To date, however, little research has integrated assessments of children's moral preferences with their explicit moral judgments.

Morality as a distinct domain of social knowledge

Drawing on philosophical writing and empirical research, social domain researchers have defined morality in terms of individuals' prescriptive understanding of others' welfare, fairness, and rights, as distinguished from more arbitrary, consensually determined, and contextually relative social-conventional norms (Turiel, 1983, 2006). Research has investigated children's ability to identify and distinguish morality from conventions as well as how they apply moral, conventional, and other considerations in reasoning about complex situations (for reviews, see Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 2006). By 4 years of age, children consistently judge hypothetical, prototypical moral transgressions pertaining to physical or psychological harm and unfairness as less acceptable and more deserving of punishment than conventional transgressions (reviewed in Killen & Smetana, 2015; Smetana et al., 2014). Because all social transgressions are generally seen as unacceptable and punishable, however, researchers also have examined judgments along several theoretical dimensions considered definitional of the moral domain (referred to as *criterion judgments;* Turiel, 1983). Children typically judge prototypical moral violations such as hitting and teasing—but not conventional violations such as calling teachers by their first name—as generalizably wrong and unacceptable regardless of whether they are regulated by rules or prohibited by authorities. The ability to distinguish moral and nonmoral norms is considered an important milestone during early social development that contributes to children's healthy social functioning (e.g., Jambon & Smetana, 2017).

Less research has examined moral and conventional judgments in children under 4 years of age. The few available studies have shown that while 26-month-olds do not distinguish the domains (Smetana & Braeges, 1990), they do by 3½ years of age in their judgments of both hypothetical (Ball, Smetana, & Sturge-Apple, 2017; Crane & Tisak, 1995; Smetana, 1981; Smetana & Braeges, 1990) and actual (Smetana, Schlagman, & Adams, 1993), observed moral and conventional transgressions The ability to make distinctively moral judgments increases across early to middle childhood (Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983; Jambon & Smetana, 2018; Smetana et al., 2012), particularly when evaluating complex moral dilemmas (Jambon & Smetana, 2014). Age differences also may reflect the verbal demands of the interview given that greater language ability among 2- and 3-year-olds has been associated with more advanced moral judgments (Ball, Smetana, Sturge-Apple, 2017; Smetana & Braeges, 1990).

Studies employing behavioral measures also suggest that 3-year-olds demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of morality. For instance, Vaish, Missana, and Tomasello (2011) showed that