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Feelings or cognitions? Moral cognitions and emotions as longitudinal predictors of prosocial and aggressive behaviors

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ABSTRACT

There is debate regarding the roles of sociomoral cognitions and emotions in understanding moral development. The short-term longitudinal relations among perspective taking, sympathy, prosocial moral reasoning, prosocial behaviors and aggression in adolescents were examined. Participants were 489 students (M age = 12.28 years, $SD = .48$; 232 boys) in public and private schools from predominantly middle class families in Valencia, Spain. Students completed measures of perspective taking, sympathy, prosocial moral reasoning, prosocial behaviors, and aggressive behaviors. Overall, structural equation modeling analyses showed that moral reasoning and emotions were interrelated and predicted both prosocial behaviors and aggression. Discussion focuses on the relevance of both social cognitions and emotions in moral development.

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1. Introduction

For centuries, philosophers have debated the roles of emotions and cognitions in morality. More recently, among psychologists, such debates have resurfaced in the writings of major moral theorists such as Kohlberg (1984) and Hoffman (2000). Cognitive-developmental theorists emphasized the role of sociomoral cognitions in moral development and this perspective continues to heavily influence contemporary research (Lapsley, 1996; Turiel, 1998). However, social cognitive theorists (Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg, 1986) have attempted to understand the interplay of moral emotions and cognitions and still others (e.g., Haidt, 2001) have suggested that moral emotions are primary to moral cognitions. Although this debate is likely to continue, research examining the simultaneous influence of moral cognitions and moral emotions processes is needed.

Prosocial moral reasoning is defined as decision making regarding helping opportunities when there is a conflict between one's own and others' psychological or physical needs in situations where there are no laws or formal social guidelines. Unlike prohibition-oriented moral reasoning that emphasizes issues of justice, prohibitions, and life-and-death (see Kohlberg, 1984), prosocial moral reasoning entails issues of caring and interpersonal relationships (Eisenberg, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Eisenberg (1986) outlined

five developmental levels of prosocial moral reasoning commonly observed among children and adolescents: hedonistic, approval-oriented, needs-oriented, stereotyped, and internalized (including reasoning about empathy). The first three levels are present early in childhood whereas the latter two levels of reasoning emerge later in childhood and adolescence. Furthermore, prosocial moral reasoning is conceptually linked to moral emotions such as sympathy (i.e. feelings of sorrow or concern for others) such that moral reasoning (and perspective taking) can induce or prime sympathy and vice versa (Eisenberg, 1986; Hoffman, 2000). Several investigators have shown that prosocial moral reasoning is related positively to prosocial behaviors (i.e. actions intended to benefit others), sympathy, and perspective taking (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, & Van Court, 1995; Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001), and negatively related to aggression (Laible, Eye, & Carlo, 2008).

Another social cognition that is hypothesized to be related to moral behaviors is perspective taking. Batson (1998) and Hoffman (2000) have speculated that perspective taking is required for sympathy and ought to facilitate prosocial behaviors and mitigate aggression. According to these scholars, understanding how others are feeling, their intentions and desires, and their social circumstances should lead to greater sympathy and prosocial behaviors for those who need assistance or who are suffering. Meta-analytic reviews have revealed that there is an overall modest positive association between these constructs (e.g., Underwood & Moore, 1982). Other studies have shown that aggression and externalizing behaviors are negatively associated with perspective taking (see Miller & Eisenberg, 1988).

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Several scholars have noted the conceptual importance and relevance of empathy (i.e., feeling the same as another) and sympathy (i.e., feelings of sorrow or concern for others) in prosocial behaviors and in aggression (Batson, 1998; Hoffman, 2000). Batson (1998) asserts that empathy is the basis for altruistic behaviors (i.e., selflessly motivated behaviors primarily intended to benefit others often under risky circumstances and without reward expectations). Similarly, Hoffman (2000) argues that empathy frequently serves as the primary motive behind prosocial behaviors. On the other hand, the lack of empathy is a central component of clinical psychopathy and has been linked to delinquency (Hare, 2006). Thus, although perspective taking enables the individual to understand the social situation, empathy and sympathy (or sometimes referred to as empathic concern; see Davis, 1983) are the constructs that move the individual toward prosocial action and away from harming or injuring others. There is relatively substantial evidence on the significant associations between empathy and sympathy and both prosocial and aggressive behaviors (Batson, 1998; Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg, 1986).

Despite the available evidence on the links among perspective taking, prosocial moral reasoning, sympathy, prosocial behaviors, and aggressive behaviors, several questions remain. First, most studies on the relations between prosocial and aggressive behaviors and these sociocognitive and socioemotive predictors are cross-sectional designs, which limit our ability to infer causality. Second, few studies have had large enough samples to examine the multivariate relations between perspective taking, prosocial moral reasoning, and sympathy, and these social behaviors (see Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). The present study was designed to further examine these multivariate relations in a relatively large, longitudinal sample of adolescents from Spain.

Although it is difficult to adequately characterize people from countries because of within group heterogeneity, researchers have often done so to contextualize their findings (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Spain is similar to most other Western, industrialized societies and is a member of the European Union. Spain is generally characterized as a society that values the family (Elzo, 2004). Although religion is not rated as highly as family and health, religion (primarily Christianity) continues to play a major role in the culture and social customs of Spanish life (CIS, 2004). In general, Spain ranks higher on individualism than other Latino cultures but substantially lower on individualism than the USA (Hofstede, 1984; Oyserman et al., 2002). Therefore, Spain is considered moderately collectivist (Basabe et al., 2000; Fernández-Berrocá, Salovey, Vera, Ramos, & Extremera, 2001). Because prior research on prosocial development in Spain show similar developmental patterns to those in studies conducted in the United States (Mestre, Frias, Samper, & Tur, 2002; Mestre, Samper, & Frías, 2002), we expected moral reasoning and emotions to be positively associated with later prosocial behaviors, and negatively associated with later aggression. Moreover, adolescent girls were expected to report more perspective taking, sympathy, prosocial moral reasoning, and prosocial behaviors than adolescent boys, but less aggression than adolescent boys (Eisenberg, 1986; Gilligan, 1982).

2. Methods

Five hundred and five adolescents from Valencia, Spain initially completed the measures described below. Students voluntarily participated in two successive annual evaluations. However, 16 adolescents failed to complete both waves completely and thus were excluded from the main analyses. The final sample included 489 adolescents with an average age of 12.28 years ($SD = .48$; 232 boys) at Wave 1. One hundred and forty-eight (30%) were from public schools and 341 (70%) were from Catholic private schools.

SES was calculated using the Hollingshead classification scheme (adapted for use in Spain; Ibáñez, 2005). The scale ranges from 1 to 7 (1 = top level administrative and business executives; 3 = mid-level administrators including administrative secretaries, insurance agents; 5 = skilled manual laborers such as auto mechanics, carpenters; 7 = unskilled workers such as cleaning workers, porters). The mean SES of the sample was 3.25 ($SD = 1.20$).

2.1. Measures

Each of the measures was previously translated into Spanish by a moral developmental researcher from Spain who is fluent in Spanish and back translated by a bilingual researcher.

Empathic concern and perspective taking were assessed with the empathic concern (i.e., sympathy) and perspective taking subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983). Each scale has seven items, such as “The problems of the others worry me” (sympathy; $\alpha_s = .63$ & $.61$, for waves 1 and 2, respectively) and “When I must decide, I listen to different opinions” (perspective taking; $\alpha_s = .62$ & $.64$, waves 1 and 2, respectively) on a 5-point scale from 1 (*does not describe you well*) to 5 (*describes you very well*). Several studies demonstrate adequate psychometric properties of the IRI with European American and Spanish samples (Davis, 1983; Eisenberg et al., 1995; Mestre, Samper et al., 2002).

Prosocial moral reasoning was assessed with the Prosocial Reasoning Objective Measure (PROM; Carlo, Eisenberg, & Knight, 1992). The PROM contains stories designed to invoke a conflict between the actor's needs, wants, and desires and those of another (or others). The stories depict situations which participants had to weigh (a) helping a peer who is being teased versus incurring rejection from peers, (b) donate blood to a needy other at the cost of losing money and time at work and school, (c) go to the beach with friends or help a peer study to pass a math exam, (d) go to a party with friends or miss the party to help an injured boy, and (e) take food to the people of his or her flooded village at the cost of not having sufficient food for him or herself.

Adolescents indicated whether the story protagonist should or should not help and then indicated the importance of five different reasons (on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *greatly*) for making this decision. From less to more mature forms of moral reasoning (Eisenberg, 1986), each story included reasons reflecting hedonistic moral reasoning (e.g., “it depends whether Sandy can find other friends to do things with in school”), needs-oriented moral reasoning (e.g., “it depends whether the other girl is crying a lot”), approval-oriented moral reasoning (e.g., “it depends whether Sandy's classmates would approve of what she does”), stereotypic moral reasoning (e.g., “it depends whether Sandy thinks the older girl is mean or not”), and internalized moral reasoning (e.g., “it depends whether Sandy thinks that she is doing what she believes she should do”).

Because adolescents show greater preference for some over others, proportion scores were computed by dividing each scale score by the sum total of responses to all five scale scores (see Carlo et al., 1992 for details on scoring). Then, weights were applied to the proportion scores; hedonistic and needs oriented were weighted by 1, approval-oriented and stereotypic were weighted by 2, and internalized was weighted by 3 to reflect different developmental levels. The final composite score showed acceptable internal consistency for both waves ($\alpha_s = .73$ & $.76$, waves 1 and 2, respectively). The PROM has demonstrated acceptable reliability, construct, convergent, and discriminant validity in other studies with adolescents, including research with adolescents from Spain (Carlo, McGinley, Roesch, & Kaminski, 2008; Eisenberg et al., 1995; Mestre, Frias, et al., 2002).

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