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It's a two-way street: Automatic and controlled processes in children's emotional responses to moral transgressions



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ABSTRACT

This study examined children's automatic, spontaneous emotional reactions to everyday moral transgressions and their relations with self-reported emotions, which are more complex and infused with controlled cognition. We presented children ($N = 242$ 4-, 8-, and 12-year-olds) with six everyday moral transgression scenarios in an experimental setting, and both their spontaneous facial emotional reactions and self-reported emotions in the role of the transgressor were recorded. We found that across age self-reported guilt was positively associated with spontaneous fear, and self-reported anger was positively related to spontaneous sadness. In addition, we found a developmental increase in spontaneous sadness and decrease in spontaneous happiness. These results support the importance of automatic and controlled processes in evoking children's emotional responses to everyday moral transgressions. We conclude by providing potential explanations for how automatic and controlled processes function in children's everyday moral experiences and how these processes may change with age.

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Introduction

Children's emotional responses to moral transgressions are multifaceted and emerge from dynamic interactions between affective and cognitive mechanisms (Malti & Ongley, 2014). But, to what extent

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are these emotional responses driven by automatic versus controlled processes? And how do automatic and controlled emotional processes develop with age? Previous studies on the development of emotional responses to moral transgressions have mostly relied on self-reported measures, providing rich information on the development of children's *controlled* emotional responses to moral transgressions and their experiential dimension. However, less is known about the kinds of *automatic* emotional reactions (e.g., spontaneous happiness or fear) children experience in response to moral transgressions, which are often beyond one's awareness and/or deliberate control (Frijda, 1993). Here, we aimed to address these questions by examining children's automatic, spontaneous emotional reactions and self-reported emotions, which are more infused with controlled processes, to hypothetical everyday moral transgressions in an experimental setting using a sample of 4-, 8-, and 12-year-olds. Addressing this question is important because it may gauge the relative impact of the infusion of controlled mechanisms (e.g., moral reasoning, theory of mind, emotion recognition) in children's situational emotions in response to moral transgressions. Moreover, examining this question from a cross-sectional perspective may shed light on whether there is a developmental time window during which these controlled mechanisms exert their strongest influence on these emotions. We also sought to examine spontaneous and self-reported emotions across three morally relevant contexts: antisocial behavior, prosocial omission, and social exclusion.

Two forms of emotion

First, we observed spontaneous emotional reactions, also known as microexpressions, which are automatic emotional reactions that last a fraction of a second and can be observed in one's facial expressions (Ekman, 1992). Spontaneous emotional reactions are considered brief expressions of common emotions, which temporally precede intentional thought and depend only on automatic information processing mechanisms for their activation (Ekman, 1977). As such, they are affective in nature but also reflective of automatic cognition. Studies examining these spontaneous emotional reactions have supported the view that these brief reactions are automatic and beyond deliberate control (Dimberg, Thunberg, & Grunedal, 2002; Porter & ten Brinke, 2008). More specifically, the reactions appear in the absence of instruction despite instructions to inhibit such reactions and despite attempts to mask such reactions with other facial expressions (Dimberg, 1997; Dimberg et al., 2002). Here, we note that these spontaneous emotional reactions are distinct from macroexpressions, which typically last for a few seconds and are not necessarily reflective of automatic processing. Second, we assessed self-reported emotional responses to moral transgressions, which are generally more cognitively infused and controlled but are not necessarily a pure measure of controlled processes (Malti & Ongley, 2014; Scherer, 2009).

Next, to examine the roles of automatic and controlled emotional responses to moral transgressions, we explored whether automatic reactions were associated with self-reported emotions and, if so, whether there were specific kinds of self-reported emotions that showed stronger associations with spontaneous expressions. Strong relations between the two forms of emotion would suggest the dominance of automaticity because controlled processes would be associated with little or no change in emotional response. Conversely, no relations or only weak relations would suggest the centrality of controlled processes because controlled processes would be associated with substantial change in emotional response.

Given previous related work (e.g., Kochanska, Gross, Lin, & Nichols, 2002) linking dispositional fearfulness and observed guilt, we expected a relation between spontaneous fear and self-reported guilt. Our study offered to extend these findings by linking a more proximal, spontaneous fear response to self-reported moral guilt. We expected self-reported anger and sadness to be related to both spontaneous anger and sadness because events may elicit either emotion dependent on which elements children attend to (Levine, 1995). We also expected children's spontaneous expressions of happiness to be related to their self-reported happiness.

Lastly, we sought to examine age-related differences in spontaneous and self-reported emotions. We chose to study 4- and 8-year-olds because the period from early and middle childhood has revealed important changes in children's self-reported emotions in response to moral transgressions. Specifically, research has shown that 4-year-olds report more happiness in response to everyday

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