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Vocal tones influence young children's responses to prohibitions



Audun Dahl^{a,*}, Amy Q. Tran^b

^a Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA

^b Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

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ABSTRACT

Vocal reactions to child transgressions convey information about the nature of those transgressions. The current research investigated children's ability to make use of such vocal reactions. Study 1 investigated infants' compliance with a vocal prohibition telling them to stay away from a toy. Compared to younger infants, older infants showed greater compliance with prohibitions elicited by moral (interpersonal harm) transgressions but not with prohibitions elicited by pragmatic (inconvenience) transgressions. Study 2 investigated preschoolers' use of firm–stern vocalizations (associated with moral transgressions) and positive vocalizations (associated with pragmatic transgressions). Most children guessed that the firm–stern vocalizations were uttered in response to a moral transgression and the positive vocalizations were uttered in response to a pragmatic transgression. These two studies suggest that children use vocal tones, along with other experiences, to guide their compliance with and interpretation of prohibitions.

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Introduction

Emotional signals can convey information about rules to children (Dix, 1991; Weiner, Graham, Stern, & Lawson, 1982). Mothers of infants have reported and expressed different emotional reactions to *moral harm* violations (when infants are harming others) than to *pragmatic* violations (when infants

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: dahl@ucsc.edu (A. Dahl).

create inconvenience, e.g., by spilling food) (Dahl & Campos, 2013; Dahl, Sherlock, Campos, & Theunissen, 2014; see also Cole & Tan, 2015; Honig & Chung, 1989). Emotional signals may be especially important during early childhood, when children's linguistic understanding is limited (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Kochanska, 1994). Yet, emotional signals could only influence the development of rule conceptions insofar as children perceive and make use of these signals (Walle & Campos, 2012). If a child were oblivious to the differences in her mother's reactions to moral and pragmatic violations, the child could not use such differences to guide future behavior (e.g., in guessing whether she might get away with a violation) or to understand differences between rules (e.g., that hitting causes pain, whereas spilling causes inconvenience) (Dahl & Kim, 2014; Dunn & Munn, 1985; Smetana, 1989). The current research investigated how caregivers' vocal prohibitions of moral and pragmatic transgressions influence behavioral reactions during infancy (Study 1) and interpretations of social events during preschool age (Study 2).

Construction of moral and pragmatic rules through social interactions

By preschool age, children endorse and distinguish between a variety of rules. During the third year of life, they view moral prohibitions as more generalizable and less alterable than social conventions (e.g., dress codes, codes of politeness) (Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Smetana, Jambon, Conry-Murray, & Sturge-Apple, 2012). During the fourth year, children also provide different justifications for different judgments about violations, for instance, justifying judgments about moral violations with references to rights and welfare of individuals and judgments about pragmatic violations with references to inconvenience or material disorder (Dahl & Kim, 2014; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetana, 1985; Tisak & Turiel, 1984). At this age, children can also protest when others commit violations and react differently to different types of violations (Killen & Smetana, 1999; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012; Smetana, 1989; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011; for a review, see Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014).

Theorists have proposed that children develop an understanding of and concern with moral and other rules through differentiated social experiences (Killen & Smetana, 2015; Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 1983). For instance, children experience that physical harm is painful (most directly experienced when they themselves are the victims) and often elicits signs of distress or protest from the victims, pragmatic violations elicit references to disorder or property damage and often require someone to clean up, and conventional violations do not have immediate consequences and tend to elicit references to rules or authorities (Dahl & Campos, 2013; Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1989; Tisak, Nucci, & Jankowski, 1996).

The experiential origins of rule distinctions in the transition from infancy to preschool age have received little attention. Most research on children's experiences with rule violations has involved older children and, accordingly, focused on the linguistic content of reactions to violations (e.g., explicit references to harm or rules) (see Smetana, 2013). As noted, young children's limited linguistic abilities may prevent them from understanding parents' commands and explanations regarding violations (Fenson et al., 1994; Kaler & Kopp, 1990; Kochanska, 1994; Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Girnus-Brown, 1987). Moreover, there has been little research on how children use their social experiences with different types of prohibitions to guide their behavior (e.g., comply with the prohibition; Study 1) and interpretation of prohibitions (e.g., infer the nature of the event being prohibited; Study 2).

Others' emotional reactions to rule violations may be particularly important for the early development of children's reactions to prohibitions. As noted, some studies have found that mothers have different emotional reactions to infants' moral and pragmatic violations (Dahl & Campos, 2013; Dahl et al., 2014). Dahl and his colleagues (2014) analyzed mothers' responses both to naturally occurring violations in the family home and to videotaped infant violations. In the latter paradigm, mothers were shown short video clips of infants engaging in violations (e.g., hitting a sibling) and were asked to respond to these video clips using a standardized phrase ("No, don't do that"). Mothers were especially likely to respond to moral violations with intense *firm-stern* (anger-like) vocalizations, whereas positive tones of voice, termed *warm-comforting* (loving) or *playful-playing* (joyful), were more common in response to pragmatic violations. Situational differences in caregiver responses to infants'

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