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Brief Report

Biases in children's and adults' moral judgments

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ABSTRACT

Two experiments examined biases in children's (5/6- and 7/8-year-olds) and adults' moral judgments. Participants at all ages judged that it was worse to produce harm when harm occurred (a) through action rather than inaction (omission bias), (b) when physical contact with the victim was involved (physical contact principle), and (c) when the harm was produced as a direct means to an end rather than as an unintended but foreseeable side effect of the action (intention principle). The youngest participants, however, did not incorporate benefit when making judgments about situations in which harm to one individual resulted in benefit to five individuals. Older participants showed some preference for benefit resulting from action (commission) as opposed to inaction (omission). The findings are discussed in the context of the theory that moral judgments result, in part, from the operation of an inherent, intuitive moral faculty compared with the theory that moral judgments require development of necessary cognitive abilities.

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Introduction

Late preschool children can make relatively sophisticated moral judgments regarding the infliction of harm. They can, for example, take the intention of an actor into account when judging the severity of a harmful act (Helwig, Zelazo, & Wilson, 2001; Zelazo, Helwig, & Lau, 1996). They can also distinguish between harmful acts and acts that contravene social conventions but are not harmful (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1985). Nevertheless, moral judgments by adults vary as a function of several contextual features and the nature of action even when intentions and harm are held constant

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(Baron & Ritov, 2004; Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Hauser, Cushman, Young, Jin, & Mikhail, 2007; Hauser, Young, & Cushman, 2008; Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991/2005). It remains uncertain how children respond to more nuanced changes in context and action.

Much of the adult research has involved studying moral judgments made in the context of moral dilemmas. The classic trolley problem, for example, describes a character inflicting harm on one individual to prevent similar harm occurring to a larger number of individuals. Typically, participants are asked to rate the moral permissibility of the character's action after hearing two versions of the dilemma (Hauser et al., 2007). The first version involves throwing a switch to divert a trolley from killing five people to killing one person. The second version involves throwing a person in front of a trolley, and killing him, to block a trolley from killing five people. The two versions do not differ with respect to the intent of the described action or with respect to the degree of harm that would be produced by the action. Nonetheless, 85% of participants judged that it would be permissible to throw a switch, but only 12% of participants judged that it would be permissible to throw a person.

The results of these and other scenarios suggest that judgments about the moral permissibility of a harm-producing action align with three basic moral principles:

- (1) Harm caused by action is worse than harm caused by inaction (the omission bias) (Baron & Ritov, 2004; Spranca et al., 1991/2005).
- (2) Harm intended as the means to a goal is worse than foreseen harm produced as a side effect of the actions taken to achieve a goal (the intention principle or the principle of double effect) (Mikhail, 2002; Royzman & Baron, 2002).
- (3) Harm involving physical contact with the victim is worse than similar harm produced in the absence of physical contact (the physical contact principle).

Adults' moral judgments follow patterns consistent with these three principles and remain consistent regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or nationality (Hauser et al., 2007). Moreover, these principles influence adults' moral judgments even when they are unable to explain their judgments, a phenomenon referred to as moral dumbfounding (Cushman et al., 2006; Haidt, 2001). The apparent inflexibility of moral judgments and the apparent lack of cognitive influence or insight support a strong position that moral judgments reflect the activity of an inherent moral faculty that does not depend on conscious deliberative reflection but instead involves a set of unconscious intuitive processes that operate according to the principles listed above (Cushman et al., 2006).

An alternative position is that moral judgments develop alongside other forms of reasoning and are not exclusively based on intuitive and unreasoned responses to moral situations. Both Piaget (1932/1965) and Kohlberg (1969) argued for a stage-like developmental process of moral judgment that coincides with the development of reasoning-based cognition such as theory of mind, understanding of others' intentions, and reasoning about others' emotional state. For instance, children's ability to reason about an actor's intention to cause harm when determining the wrongness of an outcome develops at around 4 years of age along with other aspects of reasoning such as understanding false beliefs (Nunez & Harris, 1998; Piaget, 1932/1965). In addition, drawing the conclusion that an actor intended an action when the outcome is negative, but not when the outcome is positive, has been shown to exist in children as young as 4 years and exists regardless of the actor having foreknowledge about the bad outcome and regardless of whether the actor cares about the bad outcome (Pellizzoni, Siegal, & Surian, 2009). These findings suggest that younger children focus on the most salient feature of the scenario—the bad outcome—with reasoning about features of the actor's knowledge or state of mind developing later.

If some principles affect moral judgments through an intuitive nonconscious mechanism, then the kinds of age-related changes in conscious moral reasoning that have been the focus of much of the work on children's moral judgments should not affect the degree to which children of different ages adhere to the principles. Alternatively, if moral judgments rely on the ability to reason about harm and the means through which harm occurs, then age-related changes in conscious moral reasoning should affect how children of different ages adhere to the principles. The main aim of the current study was to test whether young children's moral judgments are consistent with the three basic moral principles outlined above.

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