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The influence of negligence, intention, and outcome on children's moral judgments

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ABSTRACT

Piaget (1932) and subsequent researchers have reported that young children's moral judgments are based more on the outcomes of actions than on the agents' intentions. The current study investigated whether negligence might also influence these judgments and explain children's apparent focus on outcome. Children (3–8 years of age) and adults ($N = 139$) rated accidental actions in which the valences of intention, negligence, and outcome were varied systematically. Participants of all ages were influenced primarily by intention, and well-intentioned actions were also evaluated according to negligence and outcome. Only two young children based their judgments solely on outcome. It is suggested that previous studies have underestimated children's use of intention because outcome and negligence have been confounded. Negative consequences are considered to be important because children assume that they are caused by negligence. The findings indicate that young children can show sophisticated understanding of the roles of intention and negligence in moral judgments.

Introduction

Most adults base their judgments of actions on agents' intentions rather than on the outcomes of the actions. For example, someone who deliberately causes slight damage to an object is typically considered to be more blameworthy than someone who has an accident that results in more serious

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damage; regardless of the amount of harm done, it is the intention—not the outcome—that is morally relevant.

Piaget (1932) recognized the fundamental role of intention in mature moral reasoning and investigated whether children use the same criteria as adults when evaluating actions. He asked children to compare the naughtiness of two boys: John, who opens the dining room door on his way to dinner, knocks over an unseen tray, and so breaks 15 cups; and Henry, who tries to get some jam from a high shelf when his mother is out and knocks over one cup. Piaget reported that young children usually judged John to be the naughtier and interpreted this as showing that, in contrast to adults' moral judgments, young children's moral judgments tend to be based on outcome rather than on intention. This focus on the "objective" factor of outcome, as opposed to the "subjective" factor of intention, was considered by Piaget to constitute a key feature of the "moral realism" of the child.

Piaget's method and his interpretation of this finding have been criticized on a number of grounds. In particular, Piaget's stories confound intention and outcome (positive intentions are matched with negative consequences and vice versa), and so it is not possible to determine their separate influences; perhaps children *can* use intention information, but in response to Piaget's stories they tend to focus on outcome because it is more salient.

Numerous researchers have sought to overcome these problems (see Karniol, 1978, and Keasey, 1978, for reviews). For example, to avoid confounding intention and outcome, the valences of these factors have been varied systematically (e.g., Buchanan & Thompson, 1973; Costanzo, Coie, Grumet, & Farnill, 1973; Farnill, 1974; Imamoğlu, 1975; Leon, 1980). All have shown that, from as early as 3 years of age (Nelson, 1980), children can and often do use intention information in their moral judgments. It is now clear that methodological problems led Piaget to underestimate young children's understanding and use of this information in their moral judgments.

However, Piaget's claim that young children's moral evaluations are primarily—as opposed to solely—influenced by outcome information has not been refuted; these and more recent researchers have reported that many young children's judgments are outcome-based. For example, Costanzo and colleagues (1973) and Farnill (1974) reported that 6-year-olds were able to take intention into account but still judged principally on the basis of outcome. Imamoğlu (1975) found that 5- to 11-year-olds were strongly influenced by outcome and that only by 7 years of age was there a small influence of intention. And in two of the very few studies that have been conducted in this area during the last 20 years, Helwig, Zelazo, and Wilson (2001) and Zelazo, Helwig, and Lau (1996) reported that judgments of the acceptability of actions are determined almost exclusively by whether the outcome is positive or negative. All indicate that intention does seem to be less important than outcome to young children. Therefore, the available evidence is largely consistent with Piaget's (1932) view that the "true morality of intention and of subjective responsibility" is not acquired until late childhood (p. 135). It appears that Piaget was correct to claim that children's morality is very different from adults', and that a key feature of moral development is the gradual realization that actions should be judged not according to their consequences but rather by whether they are well- or ill-intentioned.

Yet it is not clear why this is the case. Piaget himself acknowledged that young children are *aware* of intentions. Within the moral development literature, it has been shown repeatedly that, even when young children base their judgments on outcome, they understand agents' intentions (e.g., Imamoğlu, 1975; Walden, 1982; Yuill, 1984), and that they can use them in, for example, behavioral prediction (Zelazo et al., 1996). It is also puzzling because children's theory of mind is known to develop rapidly during the preschool years, and most 3-year-olds already show an impressive appreciation and understanding of others' mental states such as desires, beliefs, and intentions (e.g., Feinfield, Lee, Flavell, Green, & Flavell, 1999; Harris, de Rosnay, & Pons, 2005; Meltzoff, 1995; Wellman, 2002; Wellman & Phillips, 2001). But for some reason, young children have been unable or reluctant to use intention information when researchers have tested the bases of their moral judgments.

The aim of this study was to investigate whether this paradox might be explained by children's judgments being influenced not only by intention and outcome but also by a third factor: negligence, that is, carelessness or recklessness. Mature moral reasoners consider both intention (what the agent aimed to do) and negligence (the manner in which the agent did it) to be morally relevant (Darley & Zanna, 1982; Grueneich, 1982; Hart, 1968; Heider, 1958; Mackie, 1977). For example, if a driver