Preschoolers’ Reactions to Novel Moral and Conventional Violations
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Introduction

• Norms are standards for how to behave
  - Moral Norms: not arbitrary, directed at preserving welfare and rights of others
  - Conventional Norms: relatively arbitrary, coordinate social interactions (Killen & Smetana, 2015)

• Difference in arbitrariness has implications for how such norms may be constructed from experience
  - Learning moral norms may not require exposure to explicit prohibitions; exposure to welfare sufficient
  - Learning conventional norms may require exposure to explicit prohibitions (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012)

• Past studies haven’t explored children’s judgments of unfamiliar events as moral and conventional violations?

Results – Moral vs. Conventional

Children are more likely to construe novel pain-event as moral and novel sound-event as conventional

• Justifications: More likely to justify judgments about moral event by reference to welfare (56%) and judgments about conventional event by reference to authority or rules (49%), $D(1) = 22$, $p < .001$.

• Authority contingency: More likely to say that conventional transgression would be okay if teacher permitted it (57% vs. 18%), $D(1) = 12.10$, $p < .001$.

• Severity judgments: More negative evaluations of the moral violation (-1.88) than of conventional violation (-0.1), $F(1, 65) = 33.71$, $p < .001$.

• Smiling during live transgression (4-5 year-olds): More smiling during conventional transgression (42% of time vs. 21% of time), $D(1) = 4.78$, $p = .034$.

• Own action: Children more likely to want to transgress themselves in conventional (60%) than in moral (35%) scenario, $D(1) = 5.28$, $p = .022$.

Results – Observ. vs. No Observ.

Children beginning to understand that forming conventional norms requires observation of prohibitions, while forming moral norms does not

• Transgressor’s knowledge: More likely to justify judgments by stating that transgressor had seen video (prohibition) in conventional-observation condition than in other conditions, interaction: $D(1) = 7.36$, $p = .007$.

• Spontaneous protest: More protest/tattle in observation (54%) than no-observation (21%), and conventional (51%) than moral (24%), $D(1)=4.25$, $p<.05$.

• Sensitivity to transgressor’s knowledge in older children?

Research Questions

• How do experiential factors affect children’s construal of unfamiliar events as moral and conventional violations?
• When do children understand that observing prohibition is required for others to learn conventional norms?

Experiment

• Video Training
  - Children watch novel action causing pain to a puppet (moral) or a sound from box (conventional), both actions initially prohibited by an adult.
  - Video is watched either in presence or absence of another ‘transgressor’ puppet (Max)

• Live Transgression
  - Children see transgressor puppet perform same transgression (moral or conventional) as before

• Measures: interview questions, emotional reactions to transgressions, spontaneous protest/tattling (Vieht, Missema, & Tomasello, 2011), and child’s willingness to transgress

70 3- to 5-year-olds ($M = 4.1$ years; $SD = .60$; 38 girls)

Discussion

• Children rapidly construct moral and conventional evaluations from specific experiences and exhibit this across many dimensions: judgments of changeability, justifications, emotional reactions, and action

• Older children appear to be beginning to understand that acquisition of conventional norms requires observation of explicit prohibitions, whereas acquisition of moral norms does not.

• Collecting more data from older children will inform developmental trajectory

References