Preschoolers' Reactions to Novel Moral and Conventional Violations

Mahesh Srinivasan[1], Sara Al-Mughairy[1], Elizabeth Kaplan[1], Audun Dahl[2]
[1]University of California, Berkeley; [2]University of California, Santa Cruz

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 with observable consequences for others' welfare (Rottman & Keleman, 2012; Schmidt et al., 2012; Smetana, 1985)

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 (Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011), and child's willingness to transgress
- 70 3- to 5-year-olds (*M* =4.1 years; *SD* = .60; 38 girls)

Results – Moral vs. Conventional

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

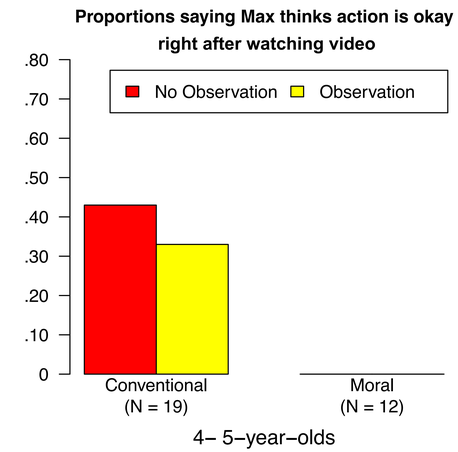
- **Justifications:** More likely to justify judgments about moral event by reference to welfare (56%) and judgments about conventional event by reference to authority or rules (49%), *D*s(1) > 22, *p*s < .001.
- **Authority contingency:** More likely to say that conventional transgression would be okay 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*s(1)>4.25, *p*s<.05.
- **Sensitivity to transgressor's knowledge in older children?**



Discussion

- Children rapidly construct moral and conventional evaluations from specific experiences and exhibit this across many dimensions: judgments of chageability, 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

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