Preschoolers’ and Adults’ Understanding of Novel Moral and Conventional Violations

Antonia F. Langenhoff*, Audun Dahlb and Mahesh Srinivasana

*University of California, Berkeley, bUniversity of California, Santa Cruz

af@berkeley.edu

Background

Different kinds of social norms thought to be learned from distinct experiences:1-3
- Moral norms against physical harm from observations of how actions affect others’ welfare
- Conventional norms from authority commands or by observing social consensus

Children distinguish familiar moral and conventional transgressions: Evidence from interview studies4 and studies using spontaneous protest.1

Research questions

- Can preschoolers rapidly apply moral versus conventional concepts to new situations?
- Do the different measures form a consistent picture?
- What role does the transgressor’s knowledge of the norm play for preschoolers’ evaluations?

Results Study 1

144 preschoolers (3, 4, 5 years); 48 adults

Why did you think it was not okay to press?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ADULTS</th>
<th>KIDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rules/others</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More references to welfare in moral conditions (p<.001).
More references to authority or rules in conventional conditions (p<.001).

Spontaneous protest during live transgression

Preschoolers: More protest in conventional conditions because they assumed violation stemmed from ignorance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>KIDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rules/others</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adulthood: More protest in moral conditions.

Severity: Adults and 5-year-olds liked moral transgressions less (p<.001; p=.05).

Own transgression: Do you want to press?

Conventional situations perceived as more context-sensitive, more arbitrary and less severe.

Results Study 2

80 adults

Does the puppet think it’s okay to press?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>After watching video</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>rules/others</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More likely to say puppet viewed action as ok in no observation (p<.001) and conventional (p<.05) conditions.

Evaluation

Preschoolers: More protest in conventional conditions.

Conclusion and further directions

- Adults and preschoolers rapidly construct distinct moral and conventional evaluations about novel actions across judgments, reasoning, and actions.
- Adults believe people don’t have to be taught that it is wrong to cause pain to others but do have to be taught arbitrary conventions.
- Data collection with preschoolers for Study 2 is ongoing. Findings promise to provide insight into how preschoolers attribute knowledge of new norms to others.

Selected references