Spring 2023

Exploring Third Party Moral Transgressions in Preschool-Age Children

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By

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Thesis submitted to Rollins College for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Psychology

Honors in the Major Field

April 24, 2023

Acknowledgements

Words cannot express my gratitude to my committee chair, Dr. Sharon Carnahan, for not only sparking my interest in this area of developmental research but also for her invaluable patience, support, and feedback throughout this process. Additionally, this endeavor would not have been possible without the expertise of my defense committee members and the generous research support from the Hume House Child Development and Student Research Center. I am also grateful to my peers Cora Burkley and Kyra Foley, for their great amount of assistance in conducting my study and for their moral support along the way. Both of these wonderful classmates inspire me and push me to be a better student. Their belief in me has kept my spirits and motivation high throughout this process.

Abstract

The present study investigates agent-neutral application of moral norms in preschool-age children and seeks to replicate a previous study that found children as young as 3 to actively intervene in third-party moral transgressions. The relationship between verbal ability and moral intervention is also explored. In an experimental research design, 3, 4, and 5-year-olds and two puppets each created their own drawing together, after which one confederate puppet left the room. The participants were randomly assigned to either a Harm condition (in which the absent puppet's drawing was destroyed by the remaining puppet) or a Control condition (in which an extra piece of paper in the room was destroyed by the remaining puppet). Children showed more moral interventions in the Harm condition than the Control condition. Verbal ability had no significant relationship with children's moral interventions. Findings were consistent with past literature, thus enhancing the external validity of the empirical relationship between the very young and possession of agent-neutral moral norms.

Introduction

Moral behavior in the very young is a closely followed topic by today's researchers. Around the young age of just two, children begin to understand the difference between right and wrong (Sloane et al., 2012). Yet at what point do children begin to develop a moral compass that guides their thoughts and actions, and helps them make sense of the good and bad traits they see in others? Considering theoretical assumptions regarding the egocentricity of the very young (Kesselring & Müller, 2011), does this sense of morality carry over into scenarios in which a third party is harmed as opposed to themselves? There is little research investigating if young children will decide to intervene in third-party moral transgressions and the specific cognitive abilities related to this decision.

Empathy and Prosocial Behavior in Young Children

Empathy can be defined as the awareness of other people's feelings and the ability to respond with care and concern for the other (Quann & Wien, 2006). While vast amounts of research and Piagetian theory suggest young children are essentially centered on themselves and struggle to grasp how others feel (Hendrick & Weissman, 2010), empathic acts have repeatedly been observed in young children before. In a cross-cultural study of 3–6-year-old American and Chinese children, children were able to differentiate between happy and unhappy reactions in other people, suggesting that the awareness of other people's feelings by young children from very different cultural backgrounds may be a basic human characteristic related to social adaptation (Borke, 1973).

The social evaluation of others is a phenomenon that has been observed in past research well before the age of 3. In a 2011 study, children as young as 18 months (about 1 and a half years) remarkably showed empathy-related behavioral responses to simulations of an adult's

pain and sadness (Bandstra et al., 2011). Furthermore, Hamlin and his colleagues provided the first empirical evidence that preverbal infants at just 6-10 months of age evaluate others on the basis of their helpful and unhelpful actions toward unknown third parties, and that they demonstrate a preference for individuals who behave pro-socially to an unhelpful or neutral individual (Hamlin et al., 2007). Prosocial behavior, or voluntary behavior intended to benefit another (Eisenberg, 1982) is a by-product of empathy. Indeed, empathy has been previously found to strongly predict prosocial behaviors in young children (Strayer & Roberts, 1996; Williams et al., 2014).

Language Skills and Moral Behavior

While there are little research findings specifically investigating verbal ability and moral behavior in young children, language skills have been previously linked to a number of social skills in past literautre. In a 2020 study, toddler's empathic responses were positively and significantly correlated with their language skills (Ornaghi et al., 2020). In a longitudinal study of very young children assessed at 14, 20, 24, and 36 months, higher language skills predicted higher concern for others and lower disregard for others even after controlling for general cognitive ability, suggesting that the relations between language skills and concern/disregard for others begin in early development (Rhee et al., 2012). In an earlier longitudinal study, early language abilities in 3-year-olds predicted theory of mind (the ability to understand and reason about other people's mental states) 7 months later (Astington & Jenkins, 1999). The relationship between language and social skills can be further demonstrated by assessing the effect of language impairment on social skills. A 1996 study showed that elementary school children with specific language impairments had poorer social skills and fewer peer relationships than their peers of the same age (Fujiki et al., 1996).

Children's Responses to Third-Party Moral Violations

A few controlled experiments conducted to date have examined children's moral behavior in situations in which a third party was harmed (Vaish et al., 2011; Hardecker et al., 2016). Major features underlying these two previous studies include investigating children's spontaneous responses (i.e., types of protest) toward moral (harm-related) and conventional (coordination-related) norm violations in a third-party context. Vaish et al. (2011) described findings of a study in which 32 3-year-olds were randomly assigned to either a harm condition, in which children witnessed an absent victim's belongings destroyed in front of them by an actor, or a control condition, in which an extra inanimate object was destroyed in front of them by an actor in a third-party's absence. Results indicated that children protested the actor's actions, tattled on the actor, and behaved pro-socially towards the victim more in the Harm condition than the Control condition. Hardecker et al. (2016) found that 3-year-olds intervened in norm violations both as victims of transgressions and as unaffected third parties alike. Thus, there is empirical evidence suggesting that children as young as 3 years old can actively intervene in third-party moral transgressions and take an agent-neutral stance when it comes to social norms.

Conclusion/Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to replicate and extend the third-party moral transgression study by Vaish et al. (2011) that demonstrated evidence of agent-neutral application of moral norms for a European sample of 32 3-year olds. We decided to replicate this study in a geographically diverse location using a sample of 3-5 year olds in hopes of enhancing the external validity of its findings. By replicating this study, we seek to further contribute to scientific inquiry surrounding young children and moral behavior as well as further investigate the empirically demonstrated relationship between children's social skills and language skills.

Thus, this study is designed to assess two hypotheses. First, that children will show more moral interventions (protest, tattling, prosocial behavior) in a condition when an actor's actions are harmful, rather than in a condition when an actor's actions are not harmful but simply negative. Second, that children with higher verbal ability skills will intervene more across conditions than those with lower verbal ability skills.

Method

Participants

Participants were 20 3–5-year-olds (8 boys, 12 girls; age range = 38 – 65 months; $M =$ 53.9; $SD =$ 8.0). Of the participants, 10 children were assigned to the control condition and 10 to the harm condition. After gaining parental consent, children were recruited from the Hume House Child Development and Student Research Center at a small liberal arts college in Florida. All children were tested by the same two female experimenters (E1 and E2). Both E1 and E2 were assigned to either a confederate puppet (Ms. Purple) or recipient (Ms. Red or Ms. Blue) puppet to be each child's interaction partners.

Materials and Setting

Testing took place on the floor of an observation room adjacent to a preschool classroom. A puzzle was given to the participants as a warm-up game. During test trials, blank sheets of paper and colored markers were provided to E1, E2, and the children. E1 and E2 followed a procedure script.

Measures

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), Fourth Edition, is a receptive vocabulary assessment tool for individuals of all ages that was involved in carrying out the present study (Dunn & Dunn, 2007). It is designed to measure competence of the English language. The tool

consists of 228 items equally distributed across 19 item-sets. The test is split into two Forms, A

& B, which are equally matched in both item content and difficulty. During the test, a test

administrator shows the test taker a series of pages of full color images. Each page features four

pictures, and the test administrator will say a word that describes one of the four pictures. The

test taker then is asked to identify which one of the four pictures is being described. Depending

on the age of the test taker, an answer may be identified by pointing, selecting the image's

number or by selecting from a multiple-choice menu. For instance, a page in the PPVT might

show illustrations of a dog, horse, cat, and lion. The test administrator will ask the test taker to

identify which picture shows a horse. The PPVT demonstrates a high internal consistency for

both Form A and B ($\alpha = .94$, $\alpha = .95$).

Procedure

The PPVT was administered within one month of the start of the study by a trained

examiner. PPVT scores were collected on scoresheets and were then transferred to an online

database where each test was computed individually.

To warm up the children, a puzzle activity was given first to familiarize them with

situations in which they could intervene. Each puppet made a mistake (wrongly placed a piece)

during the puzzle activity. If the child did not intervene within a few seconds, the other puppet

vocally expressed that there was a mistake (wrongly placed a piece) during this warm-up

activity. This warm-up activity lasted about 2 minutes. The confederate puppet (E1) brought out

4 blank sheets of paper and 3 markers, and handed one of each to the child, the other puppet, and

herself. She placed the extra blank piece of paper to the side. Then the child and the puppets each

drew a picture of whatever they liked.

During the drawing activity, each puppet happily showed off her drawing to the child, and each puppet took an active interest in the child's drawing. The drawings took about 2 minutes. When they were finished, the recipient puppet excused herself to leave the room, leaving her artwork behind, and the test phase began according to condition. In the Harm condition, the confederate said in a neutral but firm manner: "I don't like Ms. Red/Blue's drawing. I'm going to destroy it now." In the Control condition, she said in the same manner, "I don't like this extra piece of paper. I'm going to destroy it now."

In both conditions, the confederate puppet moved towards the recipient puppet's drawing (the target object) and repeated, "Yup, I'm going to destroy it now." Picking up the object, she repeated a third time "I'm going to destroy it now," then destroyed either the paper with the recipient puppet's artwork on it (Harm condition) or the blank, extra sheet of paper (Control condition). In both conditions, she tossed the destroyed pieces into the trash bin. The actor's intentions were repeated, and her actions were presented in this stepwise manner to provide the children with ample occasions to protest. After the object was destroyed, the recipient re-entered, greeted everyone, and investigated the trash bin. She then said "Hmm" to indicate she had noticed something in there. She looked at the remaining objects on the carpet, said "Hmm" again neutrally, and looked back into the bin.

In the Harm condition, the recipient puppet then asked in a clearly distressed tone "Where'd my drawing go?" This question was repeated at least two times if the child initially showed no signs of tattling. If the child mentioned something about the drawing getting destroyed, a further prompt was given to the child (e.g., "Who destroyed it?") to give the child another opportunity to tattle. She then waited about 6 seconds, then said "Oh well" despondently and returned to her seat.

In the Control condition, the recipient puppet asked, "Where'd the extra sheet of paper go?" in the same tone as the Harm condition. Once again, the question was repeated twice more if the child did not initially intervene. If the child mentioned something about the extra piece of paper getting destroyed, a further prompt was given to the child (e.g., "Who destroyed it?") to give them another opportunity to tattle. After about 6 seconds, she then said "Oh well" in the same despondent tone as the Harm condition and returned to her seat. Children's protests were coded until the recipient's re-entry.

The second test phase began when the recipient was reseated. The recipient was quiet for about 20 seconds upon reseating, but then became happy again. Tattling and prosocial behavior were coded from the recipient's re-entry until she became happy again. In the Harm condition, this showed that the recipient really cared about her objects and was upset that they were destroyed. However, this was also done in the Control condition to keep the conditions as similar as possible. After the second test phase in the Harm condition, the confederate apologized to the recipient and drew her a new picture if the child displayed no prosocial behavior to resolve the moral transgression.

Coding and Reliability

All sessions (both Control and Harm conditions) were coded from videotape. Children's responses during the test phases were assigned the following codes: 'normative protest,' 'imperative protest,' 'hints of protest,' and 'no protest.' Each protest was coded as a binary (yes/no) variable (see Table 1 for details). Reliability on a random 15% of the sample was excellent (κ =1 for forms of protest). Children's tattling and prosocial behavior were also coded as binary (yes/no) variables (see Table 2). Reliability on a random 15% of the sample was also perfect (κ= 1 for tattling and prosocial behavior, respectively).

Results

Protest

To test whether there was a statistical difference in the overall level of protest between the Harm condition and the Control condition, all three forms of protest (imperative, normative, and hints) were pooled together into one protest code (total protest) and means were compared between conditions using an independent samples test. As predicted, significantly more children protested in the Harm condition ($M = 1.3$, $SD = 1.3$) than in the Control condition ($M = .3$, $SD = .48$), $t(18) = 2.4$, $p = .03$. To assess the strength of the relationship between total protest and verbal ability, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. There was no significant relationship found between verbal fluency (PPVT scores) and total protest $r(18) = -.11$, $p < .05$. When this for the relationship was examined only in the Harm condition, verbal fluency and total protest remained negatively correlated $r(8) = -.20$, $p < .05$.

In a third analysis, forms of protest were compared individually between conditions to assess the relationship between condition and specific form of protest (See Figure 1). A chi-square test of independence revealed no significant difference between the Harm and the Control condition in normative protesting $X^2 (1, N = 20) = 1.3$, $p = .26$, although more children in the Harm Condition (3 of 10) protested normatively than in the Control Condition (1 of 10). Similarly, even though more children protested imperatively in the Harm Condition (5 of 10) than in the Control Condition (2 of 10) there was no significant statistical difference between the Harm and the Control condition $X^2 (1, N = 20) = 2.0$, $p = .16$. However, children in the Harm condition (5 of 10) showed significantly more hints of protest than children in the Control condition (0 of 10), $X^2 (1, N = 20) = 6.7$, $p = .01$. Thus, children showed greater verbal protest

when witnessing a puppet destroying another puppet's belongings than when witnessing a physically similar but harmless situation.

Tattling and Prosocial Behavior

A chi-square test of independence showed there was no significant association between condition and level of tattling X^2 (1, N = 20) = .95, p = .33, despite more children tattling in the Harm condition (4 of 10) than the Control condition (2 of 10). Children's prosocial behavior also revealed an insignificant result X^2 (1, N = 20) = 2.2, p = .14, even though more children behaved pro-socially in the Harm condition (2 of 10) than the Control condition (0 of 10).

Discussion

In this study, it was hypothesized that young children would show more moral interventions in a situation where they witnessed a moral transgression against a third-party victim than in a physically similar situation where harm was inflicted to an inanimate object but not to someone else. After children of 3, 4, and 5 years old witnessed one puppet destroying another puppet's belonging in her absence, we found that the children actively intervened on behalf of the absent victim by protesting against the transgressions during the act. Upon the victim's return, children subsequently tattled on the offender and behaved pro-socially towards the victim. In a Control condition where an offender behaved similarly but whose actions were not harmful to another person, protesting, tattling, and prosocial behavior were either reduced or were entirely absent. Therefore, children did not intervene as much towards actions that were generally negative in nature, but rather to actions that posed a direct threat to someone else.

Our significant findings of increased hints of protest and higher protest overall in a morally challenging situation allude to the 3, 4, and 5-year old's abilities to take an agent-neutral stance and apply their moral norms in action. These results support the findings of the study we

sought to replicate, in which 3-year-olds actively intervened in third-party moral transgressions in a nearly identical manner (Vaish et al., 2011). Our results are also consistent with past literature that challenges the presumably egocentric nature of very young by reporting empathy-related behavioral responses to adult sadness (Borke, 1973; Bandstra et al., 2011).

Although levels of tattling and prosocial behavior following the destruction of an object were not significantly higher in the Harm condition, when this object belonged to someone else, the trends of our results in both tattling and prosocial behavior were in the predicted direction- as children in the Harm condition displayed a higher frequency of these specific behaviors than in the Control condition. This is likely due to the limitation of a small sample size of 20 participants, causing our statistical tests to lack power. Future research could address this limitation by conducting a similar study with a much larger sample size.

It was also hypothesized that children with higher verbal ability would actively intervene more across conditions. Potential reasons why our results defied our expectations could be because performance on the PPVT is dependent on vocabulary knowledge but does not require retrieval or expressive skills for responding. While receptive language skills were important in understanding the context of the moral transgression involved in our study, expressive skills and retrieval skills are also important factors involved in a child's ability to tattle, protest, and display prosocial behavior. Our findings contrast with existing theories linking language skills and empathic responses (Ornaghi et al., 2020; Rhee et al., 2012). Future research may be needed to investigate the relationship between language skills and moral intervention in order to reconcile these differences, perhaps using an instrument that accounts for both retrieval and expressive skills (such as the EVT-3).

All in all, our study demonstrated that children as young as 3, 4, and 5 can actively intervene in third-party moral transgressions. The current study suggests that by preschool age, children already possess sophisticated, agent-neutral moral understanding. These implications contrast with a large body of Piagetian evidence speaking to the difficulties young children have with understanding how others around them feel (Hendrick & Weissman, 2010). Our findings offer practical insights to the early development of moral values that guide children's thoughts and behaviors and help them distinguish right from wrong, which will eventually mold them into responsible and reliable adults.

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Table 1

Coding Taxonomy for Protest Before Recipient Re-Entry

| Category	Coding	Behaviors
Normative protest	Yes/No	Child intervenes in a normative way, using normative vocabulary, reference to the rule ('No you're not supposed to do that' or 'You may not do that'), or reference to the recipient's emotional state ('She will be sad then')
Imperative protest	Yes/No	Child expresses an imperative, such as a command to stop the action, without use of normative elements ('No! Don't tear it!') or expresses simple disagreement with the actor's action ('No!')
Hints of protest	Yes/No	Child protests but clear attribution to the other two categories is not possible; includes using a protesting tone of voice in exclamations ('Hey!'), questions ('Why are you doing that?'), or statements
No protest	Yes/No	Child shows no protest

Table 2

Coding Taxonomy for Tattling and Prosocial Behavior After Recipient Return

Category	Coding	Behaviors
Tattling	Yes/No	Child tells recipient puppet with a complaining or disapproving tone of voice that the confederate puppet destroyed the target object ('She destroyed it); includes explicit naming and/or pointing to the confederate puppet
Prosocial Behavior	Yes/No	Child comforts (e.g., strokes), makes suggestions ('You can draw a new flower' or 'You can draw my Lion further'), helps (e.g., offers to draw another picture), or shares with recipient puppet (e.g., gives up his/her own drawing)

Figure 1

Forms of Protest Across Conditions
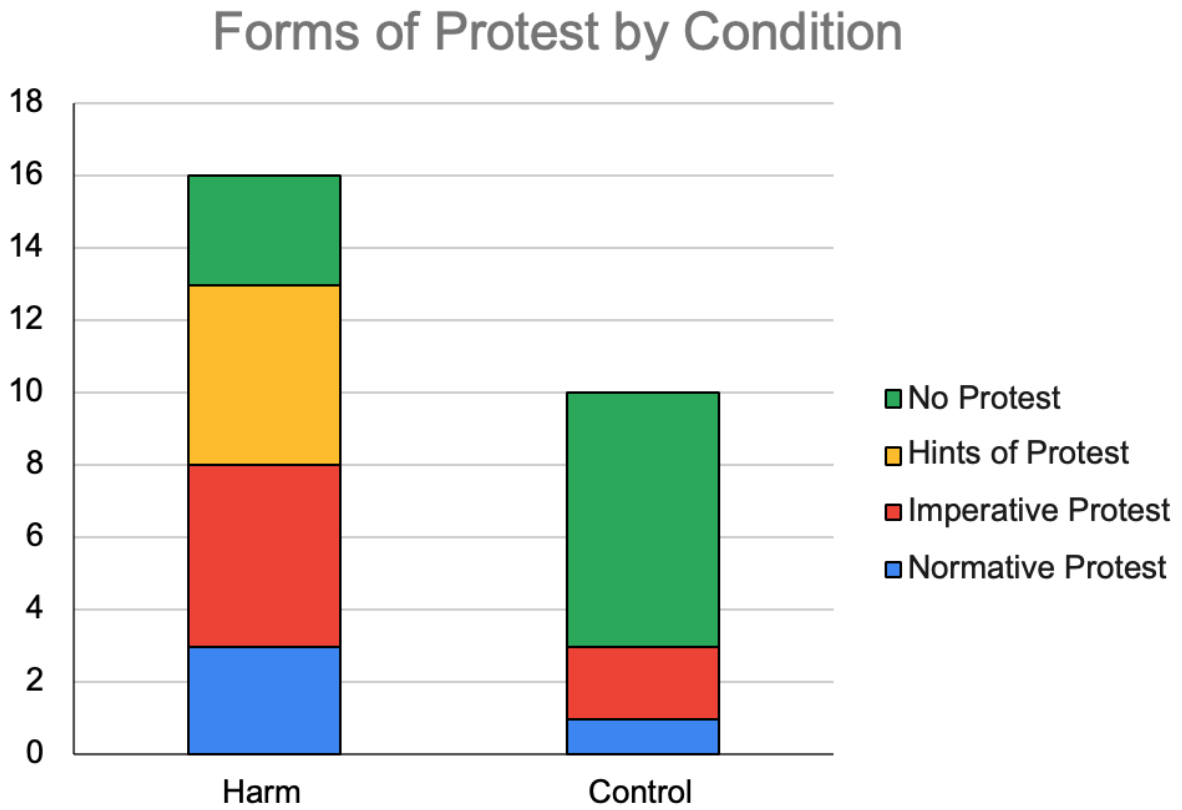
Note. Number of children in each condition who showed each form of protest as their highest form of protest.