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On Balance: Preschool Children's Judgements of Sociomoral, Environmental, and Social Conventional Transgressions

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On Balance: Preschool Children's Judgments of Sociomoral, Environmental, and Social Conventional Transgressions

An Undergraduate Thesis Project

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Abstract:

The current study investigates how preschool children judge behaviors that harm the environment as compared to moral transgressions, social-conventional transgressions, and personal choices. Forty-five preschool children (45% male) attending urban and rural preschool programs in Nebraska participated. An assessment tool was designed for this study and was comprised of a moveable balance scale on a game board. Pictures depicting different types of transgressions were attached to each end of the balance scale with Velcro and children judged which transgression was worse, or if both were equally bad. The results indicate that overall, children tended to judge socio-moral transgressions as worse than social-conventional transgressions or transgressions against the environment or animals.

Introduction and Literature Review

Environmental concern has been a growing phenomenon across all levels of school-aged children (Ernst, 2009; Louv, 2005; Wright & Wright, 2010; as cited in Hussar & Horvath, 2011) but there is little data showing how preschool children judge behaviors that harm the environment. The current study is designed to address this gap by investigating preschool children's judgments of the severity of transgressions involving harm to people, harm to nature, and social conventional violations. This is an important issue to examine because it can provide a better understanding of how children think about harm to people and nature, and social conventional violations. It also offers an understanding of whether their reasoning about harm to people and the environment follows a similar pattern. These insights can help educators and parents support children's understanding about how their actions impact people and the environment.

Social Domain Theory (Turiel, 2008) has been used to understand moral reasoning and its relationship to the development and connections between three domains: the moral domain, the social-conventional domain, and the psychological or personal choice domain. According to social domain theory, issues within the moral domain have distinct characteristics that separate them from social-conventional issues and personal choices. The transgressions in the moral domain can be considered across various contexts, are independent of rules or authority, and generally deal with concepts of welfare, rights, and justice (Kahn, 2001; Severson & Kahn, 2010; Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2008; Villarroel, 2013). Hussar and Horvath (2011) showed that judgments concerning environmentally harmful actions fall between the moral and social-conventional domains.

Several studies have found that children can differentiate between actions that cause harm to others (moral transgressions) and those that disrupt social order (social-conventional transgressions) (Nucci, 1981; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1983, 1985; Turiel, 1983, 2002; as cited in Hussar & Horvath, 2011). Moral transgressions are characterized as acts that harm others' welfare either physically or psychologically, and concern issues of fairness and justice independent of rules or authority. Social-conventional transgressions violate the social order and are only wrong if there are rules or if authorities say so. Moral rules are generally not subject to alterations or their context, whereas conventional rules are variable depending on context (Hussar & Horvath, 2011; Smetana et al., 2012).

Hussar and Horvath (2011) sought to discover how children judge behaviors that harm the environment as compared to moral transgressions, social-conventional transgressions, and personal choices. In addition to determining if children tend to perceive environmentally harmful actions similarly to moral transgressions, social-conventional transgressions, or personal choices, Hussar and Horvath (2011) investigated the reasoning behind children's categorization of environmentally harmful actions within the moral, social-conventional or personal domain. Their methods included 12 story cards depicting the four different types of actions (moral transgressions, social- conventional transgressions, personal choices, and environmentally harmful choices) with three different scenes per domain. Each child, aged 6 to 10 years old, was asked to judge the scene as 'okay,' 'a little bad,' or 'very bad.' The three different scenes within each of the four domains were averaged to determine the mean score for each domain. Environmental transgressions were more okay than moral transgressions; but when the environmental

transgressions were compared to social-conventional transgressions, the social-conventional transgressions were more okay. Therefore if the domains were ranked from least bad to most bad it would go in the sequence of social-conventional transgressions, environmental transgressions, and finally the moral transgressions as the worst.

Research indicates that preschool-age children differentiate between moral and conventional domains (Smetana, 2006). Preschoolers also can differentiate between moral, environmental, and social conventional domains. Elementary-aged children judge moral transgressions as worse than environmental transgressions, and both are judged worse than social conventional transgressions (Hussar & Horvath, 2011). When 2.5 to 4 year olds were presented with 8 familiar moral and conventional transgressions their understandings of moral transgressions as wrong independent of authority grew over time (Smetana et al., 2012). The measures used in Smetana el al. (2012) were repeated 6 months and 1 year after the original measure with the same group of children. The 8 familiar moral and conventional transgressions were shown in a random order, and for each item the children were asked a series of questions that assessed different aspects. The questions are as follows:

(1) "Is it OK or not OK for the child to ___?" assessing *permissibility* (not examined here); (2) "What if the teacher didn't see him / her ___? Would it be OK to ___ then?" assessing *authority independence*; (3) "What if no one ever told him / her it was wrong to ___. Would it be OK to ___ then?" assessing *rule independence*; (4) "What if all the teachers got together and said that kids could ___. Would it be ok then?" assessing *rule non-alterability*; (5) "Now let's think about a different situation. Let's say the child was at home or another school. Would it be OK or not

OK to ___ at home?'' assessing *generalizability*; and (6) ''Should [the transgressor] get in trouble?'' and if yes, ''A little bit or a lot,'' assessing *deserved punishment.* Young children's moral judgments of authority independence were the only significant change across time. Children in their preschool years have a rudimentary understanding of morality and are able to differentiate morality from social conventions (Smetana et al., 2012).

The age and school year of the child can increase the incidence of non-anthropocentric reasoning and younger children can generate a higher biocentric reasoning compared to studies using different methodology (Almeida et al., 2013). There is a disconnection between how young children come to develop their environmental judgments before they can fully understand what constitutes a living being (Villarroel, 2013). The link between young children's environmental judgment and the understanding of living being has been studied (Villarroel, 2013). There was a significant number of children who were conscious that transgressions that affect welfare were more serious than conventions and social rules, and damage to plants more serious than breaking rules. But overall the children, especially the 4-5 year olds compared to the 5-7 year olds, showed a lack of understanding of what constitutes a living being. Ecological dilemmas, however, are often responded to with the use of anthropocentric reasoning (Almeida et al., 2013).

The way that situations are posed to children could have an effect on their biocentric or anthropocentric reasoning (Almeida et al., 2013). However previous studies (Turiel, 2008) have also shown that children's distinctions between morality and social convention apply to both within the context of an interview about hypothetical situations and within the contexts of actual social interactions in school settings. The first grade, third

grade, fifth grade, and seventh grade children generally made the same judgments about

actual events as they did about the hypothetical events within the domains of moral, social-

conventions, and social interactions (Turiel, 2008).

Ergazaki and Andriotou (2009) performed an exploratory case study, which

investigated in detail how young children may reason about the human actions that affect

the environment. The study highlighted the ways that young children understand human

intervention through the use of drawings and semi-structured interviews. Their objective

was to determine if preschoolers are able to come up with ecological interpretations of

human actions upon plants or animals. When the preschoolers were able to verbalize

meaningful justifications, they would deal with what they could perceive directly. Young

children are potentially capable of interpreting human interventions within a forest

ecosystem in ecological terms (Ergazaki & Andriotou, 2009).

Kahn and colleagues (Severson & Kahn, 2010) used social domain theory to

determine whether children and young adults consider harm to nature within the moral

domain. Severson and Kahn (2010) sought to determine if farm worker children

understand the potential for harm from pesticides, if they make moral judgments and

reasoning about pesticide exposure and use, and if they have a biocentric orientation. The

children, second and fifth graders, judged that it was not right to be exposed to pesticides.

They held these beliefs even though they belonged to a community with the convention of

pesticide exposure; additionally they generalized the statements to a different cultural

context, and justified their statements based on an appeal to human welfare. The

combination of these factors and the social-domain criteria (Turiel 1983, 1998, 2002; as

cited in Severson & Kahn, 2010), farm worker children use moral reasoning when making judgments about pesticide exposure (Severson & Kahn, 2010).

In addition to considering harm to nature a matter of obligatory morality, Kahn and others have examined reasoning associated with children and adults' judgments of environmental moral transgressions. Biocentric reasoning is defined as judgments linked to the environment or nature itself is worthy of some kind of moral status regardless of its relevance to humans (Alemida et al., 2013; Hussar & Horvath, 2013; Villarroel, 2013). Anthropocentric reasoning (sometimes referred to as homocentric reasoning) judges that humans are the privileged group, and concerns for the environment are based on human-centered considerations and the value of environmental utility for humans (Waxman & Medin, 2007; Hussar & Horvath, 2011; Almeida et al., 2013).

Schultz (2001) found that, in regards to adults, an individual develops concerns based on their perceptive degree of interconnection between themselves and others, or between themselves and nature. There is little information about preschool children's judgments, and whether they are more biocentric or anthropocentric. Villarroel (2013) found that a significant number of children between the ages of 4 and 6 years old judge that actions that affect others' welfare or the environment are more harmful than conventions and social rules.

The purpose of this study is to examine preschool children's sociomoral and environmental moral reasoning. Three aims were accomplished: 1. Design and validate a measurement tool; 2. Determine whether preschool-aged children judge harm to nature worse than harm to people, the same, or not as bad as harm to people; and 3. Examine children's reasoning for their judgments. This study examined children's judgments of the

severity of transgressions involving harm to people, harm to nature, and social conventional violations. Moreover, within the sociomoral and environmental domains we examined whether children differentiated severity of transgressions.

Methods

Children were recruited from early childhood education programs, with letters sent home to parents with information about the purpose and procedures for the study, as well as consent forms. Once parental consent forms were obtained, the children were interviewed individually. The interviews took place in a separate room located near their classroom in the early childhood education program they attend. Children completed several measures, and only the newly designed "balance scale" measure and results are reported here. Parents and teachers completed surveys, and only parent-reported demographic information is reported in this paper.

Sample

Forty-five children (45% male) attending urban and rural preschool programs in Nebraska participated. A majority were White (57.8%), 13% Asian, 4.4% Hispanic, and 4.4% multi-ethnic or other. Over half of mothers had earned a Master's degree (55.6%), 15. % had a Bachelor's degree, 2.2% had an associate's or other 2-year degree, 17.0 % had completed some college, and 4.4 % had completed high school. One third of the sample (33.3%) reported family income between $50-$70,000 per year, with 31.1% between $70-$90,000, 22.2% between $30-50,000, and 13.2% below $30,000 per year.

Measure

We designed a "balance scale" or "teeter totter" mechanism to give children a way to compare transgressions with a familiar tool. This measure was adapted from Hussar and Horvath (2011). In Hussar and Horvath's (2011) measure each transgression was judged individually on a continuum of 'ok', 'a little bad,' and 'very bad,' scoring 0, 1, and 2 respectively. A mean average of the judgments within a domain (moral, social-conventional, personal, and environmental) was calculated to determine the overall score for the four domains. Hussar and Horvath (2011) studied slightly older, elementary-aged children, so some of the stories in their measure would not make sense to preschoolers; therefore, new stories were constructed in consultation with preschool teachers. In addition, because of the younger age range of the preschoolers they were not asked to rate on a continuum, but rather to compare two situations involving different transgressions.

A moveable balance scale was constructed on a game board and pictures could be attached to each end with Velcro. Children were interviewed individually, and first asked if they knew what a balance scale or teeter-totter was. Almost all children were familiar with one or the other. The investigator provided a brief explanation for those who were unfamiliar. An equal sign (=) was placed at the fulcrum, and children were asked if they understood "equal." Most children indicated that they understood equal or "same," and if not, the investigator explained the concept.

Next, children were given a practice item using fruit: "Here is an apple and an orange (placing one at each end of the beam). " Do you like them both the same, OR do you like apples better than oranges, OR do you like oranges better than apples?" After children

demonstrated understanding of the format, the investigator asked the 10 study questions with accompanying pictures. After children provided each judgment, the investigator asked "why?" and the responses were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Analysis of Results

The results of the 10 questions can be seen in Table 1. Each question presented two transgressions representing two of the three domains of interest: sociomoral, environmental moral, or social conventional. The table shows the percentages of responses for each pair of transgressions. Overall, children tended to judge socio-moral transgressions as worse than social-conventional transgressions or transgressions against the environment or animals. Transgressions against the environment or animals were judged as worse than social-conventional transgressions. There were a few exceptions, when social-conventional transgressions were deemed worse than environmental transgressions.

There were also a few questions, in which both were sociomoral transgressions, but one involved physical aggression (hitting a friend) and the other involved a social transgression (laughing at a friend or excluding a friend). The first question asked the children to judge whether not sharing was worse than eating with fingers, both violations of social conventions. The results indicated that eating with fingers was considered worse than not sharing but the margin was within 5 points, so further investigation is needed before a significant result can be determined. The second questions compared laughing at a friend with hitting a friend. There was a significant consensus that hitting a friend, a moral transgression, was worse than laughing at a friend, a social convention violation. An

additional set of questions that compared a social convention, laughing at a friend, with a moral violation, not including a friend, resulted in another significant agreement that the moral violation was worse. Removing the influence of a friendship from the social conventional violation of laughing at a friend and replacing it with forgetting to say please when comparing to the moral transgression of not including a friend in the fourth question resulted in the moral transgression being worse yet again.

The fifth question and the tenth both were concerning the environmental domain and the socio-moral domain. The fifth question compared hitting a friend with stepping on a cricket, and the tenth compared breaking a branch off a tree with hitting a friend. In the fifth question, the moral transgression, hitting a friend, was worse; but in tenth question, the environmental transgression, breaking a branch off of a tree, was worse. These variables will need further investigation, and perhaps the reasons the children give for why they judged one way or another will give more insight to their reasoning.

There were two situations where the preschool children deemed the transgressions as equally bad- harm to nature and harm to a friend, and harm to a plant and harm to an animal. The first instance of this was with situation number six, comparing hitting a dog with hitting a friend, an environmental transgression and a moral transgression respectively. When comparing not watering a plant with not giving water to a dog in question number eight both were within the environmental domain.

The seventh and ninth questions' results are interesting and may need to be reassessed or investigated further using the children's reasoning why they judged in particular way. The seventh question compared hitting a dog, an environmental transgression, with eating with fingers; and the majority of children judged that eating with

fingers, a social convention violation was worse. The ninth situation involved the environmental transgression breaking a branch off a tree versus a social convention transgression of forgetting to say please. The percentage was within five percent, but the social convention violation of forgetting to say please was deemed as a worse transgression.

There were a few situations where the results were within a few percentage points, and require further investigation. The next step in the process involves coding the reasons why the preschoolers judged the transgression the way they did.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine preschool children's sociomoral and environmental moral reasoning. The balance scale measurement tool was designed and data were collected to begin validating it. The results indicate that overall, children tended to judge socio-moral transgressions as worse than social-conventional transgressions or transgressions against the environment or animals. The next step in this research project is to examine the children's reasoning for their judgments.

Future use of this balance scale measurement tool could benefit from the reduction of negative language (i.e. 'not including a friend' or 'not giving water'). Furthermore, the children were asked 'why' they made their particular judgment, and their responses were recorded and will need to be coded in the future.

In conclusion, the results of this study tended to follow previous studies (Hussar & Horvath, 2011) in that violations within the environmental domain fell between the moral domain and the social-conventional domain. There were a few exceptions which lead to the

questions as to why that occurred, which can be evaluated in future research with the children's responses to the question 'why?' following their judgment. This initial research indicates that preschool children are beginning to make moral judgments about the environment but are also potentially susceptible to the way the scenarios are presented (Turiel, 2008).

Citations

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Table 1		
Which is Worse?		
Same	Not Sharing	**Eating with fingers**
24.4%	26.3%	**29.3%**
Same	Laughing at friend	**Hitting a friend**
19.5%	22.0%	**58.5%**
Same	Laughing at friend	**Not including a friend**
22.0%	17.1%	**61.0%**
Same	**Not including a friend**	Forget to say "please"
22.0%	**53.7%**	24.4%
Same	**Hitting a friend**	Stepping on cricket
22.0%	**41.5%**	34.1%
Same	Hitting a dog	Hitting a friend
46.3%	19.5%	31.7%
Same	Hitting a dog	Eating with fingers
17.1%	31.7%	51.2%
Same	Not watering plant	Not giving water to dog
43.9%	22.0%	31.7%
Same	Breaking branch off tree	**Forget to say "please"**
19.5%	36.6%	**41.5%**
Same	**Breaking branch off tree**	Hitting a friend
22.0%	**39.0%**	36.6%