SPRING 2026

SOCIAL & MORAL COGNITION LAB

Columbia University

WHAT DO WE STUDY?

We study how children and adults understand their social world. We are currently investigating how people in different age groups...

- make moral decisions
- reason about and interact with people who are different from them
- reason about supernatural entities (e.g., God)
- perceive the criminal justice system and more!

WHERE TO FIND US?

We are currently recruiting participants both in person and virtually via Zoom!

To sign-up for Zoom studies, please visit our website. Click here!
OR
To sign up directly through our Calendly, click here!

CHILDREN AND ADULTS' EVALUATIONS ABOUT OTHERS' CAPACITY FOR REDEMPTION

Main Question:
How do children and adults think about redemption?

Researchers shared twelve vignettes where different characters transgressed against another character to participants.

Participants learned about characters who put in a lot of effort or a little effort to fix the transgression. Some characters' efforts were successful while others' efforts were not successful. We asked participants how they thought about each of these transgressors and whether they expected each person to transgress again.

Findings/Next Steps:
Adult participants have found characters who exert high effort to have a higher capacity for redemption than those who exerted low effort to right a wrong.

We are still analyzing the child data for the study. Stay tuned for updates on child responses in a future newsletter.

How do incarcerated fathers and their children think about morality?

Main Question

Approximately 1 in 14 children in the United States experience parental incarceration (Muentner et al., 2023).

The current study asks how incarceration impacts incarcerated fathers and their children's moral beliefs.

We are coding interviews conducted with incarcerated fathers and their children in order to learn more about fathers' and children's moral judgments. For example, we are interested in whether children believe their incarcerated parent can change, or if they believe that their parent is, at their core, a good person.

Findings/Next Steps

Data analysis for this study is currently ongoing, and findings for this study are not available at this time. We hope to share more about this work in our next newsletter in Spring 2027.

How does context affect children's moral judgments?

Main Question

In a previous study, 4- to 9-year-olds said that mean behaviors were less bad when the circumstances made the choice “hard” (e.g. taking food from someone else’s lunchbox without asking, specifically when you don't have any lunch to eat) as compared to when the circumstances made the choice “easy” (e.g. taking food from someone else’s lunchbox without asking when you have a lunch of your own).

We wanted to know under what circumstances children consider “hard” contexts. For instance, did they think about their peers’ backgrounds (e.g., kids who come from families with a lot of money versus kids who come from families with very little money)?

We read children a few stories about characters who make “hard” choices to do a “bad” behavior. These characters had different backgrounds (e.g., some come from families with a lot of money and some come from families with very little money). After hearing these stories, children were asked if they think that these characters are (1) good or bad and (2) nice or mean.

Findings/Next Steps

We found that 7- to 9-year-old children had more positive views of poor characters who did a bad behavior than rich characters who did a bad behavior. They also have more positive views of characters who did bad behaviors in wealth-related situations.

WHAT DO ADULTS THINK ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ENGAGE IN RISKY BEHAVIORS?

Main Question:

Going through our days, we constantly impose risks of harm on others. When we drive down the highway, we create risks of accidents. Those risks go up when we glance down at our phones to change the song, exceed the speed limit, or try to weave through traffic. Many of these risks are inevitable, and we do not judge others negatively for imposing them on others. However, when people act in ways that increase risks above the normal level or when the risks they impose develop into actual harms, we start to think that they deserve punishment for their actions. We investigated what factors drive judgments about how much to punish people who have imposed risks on others.

Findings:

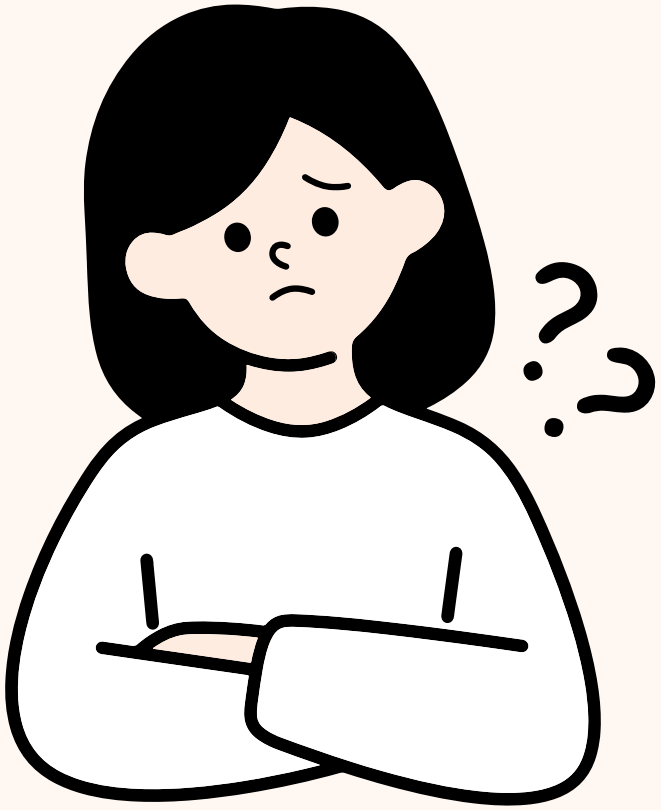
Adults think that people who impose risks on others deserve more punishment, whether or not those risks actually result in harms. These judgments are based, in part, on an inference that people who impose risks on others have a problem with their values -- they care about their own interests too much and the interests of others not enough. This effect primarily arises from the risks people are aware of and choose to disregard, rather than the actual level of risk in the world.

WHEN ARE ADULTS WILLING TO IMPOSE RISKS OF HARM ON OTHERS IN ORDER TO OBTAIN PERSONAL BENEFITS?

Main Question:
Following up on the previous study, we also investigated when adults are willing to impose risks on others to obtain personal gains for themselves. Using an economic game paradigm, we gave adult participants the option to gain valuable tokens, if they were willing to impose risks that they or other participants in the study would suffer a risk of losing tokens in the future.

Findings:
Adults imposed more risk on others than they were willing to impose on themselves. They were also more risk averse in gains and more risk seeking in losses when making decisions about themselves than when making decisions about the harms to impose on others.

HOW DO ADULTS THINK ABOUT THE MENTAL STATES OF PEOPLE WHO CAUSE HARMS?

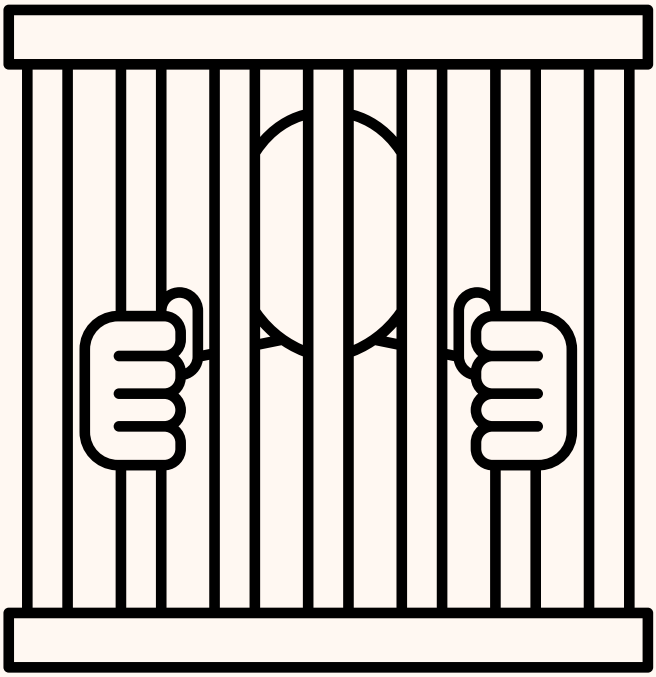


Main Question:
When we are deciding whether and how much to punish someone who has caused harm to another, their mental state often makes a difference. The same is true in the law. In United States criminal law, whether someone caused a harm "knowingly" or "recklessly" can make a big difference to guilt and punishment.

In the law, a person acts "knowingly" when they are practically certain that a harm will occur, while they act "recklessly" when they think there is a substantial probability of harm. In a series of studies, we investigated whether people's understanding of what it means to act "knowingly" differs depending on whether they are informed that, in this context, "knowingly" does not include "recklessly."

Findings:
Adults are less likely to say that a person caused a harm "knowingly" when they learn about the contract with "recklessly" than when they do not. This finding suggests that people can understand this mental state in multiple different ways -- that is, the word "knowingly" has multiple different possible meanings -- which contextual information, like contrasting terms, help people distinguish.

HOW DO ADULTS' PUNISHMENT DECISIONS VARY BASED ON THE NUMBER OF PRIOR TRANSGRESSIONS?



Main Question:

When making punishment judgments about others, the legal system often takes into account whether and how they have been punished for similar transgressions before. We investigated whether adults show the same pattern in their punishment judgments -- changing the types of punishment they impose on someone who has transgressed based on the number of times that person has transgressed and what type of punishments they received in the past.

Findings:

When adult participants learn that a person has continued to transgress after receiving a particular type of punishment in the past, they choose to impose a different punishment type for a new transgression. This finding suggests that adults are using punishment to try to change behavior for the better and adjust their strategy when a given type of punishment appears ineffective.

HOW DO ADULTS WHOSE PARENTS WERE INCARCERATED WHEN THEY WERE CHILDREN THINK ABOUT THEIR PARENTS AND ABOUT PRISON?

Main Question:

Prior research from this lab has shown that children whose parents are incarcerated feel just as positively towards their parents as children whose parents are not incarcerated, and both groups of children have similar views about what causes people to go to prison and the degree to which committing a crime reflects an unchangeable feature of the person. A new project is investigating the judgments of adults who experienced the incarceration of a parent when they were children. This study also asks participants to reflect in writing on their relationship with the parent who was incarcerated, so they can tell us in their own words how this experience affected their lives.

Next Steps:
This study is in the beginning stages. Stay tuned for updates in a future newsletter.

DO KIDS AND ADULTS JUDGE PEOPLE WHO DO BAD THINGS DIFFERENTLY BASED ON WHAT GROUPS THEY BELONG TO?

Main Question:

We already know that people tend to think differently about someone who does something wrong depending on whether that person is part of their group or not. But does it matter what kind of group it is, like a religious group or a non-religious group, and if the person is friends with the people in their group? One idea is that as kids get older they begin to judge people differently based on what social groups they are part of, including religious groups compared to non-religious groups. In another study, we are interested in knowing how kids and adults think about religious and non-religious people who do bad things and why they think that way. Here we are also looking if believing that your ideas and judgements can be wrong influences how you think about other people being good or bad and if they will be able to do better in the future.

Next Steps:
This study is in the beginning stages. Stay tuned for updates in a future newsletter.

Thank You!

We would like to send a big thank you to all of the amazing families that participate in our research!

We would also like to thank our community partners, Brooklyn Children's Museum, Liberty Science Center, and Clearview Productions, for allowing us to use their space!

Lastly, we are grateful to the National Science Foundation for their support.