

# The Social & Moral Cognition Lab

AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



## What do we study?

- How children and adults understand their social world.
- How children and adults perceive others.
- How children and adults think about right and wrong.

## What's been happening in our lab?

Since we opened our doors in 2016, we've completed multiple studies and continued to expand our lab. In this newsletter, you'll find updates about our studies and findings from the past year.

## Where to find us?

We've continued recruiting families to participate in our lab at Columbia University. We also conduct studies at the Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM), and this summer you can also find us in parks around the city!



Want to participate with us at the Brooklyn Children's Museum?

Every Thursday from 2-6pm

Every Saturday from 1-5pm

## How do children and adults think about sharing?

We continued to investigate the connection between sharing and moral essentialism -- the notion that a person's morality stems from an internal, biological "essence" that doesn't change over time. Participants typically reported more essentialism about good rather than bad characteristics; for example, they thought that a good person would stay good in the future but a bad person might change and become better. These perceptions didn't seem to be linked with participants' generosity, but a follow-up study did show that adults' generosity depended on how the recipients of the generosity were described. For instance, adults gave more resources to a bad person when they were told that person was bad because of social factors and could change over time, and they gave fewer resources to a bad person when they were told that person was bad because of something in their brain and would never change. This information didn't seem to play a role in how many resources children shared with others.

## How do children think about themselves and others?

In this study, we were interested in the experiences of children with incarcerated parents. We wondered how the experience of parental incarceration might shape the way children think about themselves and others. To test this, we asked children with incarcerated parents and children who did not know any incarcerated individuals how thinking about their parent made them feel. We also asked children how they thought about moral characteristics. Children in both groups reported more essentialism about moral goodness than about moral badness, similar to the findings from the study above. Furthermore, all children reported more positive rather than negative emotions about their parents. This study is ongoing, and we look forward to reporting more information about it in our next newsletter!

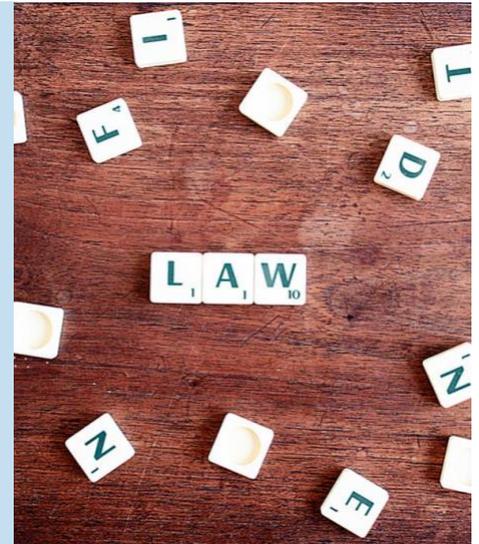


## How Do People Make Moral Judgments for Ingroup and Outgroup Members?

We explored how adults judge others' moral behaviors. Past research has shown that information about norms influence behavior. For example, if we know that it is normal to behave in a certain way, we are more likely to behave that way too. However, the effects of norms are weaker when people receive normative information about social groups to which they do not identify (e.g. information about what's normal for people of a different racial group, or about people who go to a different school). In this study, we explored how beliefs about normative behavior for people in our own versus other social groups impacts our judgments of other people. Our preliminary findings suggest that adults are less judgmental about behaviors for people in their own social groups. We are now following up with an experimental study to continue to learn more.

## How do children understand the legal system?

In another project, we examined how different explanations for incarceration shape children's perceptions of incarcerated people. To get a better understanding of this question, we told children about three people who were incarcerated for different reasons. Children held more favorable attitudes toward people who were incarcerated because they didn't have very much money while growing up than toward people who were incarcerated because they had done something wrong or because they were inherently bad people. We are currently following up on this work by investigating how other explanations may shape children's perceptions of incarcerated people.



## How do children perceive others' ability to change?

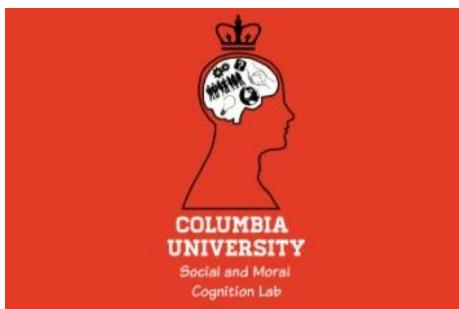
In one study, we were interested in whether children and adults think that people can change after they've done something wrong. To test this, participants heard stories about people who were returning to their neighborhoods after spending some time in prison. The characters in the stories underwent different kinds of transformations while incarcerated—some took art classes, some took ethics classes, and some took classes about religion. After hearing the stories, participants answered questions about how much they thought the person changed in prison, whether what the person did while in prison helped him to become a better person, and whether the person will end up back in prison one day. We found that generally, participants thought that religion and ethics classes helped people who were incarcerated become better. In another related study, we investigated how children perceive individuals' positive and negative moral characteristics to change as a function of going to prison. Children thought that people would improve as a result of going to prison. They perceived people's negative characteristics as becoming more positive; however, children reported that people's positive characteristics were stable over time. We are currently following up on this line of work by investigating why children believe incarceration might make people better.



We would like to thank all of the families that have participated in our research so far!

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If you would like to have your child participate in our research:

Call us: (212) 853 - 1407

Email us: [columbiasamclub@gmail.com](mailto:columbiasamclub@gmail.com)

Visit our website: [www.columbiasamclub.weebly.com](http://www.columbiasamclub.weebly.com)



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