

MAY 2020

SOCIAL AND MORAL COGNITION LAB

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



WHAT DO WE STUDY?

1. How children and adults understand their social world.
2. How children and adults perceive others.
3. 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:

Due to COVID-19, we've paused recruiting families in-person at our lab at Columbia University and the Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM), but we hope to be back soon! Until then, for your safety and ours, we will continue recruiting participants virtually via Zoom. To sign-up for zoom studies, you can copy and paste this link:

<https://columbiasamclab.weebly.com/for-parents.html> or email us directly at **columbiasamclab@gmail.com**

We hope to see you all in person again soon. Stay safe!

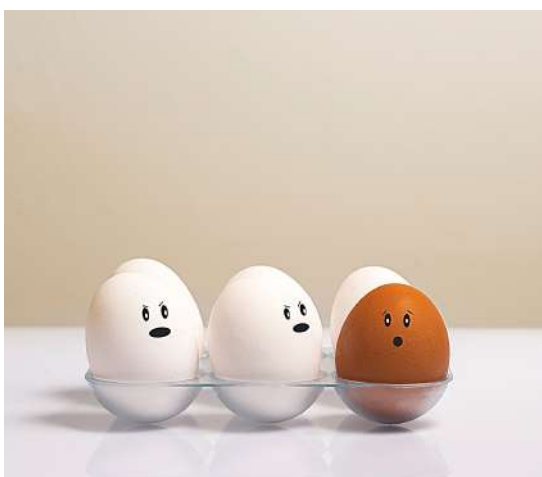




How do children reason about God's moral knowledge?

Across two studies, we investigated how children think about God's moral knowledge. In the first study, we were interested in how 4- to 5 and 6- to 7-year-old children think about God's knowledge of their own and others' transgressions (e.g., telling a lie). We found that older children attribute more knowledge to God than younger children do, and this was explained by Theory of Mind (the ability to distinguish one mind from another). Younger children, however, attributed more knowledge to God for others' transgressions than their own. We conducted a second study to see if wishful thinking might explain the findings for younger participants. They may not want God to know about the bad things that they do, so therefore, perceive that God lacks this knowledge. To test this, we asked 4- to 5-year-olds if God knows about the same transgressions from the first study (e.g., telling a lie) and additionally if God knows about prosocial behaviors (e.g., telling the truth). The results suggest that wishful thinking may play a role in how younger children attribute knowledge to God. Like in Study 1, we found that younger children attributed more knowledge to God for others' transgressions more so than their own. However, younger children attributed more knowledge to God for their own prosocial behaviors than that of others. Using a sharing task, we also found that the more knowledge of prosocial behaviors they attributed to God, the more they shared stickers with another anonymous child. These findings suggest that the ways in which children attribute knowledge to others changes around the time they start kindergarten

How do children think about people who are different from themselves?



In a current line of work, we are investigating how children think about people who have moved from one country to another. To do so, we tell children about characters who have moved from an unknown country to the United States, but each character varies in whether they are able or want to do the things that people in America do. Children then answer social preference questions for each character (e.g., how much do you like this person), followed by a sharing task. The study is ongoing, and we look forward to reporting more information in our next newsletter.

What are the psychological roots of inequality?

Inequality is at the forefront of several ongoing national conversations, including those about criminal justice reform. In this program of research, we are examining how social psychological processes (e.g., moral judgment) underlie and perpetuate incarceration-based inequality. In one project, we are examining why children of incarcerated parents experience social stigma. Initial evidence suggests that children of incarcerated parents may experience social hardship (in part) because their peers view them as lacking moral knowledge. With age, peers become more certain that children with, versus without, an incarcerated parent are less knowledgeable about morality. Further, peers share fewer resources with children of incarcerated parents than children whose parents are not incarcerated. These findings suggest that children make different moral judgments about their peers who have incarcerated parents than about peers whose parents are not incarcerated. This line of work is ongoing, and we will share more in our next newsletter.



How do people's beliefs about God relate to motivation?

In this line of work, we investigated how adults' beliefs about God influence their motivational preferences. Two characteristics that people often attribute to God are omnipotence (i.e., possessing all control) and omniscience (i.e., possessing all truth). Similarly, two of the most fundamental human motives are the desire to feel effective in the domain of control (i.e., to successfully manage what happens in one's life) and truth (i.e., to successfully establish what is real and right in one's life). We found that individuals' personal motivational preferences for control (vs. truth) reflected their beliefs about God's attributes. So, for instance, people who reported believing that omnipotence (vs. omniscience) is more central to who God is tended to report that control (vs. truth) is more important to them personally. In a follow-up study, we found that asking participants to think about God's omnipotence or omniscience produced motivational preferences that reflected this attribute. These findings suggest that beliefs about God can play a causal role in determining individuals' motivation.

How do people talk about the justice system?



Our lab recently published a paper examining how people discuss why others come in contact with the criminal justice system. Here, children and adults were more likely to explain incarceration by referencing individual-level factors, such as people's internal moral characteristics and behaviors, than they were to explain incarceration by referencing societal-level factors (e.g., racism). Interestingly, this pattern of results also emerged among children whose parents were incarcerated. In other words, children of incarcerated parents, like children whose parents were not incarcerated, were unlikely to view contact with the justice system as being driven by societal-level factors. These findings suggest that people may have a tendency to underestimate the extent to which societal factors drive justice system involvement.

How do children and adults think about punishment for different types of harm?

In one ongoing project, we are investigating how children and adults attribute moral judgments to different agents. To do so, we present our participants with short stories (e.g., building a sandcastle) in which a character causes harm to another character, either intentionally or accidentally. Then, participants answer questions about whether different agents believe that the transgressor should be punished, and if so, how much. The data collection with children is ongoing, and we will be reporting the results in our next newsletter.



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

Call us: (212) 853 - 1407

Email us: columbiasamclab@gmail.com

Visit our website:

www.columbiasamclab.weebly.com

 www.facebook.com/columbiasamclab

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

We are grateful to Columbia University, the John Templeton Foundation, and the Russell Sage Foundation for their support.

