

SPRING 2021

SOCIAL & 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.



WHERE TO FIND US?

Due to COVID-19, we've paused in-person participation at Columbia University.



We are currently recruiting participants virtually via Zoom!

To sign-up for Zoom studies, please visit our website:
<https://columbiasamclab.weebly.com/for-parents.html>

Or sign up directly through our Calendly:
<https://calendly.com/snc2123/research-games-with-the-social-moral-cognition-lab>

For more information email us at columbiasamclab@gmail.com.

HOW DO CHILDREN AND ADULTS RESPOND TO OTHERS' ACTIONS?

Main Question:

In this study, we are interested in whether children and adults want to learn more about the reason why someone did a prosocial (eg. nice) action, or whether they are more curious about the causes behind mean behavior.

We read children a set of five scenarios in which...

(1) a character does or says something nice to a person

(2) a different character does or says something mean to another person

We then ask children to answer questions about which character they would like to...



(1) learn more about on their own

(2) hear more about from the researcher

(3) ask about why they behaved the way they did

Findings/Next Steps:

This line of research is 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 2022.

We are currently conducting this research game with child participants (ages 4-to-9 years old) over Zoom.

To find out how to sign your child up see **Page 1** of our newsletter!



HOW DO CHILDREN & ADULTS THINK ABOUT CURIOSITY?



Main Question:

In this line of work, we investigate how children and adults think about people who are curious about different types of topics (eg. religion, science).

We present all participants with short stories of actors who are...

- (1) curious (e.g., someone who wants to know how magnets work)
- (2) knowledgeable (e.g., someone who already understands how magnets work)
- (3) not curious (e.g., someone who is not interested in learning how magnets work)

Then participants answer questions where they evaluate the morality of these different actors.

Findings & Next Steps:

We recently conducted this study with adult participants. Findings for this study are still developing, and are not available at this time. We hope to share more in our next newsletter in Spring 2022.

We are currently playing this research game with kids (ages 5-to-6-year-old and 7-to-8-year-old) over Zoom.

To find out how to sign your child up see **Page 1** of our newsletter!



HOW DO CHILDREN AND ADULTS THINK ABOUT DIFFERENT TYPES OF HARM?

Main Question:

Previous research indicates that adults commonly judge intentional harms (eg. ruining a person's food on purpose) to be worse than accidental harms (eg. dropping a bucket on someone else's sandcastle by mistake). In a recent study, we explored how children think about these types of harms by asking 4-to-7-year-olds, as well as adults, to judge the severity of accidental and intentional harms.

Participants also answered questions about how another person and God would judge these types of harm.

Findings & Next Steps:

Even the youngest children (4- to 5-year-olds) took the transgressor's intention into account when making a moral evaluation: They thought that people who did something wrong on purpose should "get into more



trouble" than people who did something wrong accidentally. Older children and adults shared this view.

Participants in all age groups also expected other people and God to judge intentional harms more harshly than accidental

harms. However, we also found differences in children's and adults' responses.

Adults, but not children, expected God to judge both types of harms less harshly than they themselves or another person would. In addition, older children and adults attributed more spiritual and religious reactions (e.g., forgiving the transgressor) to God than younger children did.



These findings suggest that even young children care about why someone did something wrong when making moral judgments. Young children also view other people and God as relatively similar to themselves, whereas older participants draw stronger distinctions between God and people.

HOW DO KIDS THINK ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAVE MOVED BETWEEN COUNTRIES?



Main Question:

In one recent line of work, we investigated how children think about people who have moved from one country to another.

To do so, we told children about a character who moved from an unknown country to the United States and asked children whether the character was able to and, separately, wanted to adopt the customs of their new country.

We also investigated the social consequences of different messages about immigrants' abilities and desires to change.

Findings/Next Steps:

Children readily agreed that immigrants could--and wanted to--adopt the customs of their country. Children in our study felt and behaved more positively toward people who had the ability and desire to change than toward those who did not.

Importantly, messages about individuals' desires played a greater role in shaping attitudes and behavior than did messages about individuals' abilities. These findings suggest that messages about others' ability and desire to change have the power to shape children's opinions.



HOW DOES PARENTAL INCARCERATION SHAPE CHILDREN'S VIEWS OF OTHERS?

Main Question:

Millions of children in the United States experience parental incarceration, but it is unclear how this experience might shape children's views of others.

In one recently published paper, we asked children of incarcerated parents and non-incarcerated parents to report the extent that they feel positive and, separately, negative emotions when thinking about their parent and best friend.

Findings/Next Steps:

Children used many more positive rather than negative descriptions when talking about their parents and best friends. Children also reported experiencing positive feelings when thinking about their parents and best friends. These findings occurred regardless of whether or not children's parents were incarcerated, suggesting that relationships between children and their incarcerated parents include a great deal of positivity.



HOW DO CHILDREN THINK ABOUT DIFFERENT FAMILIES?



Main Question:

For this study, we are interested in how children view others growing up in different families.

In this study, children ages 5-to-8-years-old hear stories about different types of families:

- (1) a child of an incarcerated mother
- (2) a child of a mother on a business trip
- (3) a child of a mother who lives at home

Children are asked to answer questions about what beliefs these different characters have.

Findings/Next Steps:

This study is ongoing, findings are not available for this study at this time.

We hope to share more in our next newsletter in Spring 2022.

We are currently conducting this research game with child participants (ages 5-to-8 years old) over Zoom.

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HOW DO ADULTS THINK ABOUT DIFFERENT TYPES OF MINDS?



Main Question:

Past research has found that many people believe that humans and God assign punishment. Yet, it is unclear whether people think that both humans and God punish for the same reasons.

We explored this question by asking adults to rate the extent to which they thought different

agents (God, a human named Joan) punished in order to harm the wrongdoer or prevent the wrongdoer from transgressing (ie. doing something wrong) in the future.

Findings/Next Steps:

Overall, participants viewed God as less harm motivated than Joan. In follow-up work, participants reported that God

viewed humans' moral character more positively than did Joan.

In turn, this difference led participants to view God as less harm motivated than Joan.

These findings suggest that adults sometimes view other humans and God as having different types of morally-relevant motivations.



HOW DO ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GOD RELATE TO BEHAVIOR?



Main Question:

In a new line of research, we explore the link between adults' perception of God after transgressing and their tendency to make up for this transgression.

Findings/Next Steps:

Our initial results indicate that participants who identify as Christian perceive God as more punitive after remembering a time when they did something wrong than after remembering a time when they were kind to someone. This result suggests that perceptions of God can shift depending on people's own actions.

In a follow-up study, we plan to explore whether perceiving God as more punitive will increase participants' tendency to act kind toward others.



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

We are also grateful to Columbia University and the John Templeton Foundation for their support.