Columbia University

Social and Moral Cognition Lab

NEWSLETTER | SPRING 2024

WHAT DO WE STUDY?

We are interested in how children and adults navigate their social world, including how they...

- make moral decisions
- navigate moral ambiguities
- think about right and wrong
- 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!

You can also find us at a museum!

Brooklyn Children's Museum: Fridays and every other Saturday, 2pm - 5pm

Liberty Science Center: select Thursdays

When does context change how children think about their peers' behaviors?

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).

Now, we want to know under what circumstances children consider "hard" contexts. For instance, do 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 will read children a few stories about characters who make "hard" choices to do a "bad" behavior. These characters will have 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 will be asked if they think that these characters are (1) good or bad and (2) nice or mean.

Findings/Next Steps

This line of research is ongoing and findings for this study are not available at this time. We are currently signing families up for this research game with child participants (ages 7-to-9 years old) over Zoom or in person.

Do children think rule-breaking is learned or inherited?

Main Question

In an earlier study, we found that 5- to 8-year-olds were more likely than adults to think a character in a story grew up and went to jail because their biological mother had been in jail. This finding suggests that, early in life, children may think that wrongdoing has a biological basis, but people's attitudes shift and in adulthood they're more likely to think that wrongdoing is learned.

Now, in the current study, we're using different stories and different questions to see whether children still report that rule-breaking is biologically inherited rather than learned.

In this activity, children hear stories about different characters and their families. In some stories, the main character is in jail. In other stories, one of their parents may have spent time in jail before the character was born. After hearing these stories, children will be asked questions about why the character acted the way they did in the story. Was it because of something inside of them (their genes, biology) or because of how they were raised?

Findings

This line of research is ongoing and findings for this study are not available at this time. We are currently signing families up for this research game with child participants (ages 5-to-6 years old) online - no appointment needed!

What are the long-term effects of having an incarcerated parent during childhood?

Main Question

This lab's earlier research has shown that children whose parents are incarcerated resemble other children in multiple ways: They think about their parents positively and want to spend time with them; they attribute incarceration primarily to internal and behavioral factors; and they think that criminal behavior arises from unchanging internal characteristics to a similar degree.

In ongoing research, we investigate whether or not these similarities persist into adulthood. In this research, we also ask people who experienced the incarceration of a parent during childhood to describe, in their own words, how this experience has shaped their lives and their relationships with their parent.

Findings

As this research is ongoing, we have not made any findings yet. Check back in on next year's newsletter for an update!

How do children try to find out about others' actions?

Main Question

In a previous study, we learned that older children wanted to know more about why kids did mean things to others than why they did nice things. We found that one possible reason for this is that as children get older, they care more about why people do things overall and specifically about why people do bad things. But there could also be other processes at work!

One potential process could be that bad things are really different from what children expect to happen, and that this leads them to want to know more about why they happen.

Even when children are surprised by what a character does, it was not helpful in predicting whether a child wanted to know more about why a person would do those things.

Findings

We found that even when children are surprised by what a character does, whether it is a good thing or a bad thing, it was not helpful in predicting whether a child wanted to know more about why a person would do those things. This helps us to understand that the way people think about why people do good and bad things is different from how they think about other surprising things in their environments!

Findings

We found that our Black and White participants found it more wrong when a person harmed someone who was different from them when compared to someone similar, even when the intent was ambiguous. But if it was someone who was similar to them, harming someone dissimilar to them, White participants prioritized what a person meant to do more. In the future, we plan on expanding this work with kids!

How do children and adults think about harms when they happen to people that are similar to them?

Often when someone does something that happens to hurt us or people that are similar to us, we can never be really sure if they meant to do that because of the way that we are different. Their intent will always be ambiguous. We were interested in looking at if the way we judge situations where this intent was unclear is the same when the person being hurt is similar to us or dissimilar to us when thinking about race.

How do adults think about redemption and restitution?

When someone causes a harm, one way they can seek redemption is by making restitution to their victim -- that is, returning the world as much as possible to the way it was before the harm. For example, if someone steals a phone, is caught, and suffers social repercussions, they often must replace the stolen item in order to regain their lost reputation, trust, and esteem.

This connection between restitution and redemption creates a potential barrier towards redemption in cases where people perceive that restitution is less possible due to the nature of the harm.

In this study, we investigated whether two superficially similar harms -- physical property theft and intellectual property theft -- differ in the perceived possibility of restitution and, if so, whether that difference affects real-world punishment practices.

Findings

In a laboratory experiment, adults thought that restitution was less possible in cases of intellectual property theft than in parallel cases of physical property theft. Taking this finding out of the lab, we then investigated whether this difference appears in real-world behavior. Using data on thousands of federal criminal cases, we found that judges impose less restitution in cases of intellectual property theft than in parallel cases of physical property theft, even when the quantities of other sanctions are similar.

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, "knowingly" is defined to require greater certainty that a harm will occur than "recklessly" and "recklessly" to require greater certainty than "negligently." In a series of studies, we investigated whether people's understanding of what it means to act "knowingly" or "recklessly" differs depending on whether they are informed about this contrast with "recklessly" or "negligently," respectively.

Findings

Adults are less likely to say that a person caused a harm "knowingly" when they learn that acting knowingly requires more certainty than acting recklessly, than when they do not. The same is true with "recklessly" and "negligently." This finding suggests that people can understand these mental states in multiple different ways -- that is, the word "knowingly" has multiple different possible meanings -- which contextual information, like contrasting terms, help people differentiate between.

The word "knowingly" has multiple different possible meanings

How do adults think about different types of punishment?

Main Question

People often make assumptions about how people who have previously received punishment will behave in the future. This study asked whether and how the type of punishment affects these assumptions.

A prior study found that adults think people who have received punishments targeted at the person receiving the punishment (e.g., paying a fine) are less likely to improve their behavior in the future than people who have received punishments targeted at the actions that brought about the punishment (e.g., compensating the victim). Follow-up studies explored the cognitive mechanism behind this effect.

Findings

Comparing two people who both had to pay the same amount of money after a transgression, adults thought that the person who believed their money had gone to the victim would behave better in the future than the person who believed their money had gone to the state as a fine. This difference held even when the people were mistaken about where their money was actually going.

This finding suggests that adults think different types of punishment send different messages about the nature of a wrongdoing, which have different levels of effectiveness at changing future behavior.

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 may 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, particularly when those risks actually result in harms. These judgments are based on two factors: (1) 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; and (2) an assessment of how risky the activity that caused the harm really was, even if the person who engaged in the activity thought the risk was lower. Future studies are going to investigate these factors further.

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 Columbia University, the John Templeton Foundation, and the National Science Foundation for their support.