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Young Children's Moral and Social-Conventional Understanding

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The study of human development involves an understanding of how children acquire the skills and abilities necessary to function adequately within their culture. An important aspect of this is that children must acquire knowledge of the moral standards and conventional rules and customs of their society or social group (Maccoby, 2007). It is typically assumed that moral and social rules are acquired through socialization—that is, that parents, teachers, and other adults shape children's values and beliefs by serving as role models, praising children for their good behavior, and punishing them when they disobey. Thus, successful socialization is often measured by children's internalization and compliance with the rules and values of their society.

In contrast, my colleagues and I (see Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 2006, 2011; Turiel, 1983, 2002) view children as active agents in their own development. We have shown that the social and moral rules of society are not merely reproduced but rather are *constructed* through development. Our claim is that through dynamic and constructive processes, children develop an understanding of *morality*, or individuals' prescriptive judgments of how individuals ought to behave toward others, based on concepts of welfare (harm), fairness, and rights. These are seen as different from *social conventions*, or the arbitrary, consensually agreed-on social norms (for example, manners and etiquette) that structure social interactions in different social contexts. These are distinct types of social knowledge that follow different developmental pathways.

DISTINCTIONS IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S MORAL AND CONVENTIONAL CONCEPTS

Our claim is that even young children are able to identify moral rules and transgressions as distinct

from those pertaining to social conventions. To test this claim, and in the context of interviews, we ask young children to make judgments about familiar, everyday, hypothetical transgressions, depicted in pictures. For instance, moral transgressions might pertain to hitting or teasing another child or taking away their toys, whereas social-conventional transgressions might include not saying "please," using fingers to eat ice cream, or not following preschool rules like where one sits during story time or whether children put toys away in the expected place. The interview questions usually involve yes/no responses, but the questions tap some very sophisticated notions about the criteria that define morality, drawn from moral philosophy and extensive psychological research.

For instance, to assess whether children grasp that moral violations are *generalizably wrong* (whereas social conventions are relative to specific social contexts), we ask whether hypothetical acts are wrong across different contexts (at home or at school or, for older children, "here" or in another country). We also ask children to evaluate whether different transgressions would be wrong even if there were no rule or if the teacher did not see the violation. The expectation is that moral acts will be viewed as wrong regardless of whether there are rules or whether an authority says so, respectively, whereas social conventions should be seen as wrong only if there are rules or an authority says that it is so. Furthermore, to determine whether children view conventional but not moral rules as alterable, we ask children whether it would be permissible for teachers to change the rule (for instance, to make hitting permissible). We also ask children to rate the severity of different rule violations and how much punishment the transgressor deserves.

One of the startling findings from this research is that children distinguish between these

different types of transgressions as early as age 3 and more completely by age 4 (Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1985; Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Smetana, Schlagman, & Adams, 1993; Smetana et al., 1999, 2012). The well-replicated results are that preschool children generally treat moral transgressions as more generalizable, more independent of rules and authority, more serious, and more deserving of punishment than social-conventional transgressions. They also treat moral rules as less alterable—and more important—than conventional rules. Distinctions in moral and social judgments are not restricted to American children. Although the specific conventions vary in different cultures, similar results have been obtained among very young children in China (Yau & Smetana, 2003) and Colombia (Ardila-Rey & Killen, 2001), and among older children in a wide range of cultures across nearly all continents. Differentiations between moral and conventional judgments also have been found in atypically developing children, including young children with autism (Blair, 1996) and preschool children who have experienced maltreatment, including physical abuse and neglect (Smetana et al., 1999). It is also notable that even at very young ages, children in different cultures treat a set of issues (for instance, about clothing and food preferences) as personal, up to the individual, and beyond the boundaries of conventional regulation and moral concern (Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci, 1981; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Yau & Smetana, 2003). Young children hold to the belief that some personal choices should be up to them, even when adults assert to the contrary, a pattern that we have not observed in reference to moral and conventional events.

This research does not mean that preschool children are capable of making mature moral judgments. Rather, their evaluations can be seen as initial, rudimentary, but important steps in moral judgment development. Young children's moral judgments are limited in several respects. First, young children apply moral concepts only to familiar, everyday events but not to those that are unfamiliar or more abstract (Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983). Preschool children also show a better understanding of concrete moral violations, for instance, those involving physical harm rather than psychological harm or unfair resource distribution (Smetana et al., 1993). By middle childhood, moral evaluations are extended in these ways. As children develop, they also incorporate more psychological elements in their moral thinking, leading to more

flexible moral concepts. For instance, by 5 years of age, children refer to mental states, intentions, and their own or others' emotions when discussing moral conflicts (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). They also begin to understand that others may have different moral beliefs than their own (Flavell, Mumme, Green, & Flavell, 1992; Wainryb & Ford, 1998), and they are able to consider both intentions and outcomes in making moral evaluations (Zelazo, Helwig, & Lau, 1996). Although it is often assumed that an understanding of others' mental states (referred to as "theory of mind") is necessary for more mature moral judgments, our research has shown that the development of moral evaluations and theory of mind are reciprocal, transactional processes (Smetana, Jambon, Conry-Murray, & Sturge-Apple, 2012).

Finally, not all social events can be categorized as strictly moral or conventional; they may involve overlapping moral, conventional, pragmatic, or prudential (pertaining to comfort, safety, or harm to the self) concerns. Young children are unable to recognize or coordinate multiple components in their judgments; this ability develops during the elementary school years and continues to develop during adolescence (Smetana, 2006).

SOCIAL EXPERIENCES AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESSES

How does this understanding of moral and conventional concepts develop? Rather than proceeding through "top-down" (or innate) processes, we hypothesize that moral judgments develop "from the bottom up." Children appear to be born with a capacity for empathy and reciprocity; this makes good evolutionary sense, as individuals in all cultures must learn to get along with others. But children are not born with an understanding of specific rules and values. Morality is not given; it develops. That is, children attempt to understand their social world and make meaning out of their social interactions. Moral and social knowledge develop as children strive to understand the meaning of acts and regularities in the environment. For instance, children have ample experiences, as victims and observers, of the harm or unfairness caused by others' moral transgressions. Children generalize from these experiences to construct prescriptive moral judgments. Parents' reasoning, behaviors, and responses to transgressions play an important role in children's moral development, but not because they mold children's responses. Parents facilitate moral understanding by providing information about the social world and about the harm or unfairness caused by moral

transgressions. For instance, adult responses that point out how moral violations affect others or that ask children to take the other's perspective (e.g., "Look what you did—how do you think he feels when you hit him?") help children to understand the consequences of their acts for others' welfare or rights. These kinds of responses, along with children's direct experiences, are important sources of moral development.

In contrast, conventional interactions develop from social interactions that highlight the rules, sanctions, and regularities that are appropriate in different social contexts. In other words, moral judgments develop from an understanding of acts, whereas social conventions develop from an understanding of rules and regularities in different social contexts. Interactions regarding personal issues tacitly acknowledge children's opportunities for preferences and choices (Nucci & Weber, 1995).

These claims have been supported by numerous observational studies of naturalistic social interactions in different contexts such as at home, in school, and on playgrounds. Studies have examined both *who* responds (adults, such as parents and teachers, or children) and the specific ways they respond to different types of transgressions (see Smetana, 1995, 2006 for reviews). These studies confirm that social interactions in the context of moral and conventional transgressions differ qualitatively. The claim that children construct moral and social-conventional knowledge through their social experiences also has been supported by experimental studies that vary the features of moral and conventional acts and then examine children's judgments and justifications under these different conditions (Helwig, Zelazo, & Wilson, 2001; Smetana, 1985; Zelazo et al., 1996).

Furthermore, there are individual differences according to children's temperament in the rate at which preschool children acquire moral understanding. A recent 1-year longitudinal study of preschoolers (Smetana et al., 2012) showed that children who were higher in effortful control, a precursor of executive control and part of an inhibitive system of behavior, were slower to develop an understanding that moral rules are not alterable and that moral transgressions are wrong regardless of whether there are rules prohibiting the behavior. Although this finding is counterintuitive, we speculate that because these children misbehave less often, they have less experience—and thus gain less input—about moral rules. In

contrast, children who were higher in the temperamental dimension of surgency (which is associated with extraversion, positive affect and also impulsivity) understood at earlier ages that moral transgressions are generalizably wrong and more deserving of punishment. Thus, this study suggests that different dispositional characteristics influence children's interactions, and hence their acquisition of moral and social concepts. Although there may be differences in how quickly young children acquire different moral concepts, most children understand these concepts by the end of the preschool years.

In addition, emotional responses are clearly part of children's social interactions that influence the development of moral and conventional judgments. Children's experiences of moral events can be highly emotional and affectively laden. Research has shown that children make connections between different emotions and different types of events, which become part of their cognitive representations and differentiation of moral and conventional events (see Arsenio, Gold, & Adams, 2006 for a review). A currently popular view in much of psychology is that individuals respond to social events in primarily emotional, intuitive, and automatic ways and that they rarely engage in reflective reasoning. In this view, reasoning (judgments) is seen as distinct from affect. In the social domain view, though, children, adolescents, and adults are active, volitional beings who seek to make sense of their social surroundings and interactions. Emotions are part of those social interactions. Moral judgments are not "cold-blooded" or devoid of emotion; rather, emotions are deeply embedded in social reasoning. Studying adult judgments does not take into consideration the developmental processes from which they arise. My research suggests that children first form their ideas through thought and reflection, although later, simple judgments may seem to occur in an automatic way. It is clear that even adults struggle to make complex moral decisions and to coordinate moral and nonmoral concerns in their reasoning.

I have focused here primarily on the development of young children's moral and social concepts. As noted previously, these judgments are only the first, tentative steps on the long, winding road to mature moral and social cognition, which includes the ability to think about a variety of moral issues, including civil liberties, discrimination, rights, inclusion and exclusion in social groups, and tolerance and respect for others.

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NAVIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD

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Can Teach Us*

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