

EFFECTS OF AGE OF ACTOR AND OBSERVER ON THE MORAL JUDGMENTS OF CHILDREN*¹

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SUMMARY

This experiment focused on the interaction of variables thought to influence children's assignment of praise or blame in moral judgment situations. Three discrete stories, which experimentally varied the age, intentions, and outcomes of three hypothetical children, were read to each *S* ($N = 144$ boys and girls in kindergarten and third and sixth grades). The magnitude of rewards or punishments assigned by *Ss* to the actors was the dependent measure. The results strongly supported the hypothesized inverse relationship between observer age and reliance on outcome information; however, increasing reliance on intentional information with increasing child age was not found. Regardless of the age of the observing child, same-aged actors were judged more leniently than younger or older actors when destructive outcomes were produced with good intentions. Moreover, leniency was detected in judgments of younger actors who produced destructive acts with bad intentions. These results correspond with findings on defensiveness in judgment by adults, and emphasize the importance of intention and the age of the actor as partial determinants of the moral judgments of children.

A. INTRODUCTION

Systematic analyses of the processes involved in moral judgment and moral development traditionally have examined variables concerned with

* Received in the Editorial Office, Provincetown, Massachusetts, on February 9, 1981. Copyright, 1982, by The Journal Press.

¹ The authors would like to thank Lawrence A. Messe, Hiram Fitzgerald, and John McKinney for their helpful comments on this manuscript. We are also grateful to Eileen Thompson, Joyce Spalding, and the Lansing, Michigan, public school district. This research was funded in part by NIMH grant #5 TO 1 MH 10779. Requests for reprints should be sent to the first author at the address shown at the end of this article.

(a) the observer's perception of the intent of an actor to produce an outcome or effect, (b) the quality and extremity of these outcomes, and (c) the age of the observer who makes the judgment. Even those studies that attempted to draw parallels between the processes of moral judgment in the child and in the adult, however, have tended to ignore the stimulus characteristics of the actor who is being judged. This study examined the effects of the theoretically critical actor-stimulus variable, age (2), along with actor intentions and outcomes variables, to provide a more complete understanding of the factors that affect children's assignment of praise or blame in a moral judgment situation.

While studies of the influence of various observer characteristics on moral judgment are relatively common (e.g., 20), little attention has been paid to the potential impact of actor-observer communalities on the observer's judgment of the moral rectitude of an action. One such variable that has received some attention, at least for adult observers, is age (4, 5, 18). Buldain and Wegner (4, 5) examined adult correspondent inferences (10) in the attribution of responsibility and assignment of praise, blame, and rewards to a number of children of different ages. Adults' assessments of the actors' moral rectitude, predictive knowledge of outcomes, ability to produce these outcomes, effort and responsibility for behavioral effects were gathered. In addition, consistent with the earlier work of Weiner and Peter (20), quasi-behavioral indicants of the observer's moral judgments—willingness to reward and punish—were also collected. All measures were found to be highly related, and consistently demonstrated similar effects; older children were seen as more culpable than younger ones in situations where destructive outcomes were produced with bad intentions. A complementary age-of-actor effect was found for children who produced constructive outcomes with good intentions—i.e., older children were seen as more deserving of praise than younger children. When no statements were provided to adult observers concerning the child-actors' intentions, adults were more willing to ascribe intentionality for the production of good or bad outcomes to older children.

Further support for the conclusion that the age of the actor has an impact on observers' judgmental processes has been provided by Shaver (18), who asked adult Ss to determine the responsibility for an accident of an adult actor who was either younger, the same age, or older than themselves. The results of this study indicated that the attribution of responsibility increased with the relative age of the actor; older actors were deemed more culpable

than same-aged actors, who were seen as more responsible than younger ones. However, measures of judgmental leniency—a composite of the observers' perceptions of the precautionary measures taken by the actor to avoid an accident—revealed that same-aged actors were seen as having been more concerned in their attempts to prevent the accident than either the older or the younger actors. Thus, while increased responsibility was attributed with increasing actor age, greater leniency was evident in the judgments of same-aged actors by adult Ss. Shaver (18, p. 112) suggested that the personal relevance of the actor's age has "affective significance" for the observer, motivating cognitions which indirectly protect the observer's self-esteem.

Several researchers have found age differences in children's reliance on intentional information in the determination of moral responsibility (3, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20). In general, the studies have been consistent with the theoretical expectations of both Piaget (16) and Kohlberg (14); younger children rely on outcome information more than older children, whereas the latter have emphasized intentional data in coming to a judgment of the moral implications of an act. Although there is some theoretical debate concerning the particular developmental mechanism that underlies findings of this type (*cf.* 1, 7, 9, 11, 17), the regularity of this empirical observation concerning age-related differences in the use of intentional *versus* outcome information is well established.

In this study, we examine the interaction of a number of variables that should have major implications for children's decisions in moral judgment situations. Consistent with past findings, and the theoretical propositions of Piaget (16) and Kohlberg (13), we hypothesize that as children grow older, they will rely less on outcome information about an actor's performance, and more on data about the actor's intentions when making a moral judgment. On the basis of previous (adult) research on the impact of actor's age on attributions of responsibility and moral judgment, it is possible that variations in the age of an actor will affect differentially children's judgments of others who create identical performance outcomes with identical intentions. That is, older actors might be judged more stringently, with greater reward for performances having positive valences, and greater punishments for performances of negative valence, as predicted from Buldain and Wegner's (4, 5) research. Alternatively, following Shaver's (18) formulation, it is possible that same-aged actors might be judged more leniently than others regardless of the others' ages.

B. METHOD

1. *Subjects*

A total of 144 children who were enrolled in a public elementary school in south central Michigan served as *Ss*. Three grade levels were selected—kindergarten (K), third grade, and sixth grade—the age range 5 to 6 years, 8 to 9 years, and 11 to 12 years at each grade, respectively.

2. *Design and Stimulus Materials*

This research incorporated a multiple Latin squares experimental design to avoid confounding treatment with *S* reactivity to stimuli (*cf.* 6, 9), and the concomitant problems of unequal metric that such confounded designs can create. Three levels of the age of the child-actor variable were counter-balanced and nested within three stories according to two Latin square configurations. Thus, a $2 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 6 \times 3 \times 3$ design was used to explore the effects of Latin squares (Configuration 1 *vs* Configuration 2; a design factor), *S* Grade (K, third, or sixth), Intentions of the child actor (good *vs* bad), Outcomes of the actor's performance (constructive *vs* destructive), *S* groups (rows of squares, three for each configuration; another design factor), Stories (A, B, C, as described below), and Age of the child-actor (younger than, the same age as, or older than *S*) on *Ss*' judgments of the behavior of the child actor. Outcomes, intentions, and grade level of *S* were all between-group factors in the design, while story context and actor age were within-group factors.

The stimulus materials were three stories involving children of different ages who performed constructive or destructive actions with good or bad intentions. The stories were designed so that each could be told to a child with different statements regarding (a) the relative age of the child-actor, (b) the child-actor's intentions, and (c) the constructiveness of the actor's behavioral effects or outcomes of performance. Story A was the variation of the Piagetian "lost child" theme employed by Weiner and Peter (20). The other two stories were developed such that story content and theme could remain constant, but intentions, outcomes, and child-actor ages could be varied. For example, Story B involving a girl younger than the *S* who produced destructive outcomes with bad intentions read as follows:

Ellen is younger than you are. She is (two years younger than *S*) years old. Her mommy told her not to have a piece of apple pie before dinner, but she decided to take a piece anyway. As she reached for the pie plate it slipped and fell on the floor. The pie was all over the kitchen floor.

In the constructive outcome condition, Ellen was found reaching for the pie plate by her mother, and was told to take the pie into the dining room. Later the family remarked on what a fine pie it was. In the good intention condition, Ellen wanted to help her mother by carrying the pie into the dining room so her family could have dessert. In Story C, a boy, Paul, decided to help (harm) his sister by plucking a few leaves from her house-plant. His actions resulted in the plant becoming prettier (dying).

The dependent variable, *Ss'* moral judgment of the child-actor, was obtained after each story in the same manner as that of Weiner and Peter (20). Five gold and five red stars, each approximately five inches wide, were used by *Ss* to rate each child-actor. Gold stars represented rewards; the more stars given by the *S*, the greater the reward. Red stars represented punishments, with more stars indicating greater punishment.

3. Procedure

Each *S* was escorted individually from his or her classroom to a room that served as the experimental area. After being seated at a table across from *E*, the child was read instructions very similar to those used by Weiner and Peter (20), but modified to indicate that each *S* would hear three stories, rather than one. After being assured the child understood the instructions, *E* read the first story and then asked what color star, and how many, the child would give. The *S* was asked to give the stars to *E*, who recorded the color and number of stars, and then placed them back on the table. Two more stories were presented to the *S* in the same manner. Finally, individual *Ss* were thanked for their participation, and escorted back to their classrooms.

C. RESULTS

The stars that each child awarded, for each story, were transformed into scores whose value could range from one (extreme punishment) to 10 (extreme reward). Then, analysis of variance was employed to explore the effects of the independent variables on the dependent measure, which reflected the *S's* moral judgment of the child-actor.

The analysis revealed significant main effects for the Outcomes and the Intentions of the child-actor, $F(1,48) = 169.37$, $p < .01$, and $F(1,48) = 181.75$, $p < .01$, respectively. Constructive outcomes were judged more favorably ($M = 6.76$) than destructive outcomes ($M = 4.44$); likewise, good intentions were rewarded ($M = 6.80$), while "bad" intentions were punished ($M = 4.40$). Taken together, these main effects suggest that the manipulations of Intent and Outcome operated as planned.

TABLE 1
MEAN JUDGMENTS OF OUTCOMES AND INTENTIONS BY S GRADE

Variable	K	Grade 3rd	6th
Outcome			
Constructive	6.97	7.04	6.26
Destructive	4.03	4.33	4.96
Intention			
Good	7.10	6.86	6.44
Bad	3.90	4.51	4.78

Note: Higher values indicate greater reward.

The interaction of *S* Grade \times Outcome also was significant, $F(2,48) = 8.24$, $p < .01$. The means underlying this effect are presented in Table 1. Planned comparisons of the means (21) indicated that kindergarteners and third graders, while not different from each other, were more extreme in their judgments of stories with constructive outcomes than were sixth-graders, $t(48) = 2.41$, $p < .05$. There was a complementary effect for stories with destructive outcomes—again, no differences were found between kindergarteners and third-graders, but these groups differed from the sixth-graders, $t(48) = 2.52$, $p < .05$. With increasing age, *Ss*' positive and negative judgments attenuated on the basis of story outcome.

The *S* Grade \times Intent interaction also was significant, $F(2,48) = 6.15$, $p < .01$. The pattern of means for this interaction (presented in Table 1) mirrored those of the *S* Grade \times Outcome interaction. However, a significant second order interaction with Story qualified this effect, $F(4,192) = 3.17$, $p < .05$. Simple effects analysis (12) revealed that bad intentions in Stories A (the "lost child") and B (the "pie") were judged more harshly by the kindergarteners than by the two older groups, $F(2,192) = 2.98$, $p < .05$, and $F(2,192) = 3.45$, $p < .05$, respectively. Bad intentions in Stories A and B were judged more harshly by the kindergarteners than were bad intentions in Story C (the "sister's houseplant"), $F(2,192) = 2.98$, $p < .05$. Similarly, positive intentions in Story A were particularly important for the kindergarteners relative to the other two stories, $F(2,192) = 4.35$, $p < .01$. The kindergarteners judged the good intentions of this story more positively than the two older groups $F(2,192) = 3.93$, $p < .01$. These effects suggest a strong situational influence on the use of intentional information by the youngest *Ss*.

Perhaps the most interesting result of the analysis was the significant

TABLE 2
MEAN JUDGMENTS OF RELATIVE ACTOR AGE, INTENTIONS, AND OUTCOMES

Outcome	Younger	Actor age Same	Older
Constructive			
Good intention	8.05	7.92	8.25
Bad intention	5.30	5.72	5.30
Destructive			
Good intention	5.06	6.19	5.33
Bad intention	3.64	3.06	3.36

Note: Higher values indicate greater reward.

Outcome \times Intent \times Age of the Child-actor interaction, $F(2,192) = 3.82$, $p < .025$, presented in Table 2. Simple effects analyses disclosed an Intent \times Outcome interaction when younger actors were judged, $F(1,240) = 4.55$, $p < .05$. For the younger actors, mean differences were found for each valence (i.e., combination of intention and outcome), suggesting that their shift from a positive valence (good intentions—constructive acts) to a mixed valence (good intentions-destructive outcomes; bad intentions-constructive outcomes) had a more dramatic impact on judgments than the shift from a mixed valence to a negative one (bad intentions-destructive outcomes). Also, these analyses revealed a significant effect for the age of the actor when destructive outcomes were produced with good intentions, $F(2,192) = 3.55$, $p < .05$; under these conditions, same-aged actors were judged more leniently than their younger or older counterparts.

D. DISCUSSION

The results of our analysis clearly demonstrate the impact of the age of an actor on children's moral judgments of the actor. Consistent with the suggestion of Bandura (2) and the findings of Shaver (18) and of Buldain and Wegner (4, 5), the age of the actor was found to have a powerful influence on the judgmental processes of the observer. Of more importance, perhaps, was the finding that the biasing effect of information about the age of the actor on subsequent judgments by the observer operated very early in cognitive social development. These findings appear generally consistent with Shaver's (18) view that such judgmental and attributional biases do not occur reliably merely as a function of the severity of actor-perpetrated outcomes; rather, a modicum of personal relevance of the outcomes to the observer must exist before differential judgments will be made. In this sense, the present study

generalizes Shaver's position to situations involving children. In the present study, when high personal relevance was produced through the manipulation of child-actor age, same-aged actors were judged differently from older to younger actors. This effect replicates the findings reported by Shaver for adult Ss.

It should be noted, however, that actor age effects were found in the present research only under specific conditions of destructive outcomes coupled with good intentions. These results suggest that when evaluating a similar other who has met with bad fortune, children are willing to be more lenient or magnanimous. In all of Shaver's experiments, only destructive outcome severity was varied, whereas intentionality was left ambiguous. Our findings suggest that judgmental defensiveness in children is tied to the specific valence of an act: i.e., when destructive acts are produced by actors described as having good, or at least benign, intentions. If parallel processes operate for adults, then Shaver's earlier conclusions must be qualified.

Another interesting implication of the interaction of actor age with intentions and outcomes was the leniency of judgments accorded younger actors whose performance had a negative valence. The leniency accorded to younger (but not older or same-aged) actors who had produced acts of negative valence appeared to be responsible for the observed significant simple interaction of Intent and Outcome. These results replicated those of Buldain and Wegner (4, 5), who reported that adults show leniency in judgments of the young for all valences. That young children demonstrate such leniency only when destructive outcomes were produced with bad intentions might be tied to two possibilities: first, younger actors might be seen as having less intentionality to produce effects of any kind, as Buldain and Wegner suggested; second, destructive outcomes might be more salient to children who often are placed in the position of having to explain their errors to adults (the complementary need to explain positive behavior is, we believe, much less common).

The results of this study provide some support for Piaget's (16) contention that older children rely less on outcome information than younger ones when making a moral judgment. But the predicted complementary relationship of increasing reliance on intentional information with increasing child age was not confirmed in the present analysis. The interactions of *S* Grade and Stories with Intentions indicated that grade-related intentional effects were tied to the specific story format in which this information was presented. Two possibilities might account for this pattern of results. First, it is conceivable that intentionality has different implications for moral judgment at

different ages; perhaps intentionality influences moral judgments only when elements of personal relevance or experience are present. For example, violating parental dictates by taking the pie was seen as particularly deserving of punishment only by the youngest children in our study, whereas the older children were more benign in their judgments of this act. At the same time, retribution directed at one's sibling was not punished differently by any age group, suggesting that the elements present in this story incited moral judgment to an equivalent extent in children of all ages. The extreme judgments by the youngest *Ss* of the actors in the "lost child" scenario provide additional support for this argument. A stranger who wants to help is seen as worthy of great reward, whereas one who does not help is judged very harshly, perhaps because very young children are unfamiliar with situations where strangers give or withhold assistance. In a sense, what is familiar (i.e., personally relevant) is judged with the greatest expertise by children of all ages.

On the other hand, the relationship between the age of the judge and the intentions of the actor might be an unstable one, fluctuating according to particular context (*cf.* 17). For example, the only difference in phrasing between the "lost child" story used by Weiner and Peter (20) and by us was the inclusion of information about the age of the actor. Also, we provided multiple moral judgment situations whereas they did not. Perhaps the "lost child" story suffers from instability when used alone, rather than in the traditional story pair format in which it was originally developed.

Regardless of the persuasiveness of either interpretation, our results demonstrate the utility of recent methodological innovations (1, 7, 8) that have emphasized the importance of the systematic use of multiple stories in studying children's moral judgments. These studies have yielded results of high external validity through their use of multiple story research paradigms. Only through research of this type will we come to understand the specific contextual factors that moderate children's moral judgments, and thereby provide a more accurate conceptualization of their complex psychological development.

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