

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

The Moral Foundations of Prosocial Behaviour

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Introduction

Moral development describes the emergence and changes in an individual's understanding of, and feelings about, moral principles across the lifespan. Morality includes various dimensions, most prominently emotions, knowledge and reasoning, values, and morally relevant, prosocial behaviours. While some of these components strongly develop across the first five years of life, there are also great inter-individual differences that lay the foundation for individual differences in prosocial behaviour.¹ These differences are believed to be due to biological and environmental factors.² Developmental differences occur through maturation and are socialized by peers, parents, cultural values and practices.³

Subject

Early moral development is an important foundation for prosocial behaviour. Moral emotions may facilitate children's prosocial conduct through the affective consequences of their actions for the self^{4,5} (e.g., guilt) and/or the affective concern for others⁶ (e.g., sympathy). Alternately, they may become increasingly aware of the reasons why it is important to help others, which may motivate them to engage in prosocial behaviour. Thus, if parents and teachers want to socialize prosocial behaviour in young children, it becomes an important question to consider the affective and cognitive components of morality that may facilitate such outcomes.

Progress has been made in the study of early moral development in recent years.⁷ Most of the previous work has focused on either emotion or judgment. Yet, both moral emotions and moral cognitions appear necessary for the emergence of prosocial behaviour.⁸ What is less known is the relation between moral emotions and moral cognitions and how their relations change over time. There is also a need to study trajectories of moral affect, moral cognition, and prosocial behaviour, as well as their socialization antecedents. Research on the role of peers in early moral development has also remained relatively limited. For example, it still needs to be

determined how experiences of peer exclusion affect early prosocial tendencies.

Research Context

The moral foundations of prosocial behaviour have been studied from various perspectives. Researchers have used interviews, observational measures, and parents' or teachers' reports of children's moral emotions, moral judgment, and prosocial behaviour. The interview measures typically include questions that assess children's understanding and reasoning about moral issues in transgressions, such as if and why it is (not) right to transgress norms (e.g., pushing another child off the swing) and/or children's emotions anticipated in these events.^{1,9} Observational studies have been utilized to study children's reactions to simulated distress (e.g., the experimenter expressed pain after hurting his/her knee¹⁰), spontaneous prosocial behaviour,¹¹ or negative reactions in response to a perceived transgression (e.g., children were led to believe that they damaged a valuable object¹²). While most research has been conducted in laboratory settings, some studies have been conducted in natural settings (e.g., home environment, kindergarten).

Key Research Questions

Developmental scientists have sought to understand at what ages children develop moral capabilities, such as empathy, guilt, or moral reasoning skills, and if development in these domains motivates children to act in prosocial ways. The central questions are how inter-individual differences in moral development relate to young children's prosocial behaviour, how these differences are associated with different socialization practices, and how normative change and atypical moral development affect changes in prosocial behaviour.

Recent Research Results

Investigators have studied young children's moral emotions, such as empathy and guilt. A consistent body of research has corroborated the notion that affective concern (i.e., empathy) is associated with prosocial behaviour.⁶ Early forms of empathy (i.e., feeling an emotion similar to what another is experiencing) exist from infancy on.¹³ Children's sympathetic responses become tied to their prosocial actions in the 2nd year of life^{11,14} and predict future prosocial behaviour.¹⁵ Early precursors of guilt, such as distress following a perceived transgression, emerge between the first and second year of life.¹² Around 3-5 years of age, children begin to report guilt in response to specific transgressions, such as imagining pushing another child off the swing, and these guilt feelings predict prosocial behaviour.^{1,16,17,18}

In addition, researchers have explored children's evaluations of, and reasoning about, moral issues. Infants appear to possess capacities to form rudimentary social evaluations. For example, 6-month-old infants prefer those who help over those who impede another's goals.¹⁹ Older infants and toddlers prefer equal allocation of resources over unfair distributions.^{20,21} By the age of 3, children understand that it is wrong to break moral rules, and they show more responsiveness to emotional distress evoked by moral transgressions (involving issues of fairness or harm) as compared to social-conventional transgressions (involving traditions or customs).²² In the second year of life, as children increasingly understand simple intentions, they also begin to demonstrate the first instances of prosocial behaviour, such as helping others without being asked.^{23,24,25} By the third and fourth years of life, children can more readily respond to another's negative emotional state with appropriate sharing or helping, even if it is of a cost to the child.^{26,27} The limited research on relations between moral reasoning and

prosocial behaviour in early childhood has yielded mixed findings, with some studies finding positive relations,²⁸ and others finding no relations.²⁹

In addition, how parents and peers facilitate moral and prosocial tendencies has been explored. In general, there is evidence that friends and peers are important for moral and prosocial development.^{30,31,32,33} For example, 4-year-olds' moral reasoning has been linked to the quality of interaction between friends.³⁴ Family interactions and parenting are also associated with children's morality. For example, participation in family discourse about moral issues, warm and supportive parenting, low use of discipline based on power, and high use of induction (i.e., explaining to the child why the transgression is wrong and how it affects the victim) enhance early moral development.^{2,12,32,35,36}

Research Gaps

Although young children's emotions in moral contexts have been studied, research on a wide array of naturally occurring emotions in these contexts, as well as links with moral knowledge, values, and various prosocial behaviours is necessary. There is also a need for research on how interactions with friends and peers affect young children's moral and prosocial development. Longitudinal investigations are also warranted to better understand which mechanisms account for links between early moral development and prosocial behaviour. In addition, current research is lacking in studies that investigate the effects of diverse social contexts, such as impoverished communities, on children's judgments about, and feelings associated with, everyday experiences involving issues of morality and group functioning, such as social exclusion.³⁷

Conclusions

Morality develops tremendously in the first five years of life. Although even infants have basic skills to distinguish right and wrong and express empathic concern, moral knowledge and the anticipation of more complex emotions, such as guilt, strongly develop during the early childhood years. This developmental process is closely tied to children's increasing understanding of intentions, needs, and desires, both in the self and others.^{38,39} Individual differences in empathy and guilt have been associated with various forms of prosocial behaviour, most prominently helping and sharing behaviour.^{6,17} In addition, empathy and guilt have been shown to predict future prosocial behaviour. There is also some evidence, albeit limited, for a positive relation between moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour. Moreover, it has been shown that constructive family interactions and warm and supportive parenting affect young children's morality and prosocial tendencies positively.³² There is also evidence that positive interactions with peers and close friends promote early moral development.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

The early years are a time in which various components of morality emerge and rapidly develop. These components are likely to form the foundation for children's prosocial behaviour. Moral emotions, such as guilt and empathy, are critical because they can motivate children to behave in prosocial ways. Moral reasoning skills are important because they help children navigate complex social and moral situations in everyday life. Parents, teachers, and peers play an important role in children's developing morality. Because the quality of parent-child relationships and peer relationships is associated with moral and prosocial development, it is important that parents and other caregivers be encouraged to interact with children in ways that foster the

development of moral emotions, moral reasoning, and prosocial behaviour. Similarly, because peers play a significant role in moral development, it is central to promote high-quality interactions with friends and peers. Because moral development is central to the emergence of socially responsible attitudes and values, social inclusion, and mental health, service providers and policy-makers need to implement strategies that promote moral development.

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