Where Does It Come From, Where Does It Go? The Benefits of Examining Moral Judgments across a Wide Age Range

Commentary on Nucci, Turiel, and Roded

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In their comprehensive new research paper, Nucci, Turiel, and Roded [this issue] delineate multiple aspects of stability and change in children's moral judgments from 8 to 16 years of age. Adapting procedures from their previous work, the authors systematically examined how variations in *action* (harm, indirect harm, or not helping), *context* (unconflicted, conflicted with needs of self, or conflicted with needs of other), and *relationship* (general other, antagonist, or vulnerable other) influenced children's and adolescents' binary judgments about whether an action is right or wrong and whether an individual does or does not have the right to make a choice. The researchers further queried participants' justifications for their answers, including the extent to which they coordinated different perspectives. As their title aptly reflects, some aspects of moral reasoning appeared invariant over this age range. Other features, however, revealed age-related fluctuations, often following an intriguing curvilinear (as opposed to a linear) trajectory. For example, in straightforward, unconflicted situations, 100% of participants agreed it was wrong to hit another person. In contrast, whereas 8- and 16-year-olds responded that it was wrong to hit another person in self-defense about half the time (at chance), 11- and 14-year-olds rarely ($\leq 25\%$) asserted that this was wrong [see also Jambon & Smetana, 2014]. The aim of this commentary is to draw parallels between the approach and findings of Nucci et al. [this issue] and additional studies on developing concepts of obligation, permissibility, decisions, and emotions. In doing so, I draw most heavily from research in my laboratory.

What Are People Obligated to Do?

One core aspect of moral development involves determining in which situations people are obligated or bound to act a certain way versus contexts in which people have the jurisdiction to decide their course of action. Nucci et al. [this issue] tackled this question by asking 8- to 16-year-olds, "Suppose (the protagonist) decided to (do the [immoral] act), would he/she have the right to do it if he/she wanted to?" In straightforward, unconflicted contexts, all age groups more often asserted that individuals had the right to refrain from helping than the right to keep dropped money or to hit another person. They also more often judged that individuals had the right to avoid helping a *general other*, as well as someone who antagonized them previously, than the right to ignore the needs of a vulnerable child. Developmentally (with the vulnerable child trials removed), 11-year-olds (64%) and 14-year-olds (78%) asserted more often than 8-year-olds (46%) and 16-year-olds (53%) that protagonists had the right *not* to help. This curvilinear pattern also appeared in justifications, with 11- and 14-year-olds appealing more often to personal jurisdiction for not helping compared to younger and older age groups. As quoted in a participant excerpt, "You don't have ... (an) obligation to help anyone else because there's no reason you have to. It's a very nice thing to do but you don't have to do it" (p. 321).

These two patterns (i.e., children and adolescents evaluated helping as more discretionary than *not* harming; younger children viewed helping as more obligatory than 11- to 14-year-olds) closely parallel recent findings from my laboratory. Weller and Lagattuta [2013, 2014] presented 5- to 13-year-olds with eight scenarios, each featuring a target child who faced the dilemma of whether or not to sacrifice a strong personal desire to help or to avoid harming another person. For example, in one episode, a protagonist had to choose between fulfilling his desire to attend a party or helping another person. In another trial, a protagonist had to choose between stealing someone's arcade tokens or missing out on playing a desirable video game. The experimenter asked children to rate, using a 5-point pictorial scale (1 = *either way is totally fine to do to 5 = need to no matter what*), "How much do you think (the protagonist) felt she needed to ([help]/[not harm]) (the other child)?" Across studies, children rated the obligation to inhibit desires to avoid harming another person higher than the obligation to sacrifice personal desires to help. With increasing age, children differentiated their ratings according to the other child's need level (high, medium, or low) in the helping dilemmas, with an age-related decline between 5 and 13 years in rating how strong the obligation was to help in low-need scenarios (i.e., other child wants a turn). Obligation to help in medium-need (i.e., child's special belongings are at risk) and high-need situations (i.e., child injured) remained stable between 5 and 13 years.

Another contextual variable not considered by Nucci et al. [this issue] is social group membership. In Weller and Lagattuta [2013, 2014], characters in the scenarios either matched or mismatched each other by race [2013] or by gender [2014]. Weller and Lagattuta [2013] found that children rated the obligation to help racial ingroup members higher than the obligation to help outgroup members. This resonates with findings from other laboratories showing that by the age of 4 years, children expect norm obligations to be bound by group membership [Kalish & Lawson, 2008]. For example, using a novel group paradigm, Rhodes and Chalik [2013] found that 4- to 9-year-olds presume an intrinsic obligation to help in- but not outgroup members.

When rules were in place to prevent harm, all age groups treated it as equally wrong to harm members of in- and outgroups. When the school altered the rule so that harm was permissible, children maintained their belief that harming ingroup members was wrong. In contrast, they *decreased* how wrong they evaluated those same acts levied against outgroup members. Furthermore, Chalik and Rhodes [2015], in an analysis of parental communication during a storybook task, found that parents routinely enforced moral obligations towards ingroup members, but more often talked about prosocial treatment of outgroup members as being more discretionary or “nice” to do. Given that in “real life” all social groups do not share equal status, this early emerging sense of greater obligation towards the in- versus the outgroup can create significant disparities in assistance and protection.

What Is Permissible or “All Right” to Do?

In addition to considering an individual’s obligation to act in a certain way, moral reasoning further involves beliefs about what actions are permissible or acceptable. Nucci et al. [this issue] asked participants, “Would it be all right or not all right for (the protagonist) to (do the [immoral] act)?” In their responses, 8- to 16-year-olds more often accepted hitting for self-defense compared to hitting to protect another person, with both more frequently viewed as “all right” than hitting in unprovoked contexts. Moreover, participants more often accepted not helping an antagonist than not helping a general other or a vulnerable child. With the vulnerable child trials removed, 8-year-olds more frequently said that hitting was wrong compared to 11- to 16-year-olds. A curvilinear pattern, however, appeared for prosocial dilemmas: Eight- and 16-year-olds more often judged it wrong not to help compared to 11- to 14-year-olds.

In Weller and Lagattuta [2013, 2014], we also asked 5- to 13-year-olds about the permissibility of actions. More specifically, we had them rate, “How OK do you think it was for (the protagonist) to do [action]?” In this case, the “action” was a decision that prioritized the self over the needs of the other child. Children provided permissibility ratings using a 5-point pictorial scale ranging from 1 (*not at all OK*) to 5 (*totally OK*). Consistent with Nucci et al. [this issue], children judged that it was more permissible to prioritize personal desires in prosocial (decide not to help another child) versus prohibitive dilemmas (decide to steal from another child). Children aged 7 years and older also differentiated by need level; asserting that it was more permissible to prioritize personal desires in low- versus high-need situations [see also Smetana et al., 2009]. Between 9 and 13 years of age, children also more highly endorsed the permissibility of not helping in low-need situations. Thus, similar to Nucci et al. [this issue], we found a decrease between 9 and 13 years in participants’ views of not helping as wrong. That is, we showed that children rated not helping as increasingly OK to do.

What Will People Do and How Will They Feel?

A further way that we have explored developmental changes in children’s concepts about prohibitive and prosocial dilemmas is by asking them to report how people will feel after making certain choices. Emotion judgments provide insight into

children's moral motivation to engage in certain actions [e.g., Hoffman, 2000; Malti & Ongley, 2014] as well as reflect their emerging intuitions about obligation and the acceptability of different actions. Lagattuta [2005] examined how children and adults predicted and explained emotions in situations where characters' personal desires conflicted with rules – temptation contexts where people want to do things that they should not do. Between the ages of 4 and 7 years, children increasingly predicted that transgressing can “feel bad” [despite desire fulfillment, see also Arsenio, Gold, & Adams, 2006] and that acts of willpower can “feel good” (despite desire inhibition). These developmental changes in emotion predictions were accompanied by age-related differences in emotion explanations. Notably, whereas rule-oriented and future-oriented explanations increased with age, exclusive goal-oriented explanations decreased. In a subsequent study [Lagattuta, 2008], 4- to 5-year-olds demonstrated that they could reason flexibly about emotions in rule situations if they were explicitly primed to consider rules and potential future consequences via pictorial thought bubbles. Combined, these data show that what changes with age is children's ability to coordinate their understanding of prototypical connections between psychological states (e.g., between desires and emotions) with their knowledge about obligations, rules, and group norms [see also Lagattuta & Weller, 2014; Sodian et al., 2016].

What about making the actual decisions in the first place? When faced with a conflict between personal desires and the needs or welfare of another person (or rules more generally), what do children believe people will prioritize? Lagattuta, Nucci, and Bosacki [2010] expanded the desire-rule conflict paradigm in two critical ways: Children predicted and explained characters' decisions and emotions (instead of just explaining their emotions), and the legitimacy of parental rules varied across trials (i.e., moral rules versus rules that infringed on a protagonist's personal domain). Whereas between 4 and 7 years of age, children increasingly predicted that individuals would abide by moral rules and feel good about doing so, all age groups rarely made such “feel good compliance” judgments when parental rules violated personal jurisdiction (i.e., the parent attempted to regulate friends, clothes, or activity choice). Again, 7-year-olds appealed to rules and future consequences in their explanations for decisions and emotions significantly more often than younger children who focused primarily on the status of goal fulfillment. These data indicate that initial insights into grounds for legitimate disobedience begin to coalesce during early childhood. They further correspond to more recent findings that between 4 and 6 years of age, children develop greater awareness of free will: People have the freedom “to act otherwise” and can even choose to act against their own personal desires [Kushnir, Gopnik, Chernyak, Seiver, & Wellman, 2015].

Weller and Lagattuta [2013] investigated 5- to 13-year-olds' beliefs about decisions and emotions in situations involving race relations. Across ages, children expected people to feel happier helping their racial in- versus outgroup and happier ignoring the needs of racial out- versus ingroup members. Although, with increasing age, children attributed more intensely positive emotions to people who sacrificed their own desires to help others, they also became more discriminating about the situations that called for altruistic action. Namely, the youngest (5–6 years) and oldest age groups (11–13 years) judged people to feel more positive after ignoring others' needs than did 7- to 10-year-olds (curvilinear pattern). In Weller and Lagattuta [2014], when we manipulated whether characters matched or mismatched each oth-

er in gender, children exhibited very explicit pro-ingroup attitudes. They judged that people would be more likely to self-sacrifice to help the gender in- versus outgroup, more likely to harm the gender out- versus ingroup, and would feel better helping the gender in- versus outgroup. Compared to younger age groups, 11- to 13-year-olds more frequently prioritized the self in these moral dilemmas, predicting significantly less often that people would make decisions that put the needs of others before the self.

Concluding Thoughts

I titled this commentary using modified lyrics from the classic folk song, *Cotton-Eyed Joe*, to accentuate the utility of addressing developmental questions across a wide age range. Nucci et al. [this issue] took this “Cotton-Eyed Joe” approach. Had they excluded the youngest and the oldest age groups, they would not have identified curvilinear patterns in 8- to 16-year-olds’ judgments about obligations and rights. I have highlighted confirming evidence from my laboratory that between 5 and 11 years of age, children decreasingly believe that it is obligatory to self-sacrifice to help others, more permissible to prioritize the self, and less likely that people will give up their own desires to help others (especially in low-need situations). This corresponds very closely to findings from Nucci et al. [this issue] that 11- to 14-year-olds more often believe than younger age groups that an individual has the “right” not to help, the “right” to harm others in self-defense, and that not helping is “all right” to do. What Nucci et al. [this issue] have further documented is that by the ages of 16–17 years, these judgments rebound back more closely to resemble the assessments of 8-year-olds.

Why this curvilinear pattern? Their analyses of justifications [Nucci et al., this issue] suggest that what improves with age is the ability to coordinate multiple elements; for example, attention to harm and welfare, discretionary choice, relationship status, self-defense, and interpretations of ownership. They argue that in Level 2 thinking (more common in 11- to 14-year-olds), youth prioritize personal choice and less often emphasize welfare and justice. In contrast, Level 1 (more common in 8- to 10-year-olds) and Level 3 responses (more common in 15- to 17-year-olds) assign greater weight to welfare and justice, with Level 3 explanations acknowledging personal choice but better coordinating those concerns with moral consideration for others. This increasingly complex way of broadening and balancing perspectives shares commonality with age-related improvements in children’s ability to integrate their knowledge that psychological states drive actions and emotions (e.g., desires and intentions), with their understanding that behaviors and emotions are also shaped by group membership and social and moral norms [see Lagattuta & Weller, 2014, for a review on theory of mind and moral development]. Rhodes and Wellman [2017] more recently referred to this as the bridging of intuitive psychology (reasoning about mental states) with intuitive sociology (reasoning about social groups and obligations).

As a final thought, early adolescence marks a transitional period when youth increasingly desire control and independence [Eccles et al., 1993]. Not surprisingly, arguments over boundaries of personal jurisdiction become more amplified at this time [Nucci, 1996]. There are many examples where at the time a concept is first mas-

tered, children overregularize its use, creating U-shaped developmental trajectories. When preschoolers become proficient with the rule to add “-ed” to form the past tense, they overapply it to irregular verbs (e.g., saying *goed* instead of *went*), making this error more frequently than younger age groups. With development, they learn to coordinate the rule with the exceptions [Pinker, 1991]. At the age of 6–7 years when children consistently understand that different people with different past experiences will have different interpretations of the same situation, they overextend this “rule” to situations where individuals should share common ground, making more mistakes than younger and older age groups [Lagattuta, Sayfan, & Blattman, 2010; Lagattuta, Sayfan, & Harvey, 2014]. Six-year-olds also err more than 4-year-olds in overapplying dispositional explanations to actions that could be explained by situations alone [Seiver, Gopnik, & Goodman, 2013]. I provide these examples to raise the conjecture that perhaps at the age when personal choice becomes increasingly central as children navigate the early adolescent years, they become more prone to overapply this perspective in their moral reasoning. With age and experience, children can more inclusively account for and attempt to resolve the competing perspectives and ambiguities inherent in multifaceted situations, particularly those in which no single answer is indisputably correct.

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