Letters to the Editor

D’Augelli and the Development of Sexuality as a Human Process

Taking a historical perspective on research about homosexuality, D’Augelli [2012] discusses the ways in which decontextualized research about ‘homosexuals’ has created borders to understanding LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. In addition, D’Augelli makes a strong argument for how research over the past 30 years utilizing a lifespan developmental framework has begun to advance our understanding of LGBT people and their lives. He discusses the various ways in which the development of ‘homosexuals’ occurs in the context of relationships with others (e.g., peers, romantic partners, family), institutions (e.g., schools, religious institutions, workplaces), and society (e.g., laws and discrimination). Importantly, he frames this development as a normal part of human lives, shifting from a focus on exclusively sexual aspects of nonheterosexual persons’ identities to a description of the hypothetical developmental trajectory of a young woman who is questioning her sexual orientation in a context that is supportive of this process. This piece leads us to address two important points worth further illumination: (a) it seems that a view of human development that is inclusive of LGBT individuals requires an understanding that all humans’ sexual identities are interrelated with their relationships with others, institutions, and society, and therefore, (b) it is essential to recognize the stakes for all adolescents in creating contexts that are supportive of diversity in the development of sexual identities.

Sexuality is an essential part of human development, and it is related to our understandings of ourselves in multiple ways, influencing how we interact with others, and how we are perceived by and treated by others [Romeo & Kelley, 2009]. This is true not just for LGBT individuals, and there are various ways in which our society accepts and promotes expression of sexuality in both private and public aspects of our lives. For example, even staunch conservatives promote the role of family, and particularly, marriage between heterosexual individuals as a cornerstone of a healthy society. Entering into and maintaining a successful marital relationship, however, regardless of the genders of the spouses involved, requires sociocognitive understandings of one’s self, as well as how to relate to, empathize and compromise with others, and how to negotiate gender roles and
societal expectations about household chores and childrearing. Although these skills may be more difficult for LGBT youth to develop in contexts where there are few models of same-sex couples or transgender individuals in relationships, the process by which heterosexual youth learn these skills is hardly intuitive. For all youth, the skills needed to navigate these relationships require scaffolding from others, institutions, and society.

Unfortunately, extensive research has documented the extent to which LGBT youth in heterosexist environments experience destructive feedback from others. Although negative psychological outcomes are more common among LGBT youth than heterosexual youth, there is not a direct relationship between being LGBT identified and negative psychological outcomes; rather, these outcomes are mediated by experiences with anti-gay prejudice, sexual harassment, and bullying within the institution of school [Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2003]. Furthermore, this harassment and bullying is not limited to LGBT-identified youth: 18% of young women and 19% of young men in the American Association of University Women's [Hill & Kearl, 2011] most recent survey reported experiencing being called gay or lesbian, and for young men, this behavior was reported as more upsetting than any other experience of harassment. Importantly, research has also provided evidence that students (regardless of sexual orientation) in schools with policies and practices promoting sexual diversity feel safer in their schools [Szalacha, 2003] and are also less likely to view sexuality-related harassment as acceptable [Horn, Szalacha, & Drill, 2008]. Thus, it is evident that heterosexism and anti-LGBT prejudice negatively affects the experiences of young people, regardless of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, these experiences do not only have an impact on the development of individuals’ sexual identities, but also their overall health and well-being.

The implicit assumption of many researchers that have historically studied ‘homosexuals’ is that the processes of being and becoming homosexual are inherently different than (if not deviant from) the processes of being and becoming heterosexual, rather than viewing the development of sexuality for all individuals as a human process experienced by a diverse array of individuals. It seems that recognition of the fact that LGBT youth are complex human beings requires recognition of the fact that sexuality is a central part of all human beings. Likewise, we must recognize the ways in which heterosexism and the intersections between heterosexism, sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, and other forms of oppression are experienced by and detrimental to all young people. Research must continue to frame the development of LGBT identities among youth as a human process, rather than as a deviation in need of explanation. Furthermore, it is not only necessary to recognize the humanness of LGBT youth, it is also necessary to recognize the developing sexual and gender identities of all youth in the contexts of their relationships, and the institutions and social structures within which they interact. Studying the development of LGBT
individuals may actually elucidate aspects of human development that may be taken for granted in research that assumes young people are simply ‘born’ heterosexual. D’Augelli has provided a useful mile-marker for continued discussion about these issues.

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References


Focus on Process and Judgment

I applaud Richardson, Mulvey, and Killen [2012] for moving the social domain theory toward a focus on the specific cognitive processes involved in sociomoral reasoning. I agree that developmental changes in executive function, working memory, and theory of mind affect the development of sociomoral reasoning. The model they elucidate is useful for thinking about the reasons for developmental changes. As the research moves in this direction, I hope researchers will keep the following points in mind.

One question about this model is whether even prototypical, simple sociomoral judgments are based solely on habit or unreflective previous experience. In their discussion of the hierarchical competing systems model, Marcovitch and Zelazo [2009] defined a habit as an ‘implicit influence on behavior’ (p. 10) and one example of habit, from the A-not-B task, with infants suggests that motor movement, including motor memory traces, can mediate behavior based on habits. Richardson et al. [2012] clearly did not suggest that sociomoral judgments are the result of motor memory, and the Marcovitch and Zelazo [2009] model also has a role for representation within the habit system, although it is weak. However, it seems to me that there is a danger in dividing all judgments into just two systems, because some could interpret the experience system as involving almost no reflection. As Richardson et al. pointed out, even judgments of prototypical situations may require some quick reflective judgments, although the person has previously judged similar situations (e.g., is harm involved in this case?). I agree that this thinking may be very quick if it has been done before and the situation is uncomplicated.

Perhaps a better way to conceptualize the differences between simple and complex sociomoral judgments might be as a continuum where some judgments require more or less reflection. Marcovitch and Zelazo [2009] suggested that there are ‘degrees of reflection’ (p. 8) within the representational system. These degrees may characterize the differences among more and less complex judgments better than the distinction between the two systems. For example, Lahat, Helwig and Zelazo [in press] have shown that response times can differ even for different types of prototypical violations. In their research, they show that even simple, straightforward violations of rules (e.g., don’t burp or fight at the dinner table) showed differences in response times. Specifically, conventional violations required more time to process than moral violations. Because judgments of conventions require some thought about the context and whether the rule applies in that context, it makes sense that they would take longer. Future research should examine whether prototypical moral violations require more reflection than other types of decisions that may rely more on habit, such as which seat to take at the dinner table. The fact that moral violations can so easily be made complicated by changing intentions, preferences etc., as
Richardson et al. [2012] described, is an argument for the need for reasoning and reflection to be sure even prototypical moral violations are actually prototypical.

Regardless of whether a line is drawn between judgments with different degrees of reflection, I agree with Richardson et al. [2012] that some social judgments take less conscious thought and reflection than others, and nonprototypical and more complex issues would require more reflection. I also agree that social domain theory researchers should focus their work on explicating the processes involved in social judgment at different ages. In addition to increases in working memory, reasoning about sociomoral issues may benefit from cognitive advances in inhibitory control, error correction, and the ability to monitor conflict, synthesize perspectives, and use complex rules. The Lahat, Helwig and Zelazo [in press] finding that adolescents and adults differ in their amount of reflection bears further investigation to determine which characteristics of the task, reasoning, or executive functioning may have caused this difference.

Experience clearly plays a role in the ability to quickly assess an issue. For example, a new professor may take more time to address a case of student plagiarism than a professor who has dealt with it many times. The effect of different experiences is that advances in reasoning may not be consistent across subject areas, because some people (including children) may have more or less experience with different types of social problems. The hierarchical competing systems model has shown that more experience with a type of problem can lead to both increased reflection and increased reliance on habits [Marcovitch & Zelazo, 2009]. Having spent more time reflecting on an issue, the faster judgments may also become more sophisticated.

While focus on experience and specific cognitive processes is important, it remains important to consider the role of judgment. People may reason about some subjects differently than others because they may have made different judgments about the world. For example, different people may judge that different amounts of distress are acceptable. They may have different conceptions of the rights that are due to someone who owns property, or they may weigh conflicting concerns differently.

Experience with the world may also lead to judgments that are domain specific. Children may be especially sensitive to certain types of information or they may use certain heuristics for some issues more than others at different ages. For example, theory of mind research has shown that children can articulate their thinking about desires more easily than false beliefs, and there may be similar effects in other areas. My own research [Conry-Murray, Kim, & Turiel, 2011] has shown that children in the USA and Korea both show heightened concern with gender norms around age 6, and both become increasingly flexible with age. However, this pattern of increasing flexibility does not reflect a domain-general cognitive process (i.e., children and adults tend to
remain inflexible about the need to avoid harm). In our study, children’s learning about gender was also affected by their experience and interpretation of the importance of gender in the world around them: The Korean children were more inflexible about gender than the American children, which was consistent with a difference found in a measure of their parents’ gender role attitudes. However, the American and Korean children were equally flexible about a gender norm violation when it was for the purpose of helping someone, indicating that they do not have a domain-general tendency to be inflexible. This is evidence that children are making sense of the world around them and not just accumulating experiences and abilities. I think Richardson et al. [2012] would agree that a focus on the development of specific cognitive processes also needs to be sensitive to the judgments that are involved in reflective thought, which may differ depending on how the characteristics of the issue are understood.

Despite these concerns, I believe that Richardson et al. [2012] have provided an important goal for future research to explicate more specifically the cognitive processes involved in sociomoral reasoning. Looking at the way that more experience and more advanced cognitive processes affect sociomoral reasoning is important for several reasons, not the least of which is that it could provide a basis for understanding moral development better.

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References


The Hierarchical Competing Systems Model Provides a Process Account of Social Decision Making

We applaud Richardson, Mulvey, and Killen’s [2012] application of the hierarchical competing systems model (HCSM) to models of social decision making. The HCSM is a framework of the development of executive function that was formulated to account for patterns of behavior in infant and toddler search tasks. However, the principles of the model are relevant across a wide range of domains throughout the lifespan [Marcovitch & Zelazo, 2009]. According to the HCSM framework, behavior (or decision making) results from the joint contributions of a habit system (appropriately relabeled ‘experience’ by Richardson et al.) and a representational system. In turn, the act of reflection – defined as representing a representation – strengthens the influence of the representational system to the point where it can override the influence of the habit system. Importantly, reflection is not always needed for an individual to act in a novel, appropriate fashion (i.e., this can occur through the influences of unreflective representations). That said, the presence of reflection allows for the modification of behavior (or preexisting rationales for decision making) based solely on endogenous processes, even when these endogenous processes can be triggered from environmental events. In short, we argue that unexpected changes in the environment have the potential to initiate reflection, provided that the individual is attentive, capable of processing the nature of the disturbance, and motivated to reconcile the situation.

Richardson et al. [2012] applied the HCSM successfully to the social domain theory by illustrating convincingly that in contexts in which children are attentive and capable, reflection can be elicited from unexpected environmental cues in an effort to override prepotent modes of response. It is through this mechanism that moral judgment develops and more sophisticated lines of moral reasoning can replace immature ones that were established previously. This application is entirely consistent with the intended purpose of the HCSM framework, and the integration of the two theories has the potential to set the stage for refinement of social judgment theories that lack cognitive mechanisms that account for development and cognitive developmental theories that do not account for the social context of the individual.

One challenge in studying social judgments from a habit/experience perspective is to identify the default assumptions that children bring to bear on specific social judgments or decisions; in some cases, these assumptions are evident, but they can also be quite elusive and are likely to be context-dependent. Identifying the underlying assumptions, and documenting how these assumptions are likely to change both with age and experience, will enable us to understand what is prototypic. Indeed, it is the counter-examples to these prototypes that may determine conditions under which children are expected to invoke the representational system.
We have conducted research on the nature and emergence of young children’s global personality judgments (e.g., How do young children decide that a person is ‘nice’ as opposed to ‘mean’?). One of the major factors that guide such social decisions is behavioral frequency (i.e., number of trait-relevant behavioral exemplars). Research indicates that, at a very early age, children are sensitive to frequency information and use it to learn about the physical and social world. For example, frequency detection is considered to be a major mechanism implicated in infants’ ability to predict future actions [Paulus et al., 2011]. It is also clear that preschoolers rely on frequency to make personality judgments. For example, children are more likely to generate a relevant trait attribution about a person after receiving several behavioral exemplars compared to only one behavioral exemplar [Boseovski & Lee, 2006, exp. 2]. On some accounts, the expectations that are formed based on this type of statistical evidence are used by ‘default’ and do not necessarily involve reflection [Paulus et al., 2011]. Thus, the use of frequency information can be described as habit-based. Of course, personality judgments are not based on frequency information alone. Consistent with Richardson et al.’s [2012] discussion of moral judgments, intentionality information is also critical to personality judgments [Malle, 2004]. Although there is ample evidence to suggest strong intention understanding in infancy [e.g., Sommerville, Woodward, & Needham, 2005], one challenge for older children is to integrate intention information with behavioral frequency information when making personality judgments. This ability is nascent and requires reflection, particularly when the two cues are at odds (e.g., high frequency behavior that on its own implies a particular trait, but that is accidental rather than intentional).

An additional challenge for young children’s personality reasoning concerns biased processing of information irrespective of cues such as frequency and intention. By middle childhood, children exhibit a default positivity bias wherein they give greater weight to positive than negative information when making personality judgments about others; this is thought to be socially mediated [Boseovski, 2010]. For example, children disregard negative information in their judgments about other people [Boseovski & Lee, 2008] and expect positive behavior when given neutral or negative intention information [Boseovski, Chiu, & Marcovitch, 2012; Grant & Mills, 2011].

Consistent with Richardson et al. [2012], we interpret this positivity bias to be an instance of an experience-based assumption that will guide the decision making of young children unless they are able to invoke the appropriate reflection to override these tendencies. For example, Boseovski and Lee [2006, exp. 2] found that children needed to observe 5 negative behavioral exemplars before they were likely to make a judgment of ‘mean’, whereas they only needed to witness one positive exemplar before attributing niceness to a character. Using the joint framework suggested by Richardson et al., we would argue that children expect characters to behave nicely to one
another. The expectation is sufficiently strong in that it takes 5 violations of this expectation before children are forced to reflect upon the situation and modify their judgments accordingly.

Like the authors, we also take the view that the representational system is strengthened by maturation and individual differences in EF (e.g., working memory, inhibitory control). For example, children’s personality reasoning degrades substantially in situations in which they have to monitor the behavior of a protagonist toward several different recipients rather than only one recipient over time [Boseovski & Lee, 2006, exp. 1]. Preliminary evidence from our laboratory also reveals that children’s performance on measures of working memory and goal maintenance are related directly to the likelihood of overriding their default positive social judgments. In addition, in a paradigm in which young children were asked to choose between the negatively valenced testimony of an expert informant as compared to the positively valenced testimony of a novice informant concerning the characteristics of a novel animal, a significant positive correlation emerged between parent-reported inhibitory control and selection of the negative expert informant over the positive novice informant. Accordingly, we agree with the authors that executive functioning skills must be studied within the context of social judgments and decision making.

In sum, we regard the integrative perspective of Richardson et al. [2012] to be a critical step toward understanding children’s social decision making. As research from our labs and others continues to accumulate, greater specifications of the proposed process model will enable us to uncover the complexities involved in the development of social and moral reasoning.

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References


