On Deontic Reasoning and Theory of Mind

I am in agreement with Wellman and Miller [2008] that much of theory of mind research and theorizing has largely portrayed people as “autonomous agents – intentional actors whose actions are determined exclusively by individual choices, preferences, and beliefs” [p. 106]. This oversight has been the impetus for several studies carried out in my lab that bridge children’s understanding of mental states and their knowledge about rules. In particular, I have focused on developmental changes in how children reason about people’s decisions and emotions in situations where personal desires conflict with rules. At issue is how children coordinate their developing knowledge that people’s decisions and emotions are motivated by individual goals, desires, and beliefs, with their growing awareness that people’s behaviors and feelings are also strongly influenced by what they can, have to, and are supposed to do. As argued in Lagattuta [2005, p. 727]: “A core tenet of everyday folk psychology shared by adults and young children is that people’s actions are often motivated by their desires. Moreover, the act of doing or getting what one wants generally elicits positive emotions. Because humans live in social groups, however, their actions cannot always be self-determined. Thus, a central task of childhood, and of moral development in general, is to acquire skills to change, stop, or avoid behaviors that violate parental or societal standards, even when complying means sacrificing personal desires.”

I’d like to briefly share some findings from this research that add to the dialogue raised by Wellman and Miller [2008] about the degree to which psychological and deontic reasoning develop separately or conjointly. Developmental patterns in children’s predictions and explanations strongly suggest that a focus on goals and desires is primary in young children’s reasoning about decision making and emotions. Over time, around the age of 7, this desire psychology becomes embedded into a framework of rules and norms.

In Lagattuta [2005], we presented 4- to 7-year-olds with situations in which a character’s desire (Adam wants to eat a cookie) was pitted against a parental prohibition (Adam’s dad says,
“You should not eat cookies right before dinner”). Prohibitions centered on safety, living, and ownership. For some story endings, the character decided to fulfill his or her desire (transgression: Adam eats a cookie), whereas for others he or she decided to inhibit the desire and to abide by the rule (willpower: Adam leaves the cookies on the plate). Children were asked to predict and explain the characters’ resulting emotions. Of interest was when children would understand that people could potentially feel good not getting what they wanted (because they followed a normative standard) or feel bad after fulfilling an immediate desire (because they broke a prohibitive rule). What makes such emotion predictions particularly compelling is that they are opposite to conventional desire-emotion connections (i.e., fulfill desire = feel good; don’t fulfill desire = feel bad).

Results showed a significant age-related increase between 4 and 7 years in predicting positive emotions for willpower and negative emotions for transgression. These developmental changes in emotion predictions were accompanied by significant age-related differences in emotion explanations. That is, whereas 4- and 5-year-olds largely explained emotions in relation to the status of goal fulfillment (e.g., “He feels good because he got what he wanted”), 7-year-olds frequently explained emotions in relation to rules (“She feels good because she listened to her mom’s rule”) and potential future outcomes (“He feels bad because he might get hurt”). Importantly, however, emotion predictions and explanations did not reverse with age, they expanded. That is, by age 7, children (like adults) judged that rule breaking and rule following generate mixed emotions and they combined goal-oriented explanations with rule- and future-oriented explanations. Results also showed that even young preschoolers have two early insights: (1) rule source matters – abiding by internally generated rules (e.g., Ben thinks, “I should not...”) is more emotionally satisfying than complying with external rules (Ben’s mom says, “You should not”); and (2) the presence or absence of rules influences emotion intensity (e.g., people are more likely to feel “very good” fulfilling a desire when they don’t have to break a rule to do so, and they are more likely to feel “very bad” when they simply don’t get what they want versus they inhibit a desire to abide by a rule).

Further studies [Lagattuta, in press; Lagattuta, in preparation] have confirmed this developmental pattern and have expanded the scope of inquiry. Focally, when asked to judge whether people will do what they want versus follow rules in desire-rule conflict situations, 4- and 5-year-olds overwhelmingly predict that people will follow their desires (e.g., Adam will eat the cookie – even if his dad is standing right there watching) and they largely explain these decisions in relation to goals (“Because he wanted to do what he wanted to do”). By age 7 to 8, children start to judge the opposite: people will do what they have to do; and they more often explain these decisions in relation to rules, norms, and future consequences. Still, even young children understand that a person’s mindset, or attentional focus, matters: people who think about rules or
future consequences prior to making a decision will more often comply and feel good than people who think only of self-interest, and people who think about rules and future consequences subsequent to making a decision will more often feel bad after transgressing and feel good after complying than people who think only about whether they did or did not get what they wanted. Here again, then, the developmental pattern reflects progression between 4 and 7 years from a dominant focus on desires as motivating decisions and emotions to a more integrated and coordinated psychological-deontic framework.

On a final note, I want to contribute data to Conry-Murray and Smetana’s [2008, p. 138] argument that Wellman and Miller appear to “imply that norms are obeyed blindly and because of their status as norms, not because individuals actively reason and evaluate them.” I have found that rule domain does matter for children’s reasoning about decision making and emotions. Lagattuta, Nucci, and Bosacki [in preparation] had 4- to 8-year-olds reason about people’s action decisions and emotions in situations where rules prohibited activities in the personal domain (clothing, activity, or friendship choice) and in the moral domain (hitting, stealing). Although there was a significant age-related increase between 4 and 8 in predicting compliance and positive emotions (as with the previous study involving conventional and prudential rules), this increase was only in situations involving moral rules. Indeed, children of all ages infrequently predicted that a person would comply and feel good in situations where rules infringed on the personal, especially when the desired action was essential to that character’s identity. Moreover, children more frequently used moral-evaluative comments (e.g., “Because his mom will be disappointed; “Because it’s a bad thing to do”) to explain decisions and emotions in moral versus personal rule situations whereas they more often used identity-related explanations (“Because painting is important to her;” “Because he loves his friend”) in personal versus moral rule situations. Thus, I am in agreement with Conry-Murray and Smetana that future research integrating theory of mind and moral reasoning needs to carefully attend to the rich literature on social domain theory.

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References

Is “appropriately social” social enough?

Wellman and Miller are to be commended for recognizing that “if theory of mind provides the infrastructure for social cognition writ large,” as many researchers in this area contend, then it “should be more appropriately social” [pp. 125f]. The question that I want to pose in this brief commentary is whether their account is “social enough?”

This question – or what amounts to “how social is social cognition?” – has, of course, been asked many times before. For instance, coinciding with the consolidation of the theory-of-mind framework in the early 1980s, developmental researchers [e.g., Overton, 1983] working within the now-defunct perspective-taking literature were trying – like Wellman and Miller presently – to shore up their eroding theoretical foundations. The source of tension then, not unlike now, was generated by those who wanted to place greater emphasis on the “social” in the development of social cognition.

At that time, the two sides that emerged were either those who imagined that social cognition meant examining children’s thought as it is directed toward the social world, or those who, more radically, understood social cognition to mean that social practices are constitutive of children’s
thought. In the former instance, social cognition is “thinking about social content,” whereby the mechanisms of cognition are understood as being separate from specific social content. Alternatively, in the latter instance, social cognition is construed as “thinking within the social world;” that is, thought emerges within social interaction and, because of its constitutive link to social practice, takes on the form of these interactions.

Wellman and Miller do not seem especially attuned to this older debate, but if they were, I suspect it would give them some pause. The fervor of the two competing sides in the perspective-taking literature had the effect of tearing the enterprise to pieces. I cannot help but wonder, after reading Wellman and Miller’s account, if the past is not about to be prologue again.

If such divisiveness does come to pass, then I suspect that Wellman and Miller, despite their misgivings about individualism within theory-of-mind research, will hold a prominent place on the cognitive, or mentalist, side (and less radically social side) of the debate. I say this for three reasons, all of which relate to how they narrowly construe the alternatives to their own position.

The first concerns their remarks [p. 116] about research that has overturned Piaget’s conclusions regarding children’s understanding of intentions. In making this claim, they adopt the standard cognitivist interpretation of The Moral Judgment of the Child and miss how Piaget’s account of intentions is embedded in a broader social-relational framework. According to this social-relational view, Piaget’s description of different forms of social interactions, particularly parent-child and peer-child, is illustrative of how children’s conceptions of subjective states and moral reasoning are socially constituted [Dean & Youniss, 1991].

The second reason revolves around their discussion [p. 121ff] of social domain theory. Although there has been some debate concerning the role of social matters within this theoretical framework, a close reading of it indicates that the emergence of domains of social reasoning, much like Piaget’s social-relational account, is intimately linked to patterns of social interactions. For instance, Turiel [1979] argues that within children’s social worlds “…interactions with fundamentally different types of objects should result in the formation of distinct conceptual frameworks” [p. 108], and, even more pointedly, that “…the constellation of social interactions associated with moral events … differ from that associated with events of a conventional nature” [Turiel, 1983, p. 44]. Moreover, early research, outside the social domain framework, also supports Turiel’s theoretical claims regarding children’s social interactions [see Much & Shweder, 1978]. Nowhere in Wellman and Miller’s characterization of social domain theory, however, does this critical dimension of social interaction arise.

Third, and finally, Wellman and Miller’s discussion generally eschews any mention of very recent socially based criticisms of, and alternatives to, the theory-of-mind framework [e.g., Hutto,
For many of these social-cognitive theorists, the distant “third-person” account that pervades theory-of-mind research mischaracterizes the fluid nature of social exchanges, as well as the socially constructed (or at least constrained) nature of young persons’ developing mental lives [e.g., Reddy, 2008].

At this point, the answer to whether Wellman and Miller’s attempt to broaden the theory-of-mind framework is “social enough?” should be apparent. The answer depends on how one views the meaning of “social.” Wellman and Miller’s view would appear to be fairly narrow – one that involves “thinking about social content” (and essentially expanding what that content includes) but not the more socially constitutive “thinking within the social world.” For theorists and researchers who adopt the latter position, all this suggests that, despite commendable efforts, Wellman and Miller’s steps to broaden theory-of-mind research will be far from enough.

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**References**


