

Using Moral Objectivism: A Preschoolers Commitment To Justice



Mary P. Laird, BA
Grant Gutheil, PhD



Abstract

Purpose: To compare the identity of characters in the story to the participants reaction to the immoral story
Hypothesis: Preschoolers would be influenced by their friend being in the story
Procedure: 18 preschoolers, ranging from 4 to 6 years were read an immoral story, where the identity of the victim and victimizer was either a friend or a stranger, and then rated the character's emotions and deserved punishment.
Results: No significant differences across the three scenarios, suggesting that preschoolers are rigid when it comes to judging a moral situation, regardless of the people involved.

Introduction

Previous Literature

Moral Anti-Objectivism

Studies claim that children make moral decisions based on:

- Emotional attributions before age 8, how a character feels after committing an immoral act. (Arsenio & Ramos-Marcuse, 2014)
- Intention after developing a theory of mind at age six (Bian, Wang, & Zhong, 2017)
- Cost-benefit analysis, with children tolerating an immoral act if they benefit from it at age 5 (Tasimi & Wynn, 2016)

Moral Objectivism

- By age six, children are moral objectivists (Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003).
- Emotions, intention, and possible gain have no influence on a child's interpretation of a moral event.
- A person should be punished if they did something wrong

This Study

- Looked at whether changing the identity of the victim and victimizer would change children's emotional attributions
- Two identities chosen were stranger and a pretend friend
- Children may care about and want to protect their friends

Hypothesis: Having a friend as the victim will lead to a different score than having a friend as the victimizer, indicating moral anti-objectivism.

Scenario

Adapted from Smith (2010)

This is a pretend story about a boy named Eric. Eric really likes to play on the swings at his school. On this day, Eric sees that there is only one swing. Eric really wants that one swing. Eric sees a boy named Adam walking over to the open swing. Eric runs really fast and pushes Adam out of the way. Adam falls down, and Eric gets to the swing first.

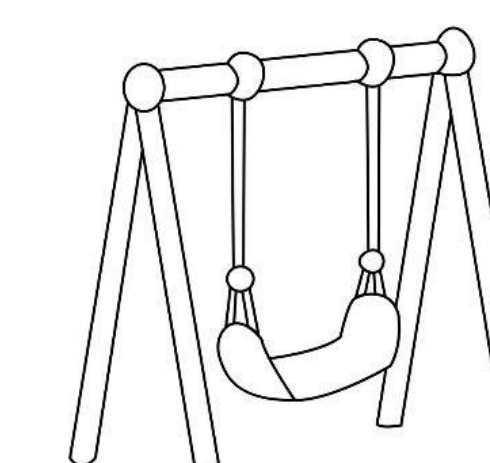
How does Eric feel at the end of the story?
How does Adam feel at the end of the story?
Do you think what Eric did was wrong?
Yes or No
Do you think Eric should be punished?
Yes or No, if yes:
How much do you think Eric should be punished?



Procedure

Participants

- 9 male and 9 female preschoolers
- Four to six years (Mage = 4.72 years, SD = 0.75).



Design & Materials

- Independent variable: Identity of the victim and victimizer
 - Condition 1: Friend as victim, stranger as victimizer
 - Condition 2: Friend as victimizer, stranger as victim
 - Control: Strangers as both victim and victimizer
- Dependent variable: Moral Objectivism

- One-way analysis of variance
- Victimizer and victim identity did not significantly affect moral objectivism $F(2, 33) = 2.551, p = .093, \eta^2 = 0.134, 1-\beta = .474$
 - Control scenario (M = 10.78, SD = 1.93)
 - Friend as victimizer scenario (M = 11.88, SD = 1.81)
 - Friend as victim scenario (M = 9.60, SD = 2.67)

Discussion

Despite evidence that preschoolers' moral judgments are impacted by emotional attributions, at least until age 8 (Arsenio & Ramos-Marcuse, 2014), current results indicate that children are moral objectivists by age 4.

- Having a friend be a part of an immoral story does not affect a preschooler's interpretation of the story
- Previous research has found that young children are objective in their view of immoral acts (Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003).
- As children age, they realize that situations are more complex (Smetana, Jambon, Conry-Murray, & Sturge-Apple, 2012).
- Young children may view a scenario to be wrong regardless of the character's identity while adults may differ in their interpretation and have a more pragmatic view.

Limitations & Future Directions

- Results indicate that preschoolers are moral objectivists
- However, our findings were on the verge of significance
- Future research should aim for more participants
 - To allow a wider age range
 - To increase power
 - To allow participants to be in only one group
 - To control for test-retest reliability
- Further research should also investigate other factors that may influence young children's moral reasoning

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Contact Information
marylaird98@gmail.com