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Developmental relations between sympathy, moral emotion attributions, moral reasoning, and social justice values from childhood to early adolescence

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A B S T R A C T

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This study examined the development of sympathy, moral emotion attributions (MEA), moral reasoning, and social justice values in a representative sample of Swiss children ($N = 1273$) at 6 years of age (Time 1), 9 years of age (Time 2), and 12 years of age (Time 3). Cross-lagged panel analyses revealed that sympathy predicted subsequent increases in MEA and moral reasoning, but not vice versa. In addition, sympathy and moral reasoning at 6 and 9 years of age were associated with social justice values at 12 years of age. The results point to increased integration of affect and cognition in children's morality from middle childhood to early adolescence, as well as to the role of moral development in the emergence of social justice values.

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Developmental scientists have recently called for an integrative approach to the study of children's morality (Malti & Ongley, 2014) which examines how emotions and cognitions in moral contexts dynamically interact and become increasingly coordinated throughout development. Accordingly, moral emotions such as sympathy help children differentiate moral rules from other rules, such as social conventions (Arsenio, 2014). In addition, moral emotions, conjointly with moral judgment, can serve as antecedents in the development of moral action tendencies and value preferences (Eisenberg, 2000; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). The increasing coordination between moral emotions and moral cognition from childhood to adolescence can serve as critical cornerstones for the development of moral identity in adolescence (Bergman, 2002).

Despite this theoretical emphasis, developmental research that integrates children's emotions and reasoning about moral issues has remained relatively scarce, especially in middle childhood. In addition, few if any studies have explored the association between moral emotions and moral cognition and the development of morally relevant values, such as social justice values. For example, Aksan and Kochanska (2005) found that early moral emotions predicted subsequent rule internalization. In addition, there is evidence that moral emotions predicted moral decision-making from middle adolescence to young adulthood (Krettenauer, Colasante, Buchmann, & Malti, 2014). Yet, most of the existing studies on the joint development of moral emotions and cognitions are concurrent, short-term longitudinal studies (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2010), or focus on small, non-representative samples (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991). The current study systematically extended this literature by investigating developmental relations of sympathy, moral emotion attributions (MEA), and moral reasoning from middle childhood to early adolescence in a large scale, representative sample.

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Another aspect in the development of moral identity during adolescence is the formation of moral values (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Researchers have argued that values become increasingly coordinated with moral emotions and moral cognitions during the process of moral identity formation (Krettenauer & Johnston, 2011). Few, if any, studies have integrated these two aspects of moral identity development by examining the role of moral emotions and cognitions in middle childhood in the subsequent development of social justice values in early adolescence. We therefore aimed to address this research gap by examining the developmental relations between moral emotions and moral reasoning, as well as associations with social justice values, over the course of six years from middle childhood to early adolescence. We utilized a large scale, nationally representative sample from Switzerland to investigate these research questions.

Developmental relations between sympathy and MEA

The present study focuses on emotions that are considered to be central in the development of human morality: sympathy and moral emotion attributions (Malti & Ongley, 2014). Sympathy has been conceptualized as an emotional response of sorrow or concern for the distress of another (Eisenberg, 2000). It stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition. As sympathy is a negatively-valenced emotion of concern or sadness, individuals are motivated to act prosocially in order to avoid these emotions. Sympathy, unlike empathy, is not an identical emotional response to what the other person is feeling or is expected to feel (Eisenberg, 2000). Sympathy appears to develop substantially throughout middle childhood as previous research has shown an increase in self-reported sympathy during this period (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Morris, 2014).

Moral emotion attributions have been defined as the negative emotions that individuals expect to experience following wrongdoing in morally-relevant contexts (Arsenio, 2014; Malti, Gummerum, Keller, & Buchmann, 2009; Malti & Ongley, 2014). MEA are considered self-conscious moral emotions, as they are experienced when an individual reflects upon and evaluates his or her own actions in relation to the consequences of these actions for others and one's own moral standards (Tangney et al., 2007). In developmental research, MEA have mostly been investigated in the happy-victimizer paradigm. In this paradigm, MEA is operationalized as the emotion attributed to protagonists or to the self-as-transgressor in hypothetical scenarios of moral transgression (Arsenio, 2014; Malti & Krettenauer, 2013). Studies have demonstrated that only at the age of six or seven years, do many children begin to associate transgressions with MEA (i.e., they attribute negative emotions to themselves in the role of the transgressor; for a review, see Arsenio, 2014).

Researchers have argued that MEA reflect children's guilt feelings because they reflect a child's internalized knowledge about a moral norm, as well as a negative affective response associated with wrongdoing (Malti & Ongley, 2014; Malti et al., 2009). Guilt feelings can be based on sympathy and/or on the more cognitive understanding and internalization of moral norms (Malti & Ongley, 2014). Sympathy-based guilt has been defined as a feeling of disesteem for oneself that results from sympathy for another's distress, combined with awareness of being the cause of that distress (Hoffman, 2000). Thus, sympathy and MEA are conceptually related. They both describe negative emotional reactions that may emerge when one is confronted with a moral transgression. They both may arise from the concern for the other's distress (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). However, sympathy can be a prerequisite to MEA feelings when it is accompanied by self-scrutiny and acceptance of one's responsibility (Hoffman, 2000).

Despite these conceptual overlaps, few studies have tested the developmental relations between sympathy and MEA. Among the few, there is some evidence that sympathy and MEA are concurrently, positively associated in middle childhood (Malti et al., 2009). Based on the theoretical premise that sympathy may be a prerequisite for MEA but not vice versa, we examined whether children's sympathy would predict subsequent levels of MEA. In line with this theorizing, we expected earlier sympathy to predict later MEA, but earlier MEA to not predict later sympathy. The latter expectation was based on the assumption that sympathy is a more simple emotion than MEA which can be based on either sympathy or on cognitive reflection about, and internalization of, moral rules (Malti & Ongley, 2014).

Developmental relations between sympathy and moral reasoning

Moral reasoning describes judgment of moral merit using moral considerations such as fairness, justice, and empathy (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2011). Specifically, children judge acts as moral if they concern issues of justice and equality, abstaining from harm, and caring for others (Carlo et al., 2011; Eisenberg et al., 2014). Here we investigated children's moral reasoning in two different contexts, i.e., omission of prosocial duties and harming others. These two types of moral transgressions have been chosen because our previous work has shown that children's reasoning differs across these contexts (Malti & Ongley, 2014). While contexts of harm frequently elicit fairness reasoning, which refers to concerns about justice, equality, or abstaining from harm, contexts of prosocial omission frequently elicit altruistic reasoning, which refers to empathy, care, and concern for others. Research indicates that there are substantial increases throughout middle childhood in complex moral reasoning that involve empathic concerns or fairness considerations. In contrast, simplistic kinds of reasoning, such as hedonistic reasoning, decrease (Carlo et al., 2010; Eisenberg et al., 1987).

Developmental scientists have argued that sympathy may stimulate the development of moral reasoning skills. Specifically, sympathy may enhance the development of concern for others' welfare, leading to an increased consideration for care, but also for fairness and equality while sharing resources (Hoffman, 2000). In accord with this notion, there is some evidence supporting the relations between sympathy and moral reasoning across childhood. For example, it has been shown that

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