



The emergence of sensitivity to biocentric intentions in preschool children



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ABSTRACT

For the first time, we assessed 5-year-old children's choices between two different ways of extending ethics to natural entities: the anthropocentric and the biocentric views. For the former, nature has to be preserved because it helps humans' interests, for the latter it has to be preserved because of its intrinsic value. Children evaluated the moral rightness or wrongness of a decision taken by an agent acting with either a biocentric or an anthropocentric intention. Children were also asked whether the agent deserved a reward or a punishment for having caused, as a side-effect of his actions, a damage or an improvement of the environment. Preschoolers judged the agent who caused accidentally an ecological benefit more worthy of a reward when he had a biocentric intention than when he had an anthropocentric intention. This suggests an early emerging sensitivity to the biocentric view.

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1. Introduction

It is now widely acknowledged that a fundamental part of morality concerns ecological issues (e.g., Gardner & Stern, 1996). Should we integrate also the well-being of natural entities (such as non-human animals or other living beings) in our moral scope? If yes, in which way should we pursue this goal and on what grounds? Nowadays, these are pressing questions. Moral psychologists have recently begun to study people's moral reasoning about ecological issues in adults (e.g., Clayton, 1998; Kaiser, Ranney, Hartig, & Bowler, 1999; Karpiak & Baril, 2008; Kortenkamp & Moore, 2001; Sacchi, Riva, Brambilla, & Grasso, 2014; Schultz & Zelezny, 1999; Thompson & Barton, 1994) as well as in children (e.g., Corraliza, Collado, & Bethelmy, 2013; Howe, Kahn, & Friedman, 1996; Hussar & Horvath, 2011; Kahn, 1997; Kahn & Friedman, 1995; Kahn & Lourenco, 2002; Kahn, Severson, & Ruckert, 2009; Kellert, 1985; see also Collado, Evans, Corraliza, & Sorrel, 2015). Overall, the studies revealed that even 6-year-olds value the relationship with the natural environment and consider environmental harm a moral violation. Moreover, by the age of 3 years children actively care for animals (Myers, 2007).

In the environmental psychology literature, *biocentrism* is distinguished from *anthropocentrism* as a different way of reasoning about the extension of ethics to nature (Kahn & Friedman, 1995; Thompson & Barton, 1994). According to the anthropocentric view, nature is valued because how it is treated affects humans' interests. By contrast, for biocentrism, nature has to be valued because of its intrinsic value. More specifically, biocentrism focuses on valuing the biosphere, that is, the non-human elements of the natural environment, and therefore it underlines the consequences of environmental deterioration or improvement for non-human animals, plants, and, in general, the ecosystem (Amérgo, Aragonés, de Frutos, Sevillano, & Cortés, 2007; Schultz, 2001; Schwartz, 1994).

By relying on the distinction between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, we further differentiate between two intentions with which an agent can act toward a natural entity: an anthropocentric and a biocentric intention (Katz, 1997; Thompson & Barton, 1994). To grasp the difference between these two intentions, imagine the case of a nature park manager who opens the trails to bike riders and dog-walkers to increase the money from admittance fees. The manager could act with an anthropocentric intention, for example she may want to collect more money in order to build a new parking lot for human visitors, or she can act with a biocentric intention, by collecting money to purchase a wetland that is at risk of being destroyed.

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1.1. The development of biocentric reasoning in school-aged children

A number of studies investigated anthropocentric and biocentric reasoning, both in adults (e.g., Bjerke & Kaltenborn, 1999; Casey & Scott, 2006; Kortenkamp & Moore, 2001; Milfont & Duckitt, 2010; Schultz, 2000; Snelgar, 2006; Stern & Dietz, 1994; Thompson & Barton, 1994) and in children (e.g., Hussar & Horvath, 2011; Kahn & Friedman, 1995; Kahn & Lourenco, 2002; Kortenkamp & Moore, 2009; Severson & Kahn, 2010). Overall, the studies revealed that 6-year-olds already assume a moral obligation towards natural entities, but the biocentric reasoning does not develop until late childhood (Kahn & Friedman, 1995; Kahn, 1997). When asked to justify why they morally condemn an act of damaging the natural environment, school-aged children are likely to underline the detrimental effects of such an act for the human wellbeing. School-aged children thus use the anthropocentric reasoning more often than the biocentric reasoning, which is indeed more commonly found in older children, not before around the age of 10–11 years. However, using a novel task, Severson and Kahn (2010) found that by 7 years children not only morally condemn harming nature, but they also generate biocentric justifications of their evaluations. In this novel task, children were presented with a story about aliens harming animals in a situation in which there are no more humans on earth. By leaving the human beings out of the story, nature considerations could be disentangled from human considerations.

In general, previous research asked children to judge outcomes of harming actions towards nature, and then investigated whether the justifications of children's judgments referred to biocentric or anthropocentric arguments. However, in order to assess developmental changes in the relative weight of biocentric and anthropocentric concerns, researchers could move from studying elicited moral justifications (a quite complex response for younger children) to investigating how different moral concerns affect moral judgment. A first move in this direction was made by Kortenkamp and Moore (2009). The authors investigated age-related changes in the use of intention information (anthropocentric vs. biocentric helping intention) in shaping the moral judgments of ecological damages given by children aged 10 and 13 years and adolescents. When interviewed about actions concerning animal welfare, both children and adolescents judged an agent who caused an ecological damage to be less blameworthy if his intention was described as biocentric rather than anthropocentric. That is, having a biocentric intention lessened the condemnation.

To our knowledge, the present study is the first one that tried to assess preschool children's sensitivity to biocentric or anthropocentric intentions. So far, no research investigated whether children younger than 6 years understand and use biocentric reasoning, or whether they prefer biocentric over anthropocentric intentions. Here, by using a new version of the Kortenkamp and Moore (2009)'s task, we aimed to assess whether preschoolers show a preference for biocentric over anthropocentric intentions. In fact, in the literature on the development of moral judgment, a standard result is that, when judging whether an act is morally right or wrong, younger preschoolers tend to focus on actions outcome whereas older preschoolers increasingly rely on mental state attribution. Since the seminal work of Piaget (1932), researchers showed that children shift from judging moral actions based on outcome to judge them on the basis of intention (e.g., Armsby, 1971; Baird & Astington, 2004; Costanzo, Coie, Grumet, & Farnill, 1973; Helwig, Zelazo, & Wilson, 2001; Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Kohlberg, 1969; Margoni & Surian,

2016; Moran & O'Brien, 1983; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009; Yuill, 1984). According to recent evidence, around the age of five, children's verbal moral judgment starts to be based mainly on intention rather than action outcomes (Cushman, Sheketoff, Wharton, & Carey, 2013; Margoni & Surian, 2017). However, whether and how intentions associated with different moral views affect preschool children's moral judgment remains unclear.

1.2. The current study

We investigated whether preschoolers hold a preference for biocentric over anthropocentric intention information in judging the rightness or wrongness and the deserved reward or punishment of both ecological damage and ecological benefit. The present study introduced some novelties: it is the first (a) to examine children younger than 6 years and (b) to focus on children's evaluation of both ecological damage and ecological improvements.

It is worth asking whether some developmental changes in preferring biocentric to anthropocentric intentions occur prior to the primary school years. In fact, studies on the outcome-to-intent shift in moral judgment found that children at the age of five start to rely more on mental state information than on actions outcomes when judging moral cases (e.g., Cushman et al., 2013; Margoni & Surian, 2017). Given that 5-year-olds judge moral cases based on intention, we asked whether their judgments also differently rely on different types of intentions. Since the youngest children in the previous study on the use of biocentric and anthropocentric intentions in moral judgment were 10-year-olds (Kortenkamp & Moore, 2009), it is an open question whether younger children also prefer biocentric over anthropocentric intentions. However, in the present study we chose to examine 5-year-olds because children at this age already rely more on agent's intentions than on actions outcomes when generating a moral judgment, so they may be also able to show a preference for one type of intention over another.

We presented children with moral scenarios in which a character took an altruistic decision with either an anthropocentric or a biocentric intention that, however, as a side-effect, caused an ecological damage or benefit. If children prefer biocentric to anthropocentric intentions, we should find that their judgments of ecological damage are milder and their judgments of ecological benefit are more favorable when the character's intention is biocentric rather than anthropocentric.

Although the vast majority of studies on moral judgment focused on how children and adults evaluate transgressions, here we were also interested in how children judge actions that brought about a desirable outcome. So, for the first time, we investigated whether there is an effect of intention type (biocentric vs. anthropocentric) on preschoolers' evaluations of decisions resulting in a benefit for the natural environment. Following Kortenkamp and Moore (2009; see also Coleman & Temple, 1996), children were presented with scenarios involving damages or benefits to non-human animals (birds). Past studies provided some evidence that children understand better the moral difference between biocentric and anthropocentric intentions when they evaluate scenarios involving non-human animals rather than plants or other aspects of nature, such as a shoreline or a park (e.g., Kahn & Lourenco, 2002). Therefore, we presented children with a scenario used by Kortenkamp and Moore (2009), which originally involved a cat owner who decided to let his cats out of his farmhouse with an anthropocentric intention (the cats will otherwise wreck the house furniture) or a biocentric intention (the cats need to have fun outside) and, as a results, the cats killed some birds.

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