The Relationship between Moral Judgment, Egocentrism, and Altruistic Behavior

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RUBIN, KENNETH H., and SCHNEIDER, FRANK W. The Relationship between Moral Judgment, Egocentrism, and Altruistic Behavior. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1973, 44, 661–665. 55 7-year-old children were administered cognitive measures of communicative egocentrism and moral judgment and were provided with 2 opportunities to display altruistic behavior—(a) to donate candy to poor children and (b) to help a younger child complete a task. Success on the 2 cognitive measures was positively correlated with the incidence of altruistic behavior in both altruism conditions. With mental age partialled out the correlations between the cognitive measures and donating candy were significantly lower than the correlation between the cognitive measures and helping. The difference between the correlations was accounted for by the fact that only in the candy donation were there cues that helped the subject attend to the possibility of emitting an altruistic act. Finally, the communicative and moral judgment measures were significantly correlated.

A number of studies of altruism in children have indicated that the incidence of helping and sharing behavior increases with age, at least until 10 years of age (e.g., Handlon & Cross 1959; Midlarsky & Bryan 1967; Ugurel-Semin 1952). However, little attention has been directed toward understanding why younger children are, in fact, less altruistic than older children. One explanation may be suggested by Piaget’s notions concerning egocentrism (Piaget 1926) and moral judgments (Piaget 1932).

According to Piaget (1950), the young child is unable to decenter, that is, to shift his attention from one aspect of an object or situation to another. This inability appears to underlie the preoperational child’s egocentric thought and immature moral judgment. For example, during communicative activity, the egocentric child fails to take his auditor’s point of view into account. He centers only on his own viewpoint (e.g., Rubin 1973). Moreover, when attempting to resolve moral-conflict stories, the child who cannot decenter fails to consider the reciprocal, interpersonal aspects of the moral situations (e.g., Lee 1971). The idea that decentering underlies both moral development and sociocentric thought has received empirical support from studies in which spatial (Lee 1971; Stuart 1967) and role-taking (Selman 1971) skills have been found to be significantly related to moral development. Piaget believes that it is not until later childhood, 7–12 years of age, that the child is able to consider reciprocal relations and the viewpoints of others. In support of Piaget, research has indicated that with increasing age children become less egocentric (Flavell 1968) and increasingly able to make mature moral judgments (Lee 1971).

It seems logical to assume that there is a direct link between a child’s capacity to decenter and the amount of altruistic behavior he displays. The increase in the child’s ability to (a) recognize that another person is in need of help (i.e., to take the other person’s point of view) and (b) to understand reciprocal relations should be accompanied by an increase in the likelihood that the child will help others. The fact that the increase in altruism with age is paralleled by a decline in egocentrism and the development of higher-level moral judgments is consistent with this interpretation. Moreover, inasmuch as altruis-

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tic behavior is moral behavior, it would seem likely that moral judgment and conduct are highly related. Thus, the present study was undertaken to test the hypothesis that among 7-year-olds, there is a positive relationship between their scores on measures of communicative skill (lack of egocentrism) and moral judgment and the incidence of their altruistic behavior. Two measures of altruism were selected, (a) generosity and (b) helping behavior. The latter measure was included since almost all studies of altruistic behavior in children have been restricted to measures of generosity (Bryan & London 1970).

Method

Subjects.—Fifty-five 7-year-olds (28 girls and 27 boys) were drawn from two lower-middle-class public schools in Windsor, Ontario. The mean age of the sample was 89.7 months. Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) IQs ranged from 78 to 127 with a mean of 100.89 and a standard deviation of 18.70.

Procedure.—The study was conducted in two sessions. During the first session each S was individually administered the PPVT by E 1, a female graduate assistant. After completion of the PPVT, a communicative egocentrism task was administered in a manner similar to the procedure followed by Glucksberg and Krauss (1967). The task required that two persons communicate with one another about novel, low-encodable, graphic designs. The E 1 and the S had identical sets of 10 nonsense figures (Glucksberg & Krauss 1967) drawn on 5 × 7-inch cards. A screen placed in the center of a table prevented E 1 and the S from seeing each other’s cards. The S’s cards were turned face down in a single pile in front of him. The cards of E 1 were spread randomly before him. The E 1 instructed the S as follows: “The idea of this game is for us to match as many of our cards together as possible. However, since you cannot see my cards and I cannot see yours, the only way we can match them is if you tell me all you possibly can about each of your cards.”

The S proceeded by describing one card at a time. All conversation was tape recorded and transcribed such that the mean number of distinctive features per item could be computed from the S’s description. An example of a distinctive feature was, “The top part [of the figure] is shaped like a lemon.” A low distinctive feature score indicated a high degree of egocentricty.

Upon completion of the communicative tasks, E 1 led the S behind a partition in the experimental room. On a table were eight nickel boxes of Smarties (Canadian equivalent of M&M’s) and a colored box with a small slit in the top. The E 1 informed the S that “you can keep all of these boxes of candy for helping me today. Or, if you want, you can give some of the candy to a group of poor children from Windsor.” The E 1 then showed the S four pictures of poor children. Following this, E 1 explained that she would go to the other side of the partition so that she could not see what the S chose to do. The E 1 stated: “If you want to give some of your candy to the poor children, put them in the box. Put all the candy that you want to keep for yourself in this bag on which I’ve written your name. No one will find out what you did because I will seal the bag for you when you bring it to me. Then in about a week I will give the bag back to you.”

The E 1 then left and waited for the S to come back with his bag of candies. The number of boxes donated to poor children served as the first measure of altruism.

During the second experimental session, S and a 6-year-old child of the same sex were brought into another experimental room by E 2, a second female graduate assistant. The children were introduced to each other with reference to their names and ages. Thus S was informed that the second child was younger than he. The E 2 showed the children a number of new toys in the experimental room. The children were told that they would be allowed to play with the toys upon completion of a simple task. The S and the younger child were subsequently seated at opposite sides of a small table on which two stacks of tickets and a shallow box rested. Then E 2 stated: “Do you see these tickets? We are going to sell them to people for a show we are putting on. We must put the tickets into small piles of five tickets each [E 2 demonstrates]. Now this is your pile [to S], and this is your pile [to younger child]. Before you play with the toys, take your tickets and put them into piles of five. Then put a rubber band around them and place them in this small box. When you are finished with your tickets you may play with the toys.”

The number of tickets in S’s pile (N =
25) was exactly one-half the number of those in the younger child's pile \((N = 50)\). Interestingly, none of the children remarked about the discrepancy. Then \(E \ 2\) retired to an observation room where she watched the children's behavior through a one-way mirror. Because \(S\) had been given fewer tickets, he finished his task before the younger child. Thus, he could choose between helping the younger child and playing with the toys. While in the observation room, \(E \ 2\) counted the piles of tickets that \(S\) completed for the younger child. The number of ticket piles that \(S\) completed for the younger child served as the second measure of altruism.

After 10 minutes, \(E \ 2\) returned to the experimental room. The younger child was instructed to return to his classroom, after which \(E \ 2\) administered a measure of moral judgment to each S. Lee's (1971) adaptation of Kohlberg's (1964) moral-judgment stories and levels was used. The choice of Lee's measures rather than Kohlberg's stemmed from the fact that the moral-conflict stories developed by the latter were considered too complex for the 7-year-old children in this study. Thus, Lee's (1971) three “authority vs. altruism” situations and three “peer vs. altruism” situations were read to each S. All six stories present a conflict between two legitimate alternatives. At the end of each story, S was asked what the main character in the story should do to resolve the conflict and why. The reason given for the solution of each conflict was assigned a score ranging from 1 to 5. These values correspond to Lee's five levels of moral judgment. Briefly, these levels are (1) authority orientation, (2) authority bound but emergence of reciprocity awareness, (3) reciprocity, (4) rules are for societal order, and (5) ideological, based upon principles rather than rules. The sum of the scores attained by \(S\) on the six stories served as the measure of moral judgment. Thus, the possible range of moral-judgment scores was from 6 to 30.

Results

A series of \(t\) tests revealed that there were no significant sex differences on the measures of egocentrism, moral judgment, altruism, and mental age. Therefore, the male and female data were grouped together. The results were analyzed by means of Pearson product-moment correlations. A correlational matrix for all the variables of interest is presented in table 1.

The results support the hypothesis that positive relationships exist between children's scores on measures of egocentrism and moral judgment and the incidence of their altruistic behavior. The number of candy boxes donated to poor children was significantly related to both communicative egocentrism, \(r = .31\), and to moral judgment, \(r = .31\). The number of ticket piles completed for the younger child was also significantly related to egocentrism, \(r = .44\), and moral judgment, \(r = .40\). Further support for these findings stems from the fact that (a) when the effects of mental age were partialled out the amount of candy donated remained significantly related to egocentrism, \(r = .29\), and to moral judgment, \(r = .29\); and (b) the number of ticket piles completed remained significantly related to egocentrism, \(r = .64\), and to moral judgment, \(r = .57\). Moreover, with mental age partialled out, the correlation coefficients between egocentrism and the two measures of altruism were significantly different from each other, \(t = 3.08, p < .01\). A similar result was found for the relationships between moral judgment and the two altruism conditions, \(t = 2.29, p < .05\).

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<th>Measure</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Moral judgment</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egocentrism*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candy donated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.40**</td>
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<td>Ticket piles completed</td>
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<td>Mental age</td>
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* A high score signifies a low degree of egocentrism.
** \(p < .05\).
*** \(p < .01\).
In addition, 21 out of the 29 Ss scoring at or below the median distinctive features score (median = 1.10) failed to give any help to the younger child on the token task; on the other hand, among the 26 Ss who scored above the median, all but nine helped, $\chi^2(1) = 6.44, p < .02$. Likewise, 22 out of the 30 Ss scoring at or below the median moral-judgment score (median = 12) failed to give any help to the younger child on the token task. Among the 25 Ss who scored above the median, all but eight helped, $\chi^2(1) = 7.80, p < .01$. Only five of 55 Ss failed to donate any candy to the poor children. Finally, a significant positive relationship was found between egocentrism and moral judgment, $r = .59$.

Discussion

The results of this study provide clear support for the hypothesis that among 7-year-olds there is a positive relationship between decentration skills, as indicated by scores on measures of communicative egocentrism, and moral judgment and the incidence of altruism. It is important to note that when mental age was partialled out the correlations between the two measures of decentration and the measure of helping behavior were significantly greater than the correlations between the decentration measures and the measure of generosity. This may be accounted for by the fact that the generosity measure involved the presentation of a “decentration” cue to the children. The experimenter focused the subject’s attention on two alternatives, (a) keeping all candies for himself and (b) giving some of the candy to poor children. Perhaps this cue helped some of the children, who otherwise would have simply centered upon themselves, to simultaneously center both on themselves and on the poor children. If this was so, then the cue may have contributed to the lower correlation coefficient in the generosity condition than in the helping condition where no such cues were given. It is also possible that the instructions in the generosity condition may have served to lower the decentration-generosity correlation coefficients in another way. By providing the child with cues suggesting the possibility of emitting a generous act, the instructions may have reminded the child that, in the past, he had been reinforced for displaying such behaviors. Thus, children who had experienced reinforcement for sharing with others may have donated candy because of the possible reinforcement consequences to themselves.

Apparently, only the classical Hartshorne and May (1930) study has related moral cognition and altruistic behavior. However, the correlations between their eight subscales of “moral knowledge” and “helpful behavior” (Hartshorne & May 1930, p. 203) were generally lower than those found in the present investigation. We believe that our higher correlations were, in part, a function of differences in the measures used to define moral judgment. In the present study, only Lee’s (1971) three “authority vs. altruism” and her three “peer vs. altruism” situations were read to the children. Thus the measure of moral judgment was specific to altruism. However, Hartshorne and May’s moral knowledge measures were general, tapping many aspects of moral cognition (e.g., honesty, good manners, bravery, and prejudice). The present results are consistent with more recent research which indicates a positive relationship between levels of moral judgment and other moral behaviors, for example, resistance to temptation (Krebs 1967) and children’s adherence to rules in the absence of authority (Kohlberg 1964).

Finally, the belief that the ability to decenter is the underlying factor common to measures of egocentrism and moral judgment is supported by the significant relationship between these two measures. This finding supports previous research (Lee 1971; Selman 1971; Stuart 1967). In conclusion, the results of the present study suggest that the increase in altruism with age is, in part, the result of the child’s increasing capacity to decenter.

References

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