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New Beginnings: An Interactionist and Constructivist Approach to Early Moral Development

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Abstract

Orientations toward harming and helping others are central to morality. These orientations undergo major transformations in early life. This paper proposes an interactionist and constructivist approach to early moral development, and discusses how children construct orientations toward harming and helping through everyday social interactions. A major developmental acquisition – typically evident by age three – is the ability to make judgments of right and wrong based on concerns with others' welfare. The paper concludes by outlining issues for future research on the development of morality from infancy to childhood.

Keywords

moral development; infancy; social interactions

Moral development is crucial for societies. In its developed form, morality protects the rights and welfare of individuals, promotes peaceful coexistence, and motivates resistance to oppressive practices [Haidt, 2008; Tomasello, 2016; Turiel, 2002]. Although morality seems inherent to humans, its origins have puzzled researchers. In developing a moral sense, children must subordinate their immediate self-interest to moral ends, for instance when refraining from violence or by helping another. How do helpless neonates preoccupied with eating and sleeping develop into helpful children concerned with the welfare and rights of others?

When seeking the origins of morality, questions of when and how morality *emerges* may seem inescapable. Answers to questions about emergence usually come in two forms. According to *learning* views, children learn morality from adults. According to nativist views, children are born with a moral sense. The dichotomy between learning and nativist views is often taken for granted: Contributors to a recent *Atlas of Moral Psychology* were asked to state whether morality was learned or innate [Gray & Graham, 2018]. Indeed, the learning and nativist views have shaped debates on moral development for decades [Damon, 1999; Turiel, 2015]. Most recently, groundbreaking studies with infants prompted discussions of whether some moral capabilities are innate, emerging independently of relevant social experiences [Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006].

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Despite their pedigree, learning and nativist views tend to stalemate in debates about how morality emerges [Allen & Bickhard, 2013; Lewkowicz, 2011; Spencer et al., 2009]. The stalemates result, in part, from insufficient definitions of key terms, such as “morality” or “innate” [Dahl, 2014]. Without definitions, and corresponding operationalizations, it is difficult to agree on the evidence needed resolve the debates [Dahl, 2014; Turiel & Dahl, in press]. A further difficulty is that most agree that both environments and genes contribute to development.

This article proposes an alternative starting point for research on early morality. This starting point rejects the question of when morality emerges and the dichotomy between innate and learned characteristics. Instead, I propose that morality develops gradually through a series of interactions between children and their environments [Carpendale, Hammond, & Atwood, 2013; Dahl, Waltzer, & Gross, 2018; Piaget, 1965; Turiel, 1983].

This alternative starting point consists of three fundamental claims: (a) *Providing explicit definitions of morality is crucial for advancing debates* [Dahl, 2014; Turiel, 1983]. Any inquiry into morality relies on explicit or implicit definitions of morality, by virtue of the phenomena they seek to explain or the stimuli they use in their experiments. Without explicit definitions, it can be impossible to identify points of agreement and disagreement between theories. (b) *Morality consists of several elements that develop gradually and not always in synchrony* [Dahl & Freda, 2017; Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018]. These elements include concerns with the welfare of others, conceptions of rights and fairness, and the ability to make categorical judgments about right and wrong. There is no point in development *when* morality emerges, nor is there a single process that explains *how* it develops. (c) *Developmental change always involves coactions among genetic, neural, behavioral, and environmental processes* [Gottlieb, 1991; Spencer et al., 2009]. For this reason, no developmental transition can be attributed solely or primarily to genetic or environmental processes. Research may focus on one level of analysis without implying this level of analysis takes precedence over others. For instance, studying moral development through social interactions does not imply that social interactions are somehow more important than genetic processes [Dahl, 2018].

In the subsequent sections, I elaborate on each of these three claims. Then, based on this alternative starting point, I propose an *interactionist* and *constructivist* approach to early morality [Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018; Piaget, 1965; Turiel, 1983]. I then apply this approach in a discussion of how children construct moral orientations toward helping and harming others through everyday social interactions.

An Alternative Conceptual Starting Point for Research on Early Moral Development An Explicit Definition of Morality is Needed

All inquiries about morality and its development presume a definition of morality [for different perspectives, see Greene, 2007; Wynn & Bloom, 2014]. In research on early moral development, a definition of morality articulates what a theory is seeking to explain: Without knowing what we mean by “morality,” we would not know how to explain how morality develops [Dahl, 2014].

Definitions of morality guide researchers' choices of stimuli. For instance, when conducting empirical research on whether infants make moral judgments, researchers must rely on an implicit definition of morality for deciding which situations to present to infants and what to count as a moral judgment [Hamlin, 2013]. In one line of research, infants' preferences for puppets helping or hindering another puppet from reaching its goal have been taken as indicators of moral judgments [Hamlin, 2013; Wynn & Bloom, 2014]. However, without an explicit definition, it is impossible to know whether the researchers consider such preferences sufficient for morality, a part of morality, or a precursor for morality.

A lack of consideration for definitions of morality can cause major miscommunication in scholarly debates. For illustration, consider a recent debate in moral psychology. Haidt and Graham [2007] criticized Social Domain Theory [Turiel, 1983, 2015] for defining morality in terms of harm, rights, and fairness. According to Haidt and Graham, many people also treat issues of loyalty, authority, and cleanliness as moral issues. However, in their empirical research, Haidt and Graham used the word "morality" to refer to any kind of right and wrong consideration. Ironically, a central contention of Social Domain Theory is precisely that people base evaluations of right and wrong on considerations other than harm, rights, and fairness, such as considerations about loyalty or authority [Killen & Smetana, 2015; Turiel, 1983]. Thus, at the root of one major controversy in contemporary moral psychology are misunderstandings about what other researchers mean by the word "morality." Similar miscommunication can also arise in the developmental literature [Dahl, 2014; Hamlin, 2014; Tafreshi, Thompson, & Racine, 2014].

There are likely many reasons why scholars are reluctant to provide explicit definitions of morality. One potential problem is that the word morality has multiple meanings in everyday language and philosophy [Greene, 2007; Wynn & Bloom, 2014]. Still, there are many concepts in psychology and other fields with multiple everyday meanings (e.g. emotion, intelligence), and this does not prevent researchers from providing scientific definition of those concepts [Dahl, 2014]. Alternatively, researchers may think that a definition of morality commits them to a view on what is morally right and what is morally wrong. However, a psychological definition of morality does not commit researchers to a view on what is objectively right and wrong any more than a psychological definition of religion commits researchers to believing in gods. What matters, from a psychological point of view, is how individuals construe and judge situations, not whether those construals and judgments ultimately turn out to be true.

The present article defines morality as obligatory concerns with welfare, rights, and justice, as well as thoughts, emotions, or actions based on these concerns [Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018; Turiel & Dahl, in press]. The term "concern" is used here to mean issues people care about and want to promote, other things being equal [Dahl, Campos, & Witherington, 2011; Turiel & Dahl, in press]. Moral concerns are viewed as obligatory in the sense that they are viewed as applicable to all contexts and wrong to neglect. This definition does not aim to cover all meanings of "moral" in everyday language, but is based on philosophical accounts and past developmental research [Kant, 1785; Kohlberg, 1971; Rawls, 1971; Turiel, 1983].

Morality Consists of Several Elements that Develop Gradually and Not Always in Synchrony

Morality has many parts. Most agree that morality includes concerns with welfare, rights and fairness. Moreover, a developed morality includes the capacity for categorical judgments about right and wrong, emotional reactions (e.g. empathy or moral outrage), actions (e.g. helpful actions). None of these components are fully present at birth, but develop gradually over several years.

The elements of morality do not develop in synchrony. Simple empathic reactions and helpful actions emerge by early in the second year, but there is no evidence of categorical judgments of right and wrong until two or three years of age [Dahl, 2015; Dahl & Kim, 2014; Roth-Hanania, Davidov, & Zahn-Waxler, 2011; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012; Smetana et al., 2012; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992]. In the first half of the second year, children become more helpful, but they also hit, bite, and kick others increasingly often, even without provocation or frustration [Dahl, 2015, 2016a; Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018; Hay, 2017]. In fact, some studies have found positive correlations between aggressive actions and empathic responsiveness among young children, even though these variables are negatively correlated among older children and adolescents [see Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015]. The elements of morality continue to transform beyond the preschool age. Three-year-olds have concepts of property rights and prioritize equality in resource distribution, but are less likely than older children to endorse rights to free speech or prioritize equity (e.g. merit or need) in resource distribution [Helwig, 2006; Rizzo & Killen, 2016].

The above discussion implies that morality does not *emerge*, in the sense of going from completely absent to completely present. Rather, early moral development involves several unsynchronized developments that call for separate inquiries. Studying these developments require delineation of the elements under investigation, such as orientations toward helping or harming, and consideration of how (if at all) these elements form part of a developed morality [Dahl, Waltzer et al., 2018]. For instance, while young children's compliance is relevant to morality [Kochanska & Aksan, 2006], individuals do not always think that compliance is morally right. Children typically say it would be wrong to harm others or steal even if parents permitted these behaviors [Dahl & Kim, 2014; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetana et al., 2012]. Moreover, individuals often reject norms in their societies as unfair, for instance norms that discriminate against women [Turiel & Dahl, in press]. Thus, while an understanding of how compliance develops may inform our understanding of moral development, compliance is not an inherently moral issue.

Developmental Change Always Involves Coactions Among Genetic, Neural, Behavioral, and Environmental Processes

Research in developmental biology has shown that developmental transitions involve coactions between genetic, neural, behavioral, and environmental processes [Lewkowicz, 2011; Spencer et al., 2009]. The expression of genes is contingent on the cell environment,

which in turn is influenced by extracellular activity [Moore, 2015]. For these reasons, no developmental transition, prenatal or postnatal, can ever be ascribed to environmental or genetic processes alone. The question is not whether genes or social interactions matter for moral development, but how [Anastasi, 1958; Dahl, 2018]. In investigating developmental processes, researchers may ask whether particular environmental or genetic processes play a role in a given transition. For instance, researchers may ask whether adults scaffold infant helping at home [they do, Dahl, 2015] and whether adult scaffolding increases helping when infants begin to help [it does, Dahl, Satlof-Bedrick, et al., 2017]. Still, these findings do not indicate that genes are unimportant nor that scaffolding is the sole cause of infant helping [Dahl, 2018].

The fact that every developmental transition involves coaction between genetic, environmental, and other processes is difficult to reconcile with standard nativist and learning views. These views seek to explain developments as a function of either genetic or learning processes. Abandoning the nativist-learning dichotomy leaves a number of approaches, ranging from research on the transcription and translation of DNA to sociological analyses. The remainder of this paper proposes one approach compatible with this starting point: an interactionist and constructivist approach.

An Interactionist and Constructivist Approach to Early Morality

The present interactionist and constructivist approach rests on the starting point discussed above, emphasizing the need for definitions, gradual and nonsynchronized developments, and coaction between individual and environmental processes. It also builds on past constructivist views of moral development [Kohlberg, 1971; Piaget, 1965; Turiel, 1983]. The next section describes the two central tenets of the present approach. First, moral development happens through constant interaction with the social (and nonsocial) environment. Second, children have a constructive role in moral development, and are not passive recipients of parental commands. In the final part of the paper, I will exemplify this approach through a discussion of two key developments in early morality: the development of orientations toward helping and harming others in the first years of life.

Constant Interactions

From birth, children's behaviors elicit reactions from others, which in turn guide children's actions [Richards & Bernal, 1972; Tronick, 1989]. In this way, children's lives are characterized by constant interactions with caregivers and others. As they get older, children's helpful and harmful behaviors elicit reactions from others, for instance in the form of encouragement, praise, or prohibitive signals [see Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018].

All developmental theories involve assumptions and claims about children's everyday interactions, elsewhere termed *ecological commitments* [Dahl, 2017]. For instance, nativist theories propose that infants are not encouraged to help others in everyday life, or that they lack other morally relevant experiences in early life [Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin et al., 2007; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2009]. These claims about everyday interactions often go untested. Testing these ecological commitments can involve direct observations of

naturally occurring events or interviews with caregivers [Dahl, 2015, 2016b]. Naturalistic observations can yield novel insights that challenge past claims about everyday experiences, for instance documenting that parents frequently encourage infants' everyday helping from early in the second year [Dahl, 2015]. Thus, a central tenet of the present approach is that it is necessary to study children's everyday interactions in order to understand of children develop through those interactions.

Development through Construction

Construction refers to the active role of the individual in interpreting events, transforming information, and adopting new concerns and goals. Constructivism has a long history in developmental psychology and in research on moral development [Kohlberg, 1971; Piaget, 1965; Turiel, 1983, 2015]. In a constructivist view, the development of morality is neither the general acceptance of messages received from others nor the unfolding of a genetic blueprint. Children interpret and evaluate signals from parents, teachers, and peers, and do not passively accept commands from others. For instance, toddlers frequently disobey and negotiate with their parents [Dahl, 2016b; Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Ginius-Brown, 1987]. By three to four years of age, most children do not think parents or teachers can make it permissible to harm others [Dahl & Kim, 2014; Nucci & Weber, 1995]. Moreover, children at this age think certain personal issues, for instance about which clothes to wear, should be decided by children and not parents [Nucci & Weber, 1995].

While children do not unconditionally *accept* all commands from others, they do *incorporate* social information. Indeed, signals from others are crucial ways by which children come to understand others' intentions, expectations, and reactions. When young children hit, bite, or kick others, victims as well as observers convey that harmful acts cause pain to others [Dahl, 2016b; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetana, 1984; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992]. Increasingly over the second and third years, young children respond to signals of distress by concerned expressions and efforts to comfort the person in distress [Roth-Hanania et al., 2011; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992]. In the second year, children also guide their actions based on encouraging or discouraging emotional signals from others [Dahl & Tran, 2016; Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985]. In short, in a constructivist view, children incorporate information from their social environment, but do not unconditionally accept such messages. Children, like adults, interpret, and evaluate messages from others as they form their own moral concepts, concerns, and judgments [Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Turiel, 2002].

Developing Orientations toward Harming and Helping Others

Orientations toward others' welfare are central to morality [Dahl, Gingo, Uttich, & Turiel, 2018; Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018; Turiel, 2015]. Agents can directly influence others' welfare by harming or helping them. By early to middle childhood, children generally evaluate harmful acts negatively and helpful acts positively [Kahn, 1992; Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990; Nucci, Turiel, & Roded, 2017]. Evaluations are reflected in children's judgments, justifications, and protest behaviors in response to social events [Dahl & Kim, 2014; Schmidt et al., 2012; Smetana et al., 2012]. The development of these evaluations is

consistent with developments in children's behaviors. From preschool age to adolescence, harmful actions become less frequent and helpful actions become more frequent [Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2015; Hay, 2017].

Moral orientations toward other harming and helping others change dramatically during the first three years of life. These changes have been a topic of debate among scholars of early morality [Dahl, 2014, 2015; Hamlin, 2013; Tomasello, 2016; Wynn & Bloom, 2014]. These developments are interesting in part because they at times seem paradoxical, illustrating how the different elements of morality do not always develop in synchrony. As noted, early in the second year, children engage in more helpful actions, but also more harmful actions [Dahl, 2015, 2016a].

Developing a Moral Orientation toward Harming Others

By harmful actions, I mean intentional acts of force toward another person's body that can cause pain, for instance by hitting, kicking, or biting. In exceptional circumstances, some harmful actions are considered acceptable by many if not most children and adults. These actions include acts of self-defense, the use of force in contact sports, or the use of force toward one person to save several others [Dahl, Gingo et al., 2018; Nucci et al., 2017]. Still, a key feature of a developed morality in all communities is that it is generally wrong to intentionally cause harm to others [Turiel, 2015].

Interactions surrounding harmful actions.

Hitting, kicking, or biting others is a part of early development for most children and their families. Children's first acts of harm toward others appear before the first birthday [Hay, 2017]. These acts increase during the second year, when most infants hit, bite, or kick others [Dahl, 2016a; Hay, 2017]. One naturalistic study found that, on average, infants engaged in one act of harm per hour at this age [Dahl, 2016a].

Acts of harm often elicit negative reactions from other children and adults. In the second year, these negative reactions take a variety of forms, including physical interventions, verbal commands, expressions of pain, and angry emotional tones [see Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018 for review]. Others also use verbal explanations in response to children's harmful actions, for instance telling children that hitting hurts others, and these explanations become more common as children become older and more verbal [see Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018].

As early as the second year, acts of harm elicit different social signals than creation of mess, violations of social conventions, or acts that may affect the child's own welfare [Dahl, 2016b; Smetana, 1984; see Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018]. When children create disorder or break things, parents use positive emotional tones, compromise, or refer to the material consequences of the child's action more frequently than when children harm others [Dahl, 2016b; Dahl, Sherlock, Campos, & Theunissen, 2014]. In short, during the second year and beyond, children often receive signals indicating that others dislike hitting, biting, or kicking, and that they view these moral transgressions as different from other types of unwanted behaviors. However, these distinct social signals do not automatically lead

children to view harmful actions as wrong. These signals need to be incorporated as children construct their views of moral right and wrong.

Construction of moral orientations toward harm.

A developed moral orientation toward physical harm involves three components. First, children need to understand that acts of harm can cause pain or discomfort. Second, children need to be concerned with preventing or reducing pain in others. Third, children need to make a negative evaluation of acts that cause pain. This last step refers to a categorical negative judgment about harming others, regardless of who is doing the harming or being harmed.

A moral orientation toward harm thus defined is not present in the first year of life, but develops over several years [Dahl, Waltzer et al., 2018]. First, there is no evidence that children are born with an understanding that acts of harm cause pain to others. There is some evidence for responsiveness to others' distress shortly after birth, but it is not clear that these reactions indicate a concern with reducing others' pain. Neonates cry more frequently after hearing the cry of another infant than after hearing their own cry [Martin & Clark, 1982]. However, neonates do not tend to cry in response to the cry of an older infant or a chimpanzee, suggesting that the neonatal "empathic" cry is not a general negative response to distress in others. Moreover, at this age, infants do not show efforts to relieve the distress of another person until about a year later, if not more [Roth-Hanania et al., 2011; Svetlova et al., 2010; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992].

Lastly, infants do not appear to make categorical evaluations of right and wrong in the first year of life. Some studies have found that, in the first year, infants prefer to look or reach toward helpful puppets over hindering puppets [Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin et al., 2007]. Importantly, however, these studies document relative preferences for one puppet over another, and not categorical evaluations of right and wrong. Infants show similar preferences based on personal taste, for instance for food [Hamlin, Mahajan, Liberman, & Wynn, 2013]. Moreover, research with older children has found that they are willing to interact with nonpreferred agents when a helpful agent is not available, suggesting that preference tasks do not demonstrate categorical evaluations of right or wrong [Dahl, Schuck, & Campos, 2013; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010].

The second year is a period of transformation in children's orientations toward harmful actions. In the first half of the second year, most infants increasingly use force toward others, for instance by hitting, biting, or kicking [Dahl, 2016a; see Dahl, Waltzer et al., 2018]. These acts do not just occur when infants are frustrated; they often occur without any frustration of the infants' goal or signs of negative emotion [Dahl, 2016a]. Rather, these unprovoked acts of harm may be forms of social exploration, which frequently elicits negative reactions from others, as noted above. During the second year, children use emotional and other social signals from others to guide their behavior. For instance, they are more likely to avoid an action that has previously elicited an angry response from an adult when that adult is watching them [Dahl & Tran, 2016; Repacholi, Meltzoff, & Olsen, 2008]. In the second half of the second year, children become increasingly likely to respond to others' distress with efforts to comfort or relieve the distress [Svetlova et al., 2010; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992].

Unprovoked acts of harm appear to decrease late in the second year, suggesting that infants are gradually becoming concerned with avoiding acts of harm [Dahl, 2016a]. In sum, children appear to be aware that others dislike harmful actions and become concerned with avoiding harm by the end of the second year of life.

By three or four years of age, most children express categorical evaluations of right and wrong based on concerns with welfare. When interviewed about hypothetical events involving harm and other moral issues, two-year-olds tend to say these actions are wrong [Smetana, Ball, Jambon, & Yoo, 2018; Smetana & Braeges, 1990]. However, it is not until around the third birthday that children appear to distinguish between moral and other violations. For instance, 34-month-olds are more likely to say that moral violations would be wrong in a different school than to say that the conventional violations would be wrong in a different school [Smetana & Braeges, 1990]. This suggests that children view acts of harm and other moral violations as wrong because of inherent features of the action (it negatively affects others' welfare) rather than the social context in which it occurs. In the third year, children also distinguish moral from other violations along several other dimensions, indicating that their judgments about harm are rooted in concerns with welfare. They justify their moral judgments on the basis of the welfare and rights of the victim, say that it would be wrong to harm others even if parents or teachers gave permission and even if there was no rule against these behaviors [Dahl & Kim, 2014; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetana et al., 2012]. These responses differ from children's responses about violations of dress codes and other social conventions, mess making, and acts that may affect the child's own welfare.

Children's categorical judgments are also reflected in their protests against observed events. Research on children's protests in moral contexts has typically focused on property violations rather than physical harm. Still, these studies support the proposition that children are capable of forming and acting on categorical judgments of right and wrong in the second and third years. To date, protests against (conventional) game violations have been demonstrated in two-year-olds, who were more likely to protest when a puppet violated a game rule than when a puppet adhered to a game rule [Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008]. In other research, three-year-olds protested when a puppet destroyed the property of another puppet [Schmidt et al., 2012; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011]. Unlike responses to conventional events, children's protests against moral violations did not depend on the group membership of the transgressor nor on whether the puppet had indicated that he no longer wanted to be part of the activity [Schmidt et al., 2012]. Some scholars have also proposed that two- to three-year-olds also begin to express negative evaluations of their own moral violations, sometimes accompanied by guilt [Mascolo & Fischer, 2007; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2016]. Thus, judgments, justifications, and protest behaviors indicate that most children have acquired a moral orientation toward harm by around three years of age.

Developing a Moral Orientation toward Helping Others

Helpful actions here refers to actions that, if completed as intended, would directly facilitate the goals of another person [Dahl, 2015]. People generally evaluate helpful actions positively, and sometimes view them as obligatory, for instance when the helpful action

saves lives [Dahl, Gingo et al., 2018; Miller et al., 1990; Nucci et al., 2017]. However, there are situations in which most view helping as wrong, for instance if the agent is helping someone steal or destroy the property of another person [Miller et al., 1990].

Interactions about helping.

From birth, infants have experiences with others responding to their needs and interests. From two months of age, infants facilitate caregivers' actions, for instance by adjusting their arms before being picked up or participating in their own feeding or dressing [Hammond, Al-Jbouri, Edwards, & Feltham, 2017; Reddy, Markova, & Wallot, 2013]. Later, caregivers commonly scaffold infants' helping at home through encouragement, thanking, praise, and other means [Brownell & The Early Social Development Research Lab, 2016; Dahl, 2015; Gralinski & Kopp, 1993]. In one study of one-year-olds, most situations in which infants helped involved encouragement, thanking, or praise [Dahl, 2015]. These findings are consistent with other research demonstrating that family members around the world often seek to involve young children in chores and other adult activities, although there is cultural variability in the ways in which parents scaffold helping [Giner Torrés & Kärtner, 2017; López, Najafi, Rogoff, & Mejía-Arauz, 2012; Rogoff, 2003].

This scaffolding appears to build on children's interest in social interaction [Dahl, 2015; Rheingold, 1982]. In an ongoing study, helping situations around the first birthday commonly began with caregivers building on infants' social interest: Infants would look toward the caregivers' activity without beginning to help, whereupon caregivers would encourage and otherwise scaffold infant involvement [Dahl, Freda, & Grubb, 2017]. As children get older, adults also provide different scaffolding, such as less praise, in response to children's developing helping tendencies [see Brownell & The Early Social Development Research Lab, 2016; Dahl, 2018].

Construction of a moral orientation toward helping.

A moral orientation toward helping involves a motivation to promote others' welfare, as well as an ability to evaluate acts of helping as required, good, or wrong based on concerns with rights and welfare [Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018]. Importantly, acts of helping do not by themselves indicate a concern with others' welfare. Children and adult may help for reasons unrelated to others' welfare [Eisenberg et al., 2015]. Indeed, below I argue that infants' first acts of helping reflect a desire for social interactions rather than a concern with others' welfare. On the present account, a moral orientation toward helping, as defined above, does not emerge until the preschool years.

Infants enjoy social interactions from very early in life. Most infants begin to smile in response to social stimulation around four to six weeks of age [Sroufe, 1996]. In the second half of the first year, caregivers and infants incorporate objects into their interactions, for instance when adults show a toy to the infant and let the infant play with it [Brownell, 2011; Gustafson, Green, & West, 1979]. Thus, by late in the first year, infants have the motivational and cognitive capacities to engage in social interactions about objects with adults.

The early propensity to hand objects to others in the context of helping and sharing is influenced by caregiver scaffolding [Dahl, Satlof-Bedrick, et al., 2017; Xu, Saether, & Sommerville, 2016]. In one study, 13- and 14-month-olds were twice as likely to hand back an out of reach object to an adult when they were encouraged and praised than when they received no encouragement or praise [Dahl, Satlof-Bedrick, et al., 2017].

The earliest forms of helping are unlikely to be based on concerns with others' welfare. Efforts to comfort others are rare in the first year and early in the second [Hay, Nash, & Pedersen, 1981; Roth-Hanania et al., 2011; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992]. At these ages, infants often show interest and negative reactions to others' distress, if they show any reaction at all. Further indicating that early helping is not generally based on concerns with welfare, one study found that expressions of distress did not increase helping among 18- and 20-month-olds [Newton, Goodman, & Thompson, 2014]. Moreover, 18-month-olds often refrain from helping others, opting to play instead of handing back an out-of-reach object [Waugh & Brownell, 2017].

Over the course of the second year and into the third, children help in an increasing array of situations with little or no explicit prompting [Dahl, Freda, et al., 2017; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006; Waugh & Brownell, 2017]. Children increasingly help others in distress, for instance by comforting [Svetlova et al., 2010; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992]. Around the second birthday, children also help in the absence of explicit cues, for instance picking up a needed object even before the adult has noticed that the object fell on the floor [Warneken, 2013]. Still, the tendency to help in a wide variety of situations does not show that toddlers make moral evaluations. Moral evaluations require that the evaluations are agent-neutral, or independent on who is helping and being helped. Merely helping others does not imply that children think helping is good or required.

Research on evaluations of helping among young children is limited. Around seven or eight years of age, children say people should help, and that it is sometimes wrong not to help [Miller et al., 1990; Nucci et al., 2017]. For instance, all 8-year-olds in a study by Nucci and colleagues [2017] said it would be wrong not to help an injured child by getting the child's parents. Children likely make moral evaluations of helping before eight years of age. In fact, children as young as four years of age could reason about dilemmas involving helpful actions [Eisenberg, Lennon, & Roth, 1983]. However, this research presented situations in which the needs of a protagonist were pitted against the needs of others. Such conflicted situations tend to elicit different responses than unconflicted situations in which the protagonist can help without substantial personal sacrifice [Nucci et al., 2017].

Conclusion

This paper proposed an alternative starting point for research on early morality. I argued that a definition of morality is crucial, that morality consists of multiple elements that do not always develop in synchrony, and that developmental transitions involve coactions between genetic, neurological, behavioral, and environmental processes. Based on this starting point, the paper proposed an interactionist and constructivist approach to early moral development.

Most children construct moral orientations toward harming and helping others through social interactions in the first three years.

Recent research has yielded several key insights into the construction of moral orientations through early interactions. Most infants harm and help others in everyday life. These acts engender reactions from others, such as strong negative reactions to harmful acts or various forms of scaffolding of helping acts. Children in turn use these signals to guide their subsequent actions. By the second birthday, most children show clear concerns with promoting the welfare of others, for instance by comforting a person in distress. By age three, most children have begun to make evaluative judgments of right and wrong based on concerns for welfare and rights, which are central to moral orientations toward harming and helping.

The present approach points to several issues for future research. One is the integration of research on children's everyday interactions with experimental research on children's concerns and understandings [Dahl, 2017; Turiel, 1983]. All theories of moral development make assumptions about the kinds of experiences children have and do not have, yet little research investigates these assumptions. A second major issue is the acquisition of evaluative judgments of right and wrong, which appears to take place during the third year of life. What leads children to start perceiving actions in terms of right and wrong based on moral concerns with welfare and rights? Few theoretical proposals and little research have sought to explain this major transformation in early moral development [Dahl, Waltzer, et al., 2018; Piaget, 1965; Schmidt & Rakoczy, in press; Tomasello, 2016]. A third issue is the development of children's judgments about helping. As noted, there is little research on children's judgments about helping prior to eight years of age. There are well-documented individual and cultural differences in children's propensities to help with household work and promote the goals of others [see Eisenberg et al., 2015; López et al., 2012]. These differences in behavioral propensities may in part reflect different views on when and how it is good or obligatory to help others [Miller et al., 1990].

Beyond preschool age, individuals evaluate harmful actions negatively and helpful actions positively in the absence of conflicting considerations [Dahl, Gingo, et al., 2018; Nucci et al., 2017]. However, in their lives, individuals do encounter conflictful situations in which moral concerns with welfare are pitted against rights or other considerations [Dahl, Gingo, et al., 2018; Nucci et al., 2017]. As children get older, their ways of coordinating these competing considerations change [Nucci et al., 2017; Rizzo & Killen, 2016]. Thus, as noted by Nucci and colleagues [2017], there are both continuities (e.g. in concerns with welfare) and discontinuities (e.g. in forms of coordination) in moral development from childhood to adulthood. Thus, while the early transformations of children's orientations toward helping and harming are radical, they are merely the beginnings of moral development.

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