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Located in the thin of it: Young children's use of thin moral concepts

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ABSTRACT

One important socio-cultural medium through which young children's moral understanding is cultivated is parent/child discourse. Of particular interest to us was young children's use of basic ('thin') evaluative concepts (*good*, *bad*, *right* and *wrong*), which are ubiquitous in everyday discourse and serve as a potential bridge from the non-moral to the moral domain. We investigated 14 2–5-year-old children's (and their parents') use of thin evaluative concepts and found that while they frequently used *good* and *bad* to morally evaluate other people's and their own psychological/dispositional states and behaviors—as well as, less frequently, to highlight relevant standards, expectations and rules—they did not use *right* and *wrong*. In contrast, a sample of US written and spoken public conversation revealed that adults *did*. Reasons for this are discussed, along with the frequency of different types of moral evaluations, differences between children and their parents, and age-related trends.

KEYWORDS

Moral concepts; early moral development; parent/child moral conversations

Introduction

Young children's developing understanding of the moral domain is inevitably facilitated by their socio-cultural interactions, their daily exchanges and negotiations with parents, siblings and peers (Bloom, 2010; Dunn, 1987, 1988; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Hoffman, 1982, 2000; Kagan, 1981; Killen, 1991; Kochanska, 1997; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Lamb, 1991, 1993; Rinaldi & Howe, 2003; Spinrad & Losoya, 1999; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979). Perhaps one of the most important socio-cultural mediums through which this takes place is language (Lamb, 1991; Snow, 1987), which provides the conceptual tools necessary to identify and label characteristics and events as *morally relevant* and to interpret and discuss them with other people (Noddings, 1994).

If this is right, then an analysis of children's early use of moral concepts could reveal much about their developing expression and understanding of their internal moral sense, and their cognitive grasp of the moral domain more broadly. Although caution is certainly warranted in assuming that talk mirrors understanding, research in other areas of social

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cognition has demonstrated not only that young children understand much about interpersonal communication (e.g., Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Garvey & Hogan, 1973) but also that exploration of children's earliest utterances has been revelatory of their internal lives—e.g., their interests and beliefs (e.g., Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Dunn, 1987; Hickling & Wellman, 2001), their understanding of mental states (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995), of causation in human behavior (Hickling & Wellman, 2001), of emotion (Lagattuta & Wellman, 2002) and of the distinction between reality and appearance (Woolley & Wellman, 1990), among other things.

Some researchers have already successfully utilized parent/child (and child/child) conversations to explore early moral development. Examinations of parent/child conversations have shown, for example, that by 2 years of age, children are aware of standards of correctness and violation (Lamb, 1993) and openly communicate about obligation and blame with respect to both others' feelings and familial/social rules (Dunn, 1987; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987), that they focus more on others' (e.g., a sibling's) transgressions than their own (Dunn & Munn, 1986; Ross & den Bak-Lammers, 1998) and that bringing the parent's attention to such transgressions, both to receive parental support and to enforce social/moral standards, increases in the preschool years (den Bak & Ross, 1996).

In addition, researchers have found preschool to early elementary aged children to be active and interested participants in both teacher- and child-driven conversations about real and hypothetical scenarios, making clear distinctions between social/conventional and moral issues (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, Killen, & Turiel, 1991) and displaying a developing understanding of both care- and justice-oriented concerns (Berkowitz & Grych, 2000; Cassidy, Chu, & Dahlsgaard, 1997; Farr Darling, 2001; Garrod & Beal, 1993; Garrod, Beal, & Shin, 1990).

There has been significantly less research focusing on children's early introduction to, and employment of, specific moral concepts—in particular, their use of the most basic of evaluative concepts: *good*, *bad*, *right* and *wrong*. Philosophers refer to these as 'thin' moral concepts (Blackburn, 1998; Gibbard, 1992; Williams, 1985), and their importance comes from their 'definitional priority' (Hare, 1963; Smith, 2010) over other moral concepts, which depend upon these thin concepts for their moral status. So, for example, being *mean* is morally sanctioned because it is *bad* (or *wrong*); being *nice* is morally praiseworthy because it is *good* (or *right*). And while being *mean* and being *deceitful* are bad/wrong for different reasons—just as being *nice* and being *brave* are good/right for different reasons—in all cases their moral significance comes from the badness/goodness (rightness/wrongness) they generate.

The key point is that, conceptually speaking, moral evaluation starts with and ultimately returns to *thin* moral evaluation—to people, things and actions being *good*, *bad*, *right* or *wrong*. Thus, thin concepts serve as the conceptual foundation of children's earliest understanding of the moral domain, making young children's exposure to, and use of, these concepts worthy of investigation.

Of course, these concepts are not exclusive to the moral domain, but are broadly used for non-moral evaluation as well (e.g., *good* cookie, *right* answer)—whereas other concepts (e.g., *cruel*, *brave*) are not. Given that young children's earliest encounters with evaluation are likely non-moral (e.g., something tasting good; something feeling bad), they may serve as an early bridge from the non-moral into the moral domain, as children begin to learn

that things can be good/bad or right/wrong for a variety of reasons, some of which (e.g., hurting or helping someone else) have moral significance.

Previous research

Snow's (1987) pioneering pilot analysis of one child's (Ross) moral use of evaluative concepts from 2.6 to 6.1 years old showed, among other things, that *good* and *bad* were used by the child to refer to the moral qualities of human actions (e.g., 'that was a good thing to do'), human dispositional/psychological states (e.g., 'you're being a good boy') and products of the human mind (e.g., 'those are bad ideas'). Specifically, the features that seemed most morally salient to the child were good/bad *people*, good/bad *ideas* and good/bad *words*.

Wright and Bartsch's (2008) in-depth study of two children's (2.0–5.5 years old) conversations with their parents revealed a similar pattern. When making moral evaluations, both children appealed primarily to their own and others' feelings, needs and welfare as reasons for either doing a *good* thing or prohibiting a *bad* thing—and only rarely did they appeal to obedience/punishment or other external motivations. Although neither child talked much about moral rules/standards, both frequently evaluated the *goodness* and *badness* of people and their behaviors.

Current study

Two unexpected findings in the Wright and Bartsch (2008) study are the topic of our current investigation. First, with regard to thin moral evaluative concepts, they found that while both children and their caregivers frequently used *good* and *bad* to communicate about moral issues, they almost never used *right* and *wrong* in moral evaluation, though they used both quite frequently in non-moral evaluations (e.g., evaluations of truth/accuracy: *wrong* shoe, *right* answer) from the earliest transcripts. This finding, if generalizable, suggests something interesting about children's earliest cognitive grasp of the moral domain—namely, that children experience, and are introduced to, moral concerns as being more closely tied to desires, feelings and values (*good/bad*) than to rules/standards, correctness and obligation (*right/wrong*). In other words, children's early conceptual grasp of the moral domain may be grounded in *aretaic*—rather than *deontic*—concepts. If correct, this may provide new insight into why researchers adopting a largely deontic focus on development (e.g., Piaget, 1965/1932; Kohlberg, 1969) have regarded children as being largely 'pre-moral' until middle childhood.

Second, they found both children's and their caregivers' use of these (and other) moral concepts spiked at age 2, rapidly declining after that through to the age of 5.5 years old. They speculated that this might reflect the so-called 'terrible twos' in which the child's increasing autonomy, mobility and active participation in family activities brings on sudden bursts of self-assertion (Bullock & Lutkenhaus, 1989, 1990) and parent/child conflict (Dunn, 1988; Laible & Thompson, 2002).

While both of these findings may have important implications for early moral development, they clearly require further investigation; we cannot reasonably draw generalizable conclusions from a sample of two children. Therefore, we decided to investigate a larger sample of young children, using transcripts of a similar nature to those previously employed. Our hypothesis was that a larger sample of children would show these same patterns: (1)

they would use value concepts (good/bad) more frequently than deontic concepts (right/wrong) for moral evaluation and (2) the frequency of their use of both sets of concepts for moral evaluation would be greatest at 2.0 years and would decrease from there.

Methods

Database

Our study involved transcripts selected from the Child Language Data Exchange System online language database (CHILDES; MacWhinney, 2000) for 14 children (8 boys and 6 girls, 12 US families and 2 British families; see Table 1 for more specific information). These children were selected in order to match the at-home parent/child conversational context found in the Wright and Bartsch (2008) sample. In other words, both child and parents had to be English speaking, their transcripts had to involve conversations that occurred at the child's home (rather than a research lab), they had to be dominantly composed of child/parent (rather than child/researcher) conversations, and they had to have been collected periodically over a span of time between the ages of 1 and 5 years old. Despite the large repository available on the CHILDES website, this narrowed the transcript options down substantially, resulting in the transcript selection utilized for this study.

Because of the nature of the CHILDES database, no cross-child standardization of transcripts exists. For example, the length of the transcripts, both in the length of each recorded conversation and the span of time (longitudinally speaking) covered, varied for each child. This variation was controlled for in our analyses by relativizing the frequency of use to each transcript—e.g., the number of times each child used *good* was divided by the overall number of words in his/her transcript to obtain a standardized measure of general evaluative use, and the number of times *good* was used in a moral context was divided by the overall number of times *good* was used to obtain a standardized measure of moral evaluative use, etc.

Coding excerpts

The CHILDES transcripts were downloaded and a computerized search for child and parent (father and mother) uses of the four target evaluative concepts (*good*, *bad*, *right* and *wrong*) was conducted, a procedure that generated conversation excerpts containing a window of conversation centered on a target concept line—as exemplified below (emphasis on target concept line)—for each line in the transcripts that contained a target concept.

Our 7-line window (3 lines above and 3 below the target concept line) expanded upon the 5-line window size used in previous research (Wright & Bartsch, 2008), providing additional context for identifying target concepts as being used for either moral or non-moral evaluation.

File 'adam03.cha': line 1474. Keyword: good

*CHI: play toy up.

*CHI: play toy up.

*MOT:<pick the play toys up>.

***MOT: that's a good boy.**

*CHI: good boy.

*CHI: one # two.

*CHI: ok.

Table 1. List of children included in the study.

Child	Corpora	Age Range	Demographic Information
Peter	Bloom, Hood, and Lightbown (1974)	1.9–3.2	Caucasian, first-born, upper-middle class w/ college-educated parents
Adam	Brown (1973)	2.3–5.2	Black, child of middle class, educated parents (minister and school teacher)
Eve	Brown (1973)	1.6–2.3	first-born, middle to upper class professional family
Shem	Clark (1978)	2.2–3.2	
Trevor	Demetras (1989)	2.1–3.12	son of academic parents
Anne	Theakston, Lieven, Pine, and Rowland (2001)	1.10–2.9	1.10–2.9
Nichole	Theakston, Lieven, Pine, and Rowland (2001)	1.10–2.9	
Emily	Nelson (1989)	1.9–3.0	child of academic with severe visual impairment
Seth	Peters (1987)	1.8–3.10	
Naomi	Sachs (1983)	1.1–5.1	child of academic
Nathan	Snow (1980)	2.5–3.9	child of academic
Nina	Suppes (1974)	1.11–3.3	middle class homes, professional parents
Matty	Weist and Zevenbergen (2008)	2.3–5.0	
Roman	Weist and Zevenbergen (2008)	2.2–4.7	

Coding scheme

Moral vs. non-moral evaluation.

First, we read through each excerpt and distinguished between moral and non-moral uses (e.g., *good* cookies, one's *right* foot) of the target concepts in parent/child conversations. In order for each concept's use to count as *moral*, it had to have been used for the evaluation of physical or psychological/emotional harm, injury or hurt caused to self or others—also, harm to objects (Kagan, 1981); discussions of prosocial or antisocial behavior; demonstrations of caring, concern, empathy for others (person, animal or object); discussions of upholding obligations (following rules, keeping promises, doing what is expected etc.) and meeting social expectations/norms. This level of coding allowed us to establish the frequency of moral use (relative to overall use) for each concept for the children and their caregivers.

During the coding, we encountered a coding issue with *right*. Children and their caregivers used *right* in a moral context in two distinct ways: (1) to make a moral evaluation (e.g., 'yes, that would be the *right* thing to do' or 'you know that would not be *right*'); and (2) to confirm a moral evaluation (e.g., 'she's being a bad girl, *right*?', or 'that's *right*, good boys don't fight'). Though the latter arguably *highlights* the moral relevance of certain people, actions and events, we nonetheless felt that (strictly speaking) in those instances, *right* was not being employed as a *moral* concept (though, in the examples given, *bad* and *good* were). Therefore, we included only the first of these types of uses in the results to follow.

Use and reference.

Only those target concept uses coded as *moral* underwent this second phase of coding, which involved further characterizing the identified moral conversations. Specifically, we coded for the following things:

Speaker: adult (parent) or child.

Use: the goal of the moral evaluation being performed. The coding options, which were not mutually exclusive, were to: (1) *(dis)approve*, (2) *give/ask for reasons/explanations*, or (3) *communicate feelings of self/another* and/or *motivate/engage in perspective-taking*.

Reference: the topics, characteristics and/or features of the situation the speaker was either morally evaluating or referencing as the source of the moral evaluation. The coding options, again not mutually exclusive, were: (1) *feelings/welfare of speaker*, (2) *feelings/welfare of another*, (3) *internal disposition/psychological states of speaker*, (4) *internal disposition/psychological states of another*, (5) *behavior of speaker*, (6) *behavior of another*, (7) *(dis)approval of self/other* or *obedience/punishment*, (8) *expectations/standards/ rules/laws*, and (9) *damage to objects/property*.

Unlike coding for use, reference coding required that the speaker explicitly refer to one or more of the coding options (e.g., explicitly mention the feelings of another). Thus, a speaker might be coded for '(dis)approve' in the use category but not for '(dis)approval of self/other' in the reference category unless she explicitly referred to her own or someone else's (dis)approval.

Reliability

Each child's transcript had a primary coder who coded all excerpts and a secondary coder who independently coded 25% of the excerpts (analyzing every fourth page of the excerpt report) for every target concept. Reliability was assessed first with regards to moral categorization (Cohen's κ = between .79 and 1.00). Only those excerpts judged by both coders as being *moral* were subjected to the second phase of coding. The second phase of coding was conducted by both coders independently—both coded 100% of the moral excerpts. Reliabilities for this second phase were then calculated separately for each use and reference category (Cohen's κ = between .86 and 1.00). Disagreements in coding at this level were resolved through discussion between first author and coders.

COCA—adult sample

One possible explanation for the Wright and Bartsch (2008) finding is that it reflects a general pattern of use at the population level. While an in-depth investigation of this possibility is beyond the scope of our study, we decided to nonetheless conduct a preliminary exploration by sampling the use of *good*, *bad*, *right* and *wrong* from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA; Davies, 2003), an online resource of spoken (e.g., radio sources, TV) and written English (e.g., fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic texts) in the US, covering 1990–2010. Randomly selecting 1000 uses for each concept from the database, we coded them for moral/non-moral status, using the same criteria as above.

Results

Moral vs. non-moral uses

Our first objective was to confirm the early preference for using the value (good/bad) concepts over the deontic (right/wrong) concepts in the context of moral—but not non-moral—evaluation found in Wright and Bartsch (2008).

Overall, there were 18,024 instances of the four evaluative concepts (*good*, *bad*, *right* and *wrong*) in the transcripts, which was 0.7% of the total number of words in the transcripts: 4779 instances of *good*, 571 instances of *bad*, 12,166 instances of *right* and 508 instances

of *wrong*. Of these instances, 816 (or 4.5% of the 18,024) were employed to make *moral* evaluations: 449 (9.4% of the 4779) of the instances of *good*, 340 (59.5% of the 571) of the instances of *bad*, 11 (0.1% of the 12,166) of the instances of *right* and 16 (3.1% of the 508) of the instances of *wrong*.

Breaking things down into child and adult (parent) uses, 5259 (29%) of the 18,024 instances were child uses, 12,765 (71%) were adult uses—thus, parents used the four evaluative concepts in conversation twice as frequently as their children. However, of these uses, 5.6% of the children's 5259 uses were moral, compared to 4.1% of the 12,765 adults' uses, so the children used the concepts for moral evaluation more frequently than their caregivers, relative to overall use. The percentages of moral uses for each concept were as follows: *good* was used for moral evaluation 14.4% of the time by children, 8.4% by adults; *bad* 72.5% by children, 50.4% by adults; *right* was used 0.1% of the time by both children and adults; *wrong* was used 1.5% by children and 3.8% for adults (see Table 2 for breakdown by child).

Paired-sample t-tests revealed that the relativized frequency with which children used *good* and *bad* for moral evaluation was greater than the relativized frequency with which they used than either *right* or *wrong*, $t(13) = 4.1\text{--}4.5$, $ps = .001$, though there was no difference between their use of *good* and *bad* or their use of *right* and *wrong* for moral evaluation, $t(13) = 1.3$ and $.43$ respectively, ns . The adults' use looked very similar: they used *good* and *bad* for moral evaluation more frequently (relatively speaking) than either *right* or *wrong*, $t(13) = 3.1\text{--}9.8$, $ps < .001\text{--}.008$, and there was no difference in the frequency of their use of *right* and *wrong* for moral evaluation, $t(13) = .68$, ns . The adults did, however, use *good* for moral evaluation more frequently than they used *bad*, $t(13) = 2.5$, $p = .025$. Collectively, this supports the findings in Wright and Bartsch (2008)—of the foundational evaluative concepts, children and their parents used the *value* concepts (*good/bad*) for moral evaluation more frequently than the *deontic* concepts (*right/wrong*), even though all but two of them (Emily and Seth) used the deontic concepts more frequently than the value concepts in non-moral evaluative contexts (see Table 2).

The frequency of the children's and adults' moral use of the four concepts relative to overall use was $r = .57$, $p = .033$. Therefore, paired-sample t-tests were used to analyze group differences in frequency relative to overall use. This revealed that relative to overall use, children used *good* for moral evaluation more frequently than adults— $t(13) = 2.6$, $p = .022$ —but there were no differences between children's and adults' use of the other three concepts for moral evaluation. This suggests that young children and their parents are involved in an active—and closely aligned—bi-directional exchange, both contributing to the child's early exploration (and evaluation) of the moral domain.

Age-related changes

Examining the use of evaluative concepts for moral evaluation across time (at 6-month intervals), both child and adult moral use peaked at 2.0 years and dropped off from there (Figures 1–2). Importantly, this finding mirrors the trend found by Wright and Bartsch (2008). Restricting our analysis to the 2–3-year-old window (since this age period was fully covered by all but one of the transcripts), a repeated-measures ANOVA revealed that this decrease was significant, $F(1,26) = 6.0$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2 = .19$, and that it was more pronounced for the adults than the children, $F(1,26) = 6.0$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .18$. It was also more pronounced for their use of value concepts (*good/bad*) than for their use of deontic concepts (*right/*

Table 2. Percentages of child and adult moral use of moral concepts.

	Bad					Good				
	Child		Adult			Child		Adult		
	# of words in trans.	# of total uses	% of moral uses	# of total uses	% of moral uses	# of total uses	% of moral uses	# of total uses	% of moral uses	
Adam	332,662	30	83%	15	60%	168	10%	175	7%	
Anne	235,009	1	0%	6	17%	37	11%	282	9%	
Emily	25,291	4	100%	2	0%	42	14%	89	8%	
Eve	117,719	6	33%	6	17%	28	14%	174	22%	
Matt	223,852	30	83%	41	46%	56	27%	427	7%	
Naomi	119,188	18	44%	24	38%	70	40%	214	10%	
Nathan	168,126	4	25%	32	28%	26	15%	360	11%	
Nicole	206,326	7	43%	8	63%	14	21%	310	10%	
Nina	341,114	25	52%	22	59%	44	9%	216	10%	
Peter	273,579	30	83%	24	67%	120	7%	501	4%	
Roman	139,743	17	100%	33	61%	34	21%	329	3%	
Seth	97,484	10	10%	17	12%	110	7%	390	4%	
Shem	237,863	19	84%	89	58%	26	8%	387	6%	
Trevor	71,382	35	89%	16	94%	31	26%	119	24%	
Total	2589,338	236	73%	335	51%	806	15%	3973	8%	

	Right				Wrong			
	Child		Adult		Child		Adult	
	# of total uses	% of moral uses	# of total uses	% of moral uses	# of total uses	% of moral uses	# of total uses	% of moral uses
Adam	511	0.2%	347	0.0%	46	0%	29	0%
Anne	83	0.0%	900	0.0%	16	0%	40	0%
Emily	16	0.0%	47	0.0%	3	33%	0	0%
Eve	133	0.0%	509	0.6%	5	0%	26	0%
Matt	186	0.0%	845	0.0%	5	0%	18	0%
Naomi	120	0.8%	284	0.4%	4	0%	18	0%
Nathan	125	0.0%	650	0.2%	17	0%	46	15%
Nicole	187	0.0%	639	0.0%	8	13%	71	6%
Nina	413	0.0%	521	0.0%	2	0%	30	0%
Peter	1718	0.1%	1124	0.3%	21	0%	65	0%
Roman	188	0.0%	384	0.0%	4	0%	3	0%
Seth	63	0.0%	342	0.0%	0	0%	5	0%
Shem	223	0.0%	1298	0.0%	4	0%	12	8%
Trevor	116	0.0%	194	0.0%	0	0%	10	20%
Total	4082	0.1%	8084	0.1%	135	2%	373	4%

wrong), $F(3,78) = 2.87, p = .042, \eta^2 = .01$ —though the change for both types of concepts was significant: value, $F(3,78) = 3.1, p = .033, \eta^2 = .11$; deontic, $F(3,78) = 3.5, p = .02, \eta^2 = .12$.

Uses and references

Both children and adults used these concepts for *moral* evaluation primarily (60.3% of children, 55.3% of adults) to express (dis)approval, typically about someone's behavior or an outcome. Next, they used them to give or ask for reasons/explanations, typically about why something should/should not be done or have been done (39% children, 43.7% adults). They only rarely used the concepts to express feelings/sympathy or engage in/motivate perspective taking (0.3% children, 2.1% adults; Table 3).

Breaking it down by concept, *bad* was used by both children and adults most frequently to give/ask for reasons/explanations (children: 74.1%; adults: 58%), whereas *good* was used most frequently for disapproval (children: 74%; adults: 66.7%). The little that *right* and



Figure 1. Difference in moral use by age (6-month intervals).

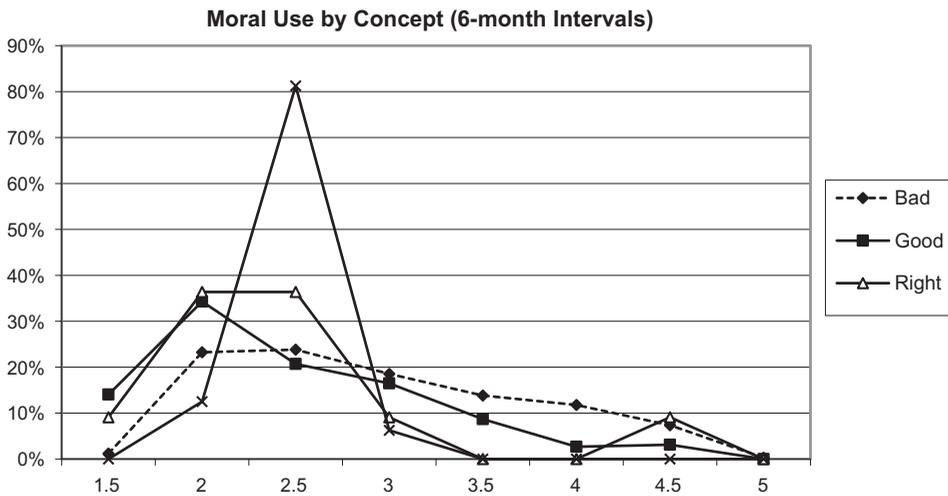


Figure 2. Difference in moral use by concept and age (6-month intervals).

wrong were used in moral evaluation, both children and adults used *right* to give/ask for reasons/ explanations (children: 66.7%; adults: 87.5%) and children used *wrong* for disapproval/ obedience (100%), while adults used it mainly to give/ask for reasons/explanations (85.7%; Table 3).

COCA—adult sample

In the COCA sample, we found a substantial decrease in the use of *bad* for moral evaluation, relative to our child/parent sample (28.8% vs. 59.5%, respectively), with a corresponding increase in the use of *wrong* for moral evaluation (20.8% vs. 3.1%). This represents a clear role for both negative value and deontic concepts in adults’ spoken and written public moral

Table 3. Percentages of children and adult uses and references.

	Children				Adults					
	Bad	Good	Right	Wrong	Total	Bad	Good	Right	Wrong	Total
(Dis)approval	50.9%	74.1%	33.3%	100.0%	60.3%	38.5%	66.7%	12.5%	14.3%	55.3%
Give/ask reasons	74.1%	25.0%	66.7%	0.0%	39.0%	58.0%	33.6%	87.5%	85.7%	43.7%
Feelings/perspective	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	3.0%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%
Feelings/welfare of others	5.8%	2.6%	33.3%	0.0%	4.8%	7.7%	6.3%	12.5%	0.0%	6.7%
Feelings/welfare of self	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%
Psychological states of others	73.7%	41.4%	0.0%	0.0%	59.6%	72.8%	49.8%	0.0%	0.0%	55.2%
Behavior of others	15.8%	32.8%	100.0%	100.0%	24.0%	20.7%	42.3%	87.5%	28.6%	35.7%
Psychological states of self	5.8%	18.1%	0.0%	0.0%	10.6%	3.6%	3.9%	0.0%	0.0%	3.6%
Behavior of self	4.1%	7.8%	0.0%	0.0%	5.5%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	71.4%	2.5%
(Dis)approval/punishment	5.3%	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	4.1%	3.3%	12.5%	7.1%	3.8%
Expectations/standards/rules	10.5%	13.8%	0.0%	0.0%	11.6%	7.1%	13.8%	62.5%	7.1%	12.2%
Damage to goods/property	2.9%	4.3%	33.3%	0.0%	3.8%	1.2%	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%	3.1%

evaluation. In addition, though the adults sampled still used *right* for moral evaluation relatively infrequently (4%), this was nonetheless more frequent than our child/parent sample (0.1%). Taken together, this suggests that somewhere along the developmental trajectory, a shift towards more *deontic-oriented* moral evaluation occurs. This is not to say that value-oriented moral evaluation ceases to be important—not only was *bad* still frequently used for moral evaluation in the COCA transcripts we sampled, but *good* was also frequently used (in fact, more frequently than in our child/parent sample: 15.4% vs. 9.4%, respectively).

Discussion

This study investigated young children's and their parents' use of the most basic ('thin') evaluative concepts: *good*, *bad*, *right* and *wrong*. Arguably, understanding and using these concepts is an important part of children's early moral development, as they provide the conceptual tools necessary to perform the most basic and ubiquitous form of evaluation, one that not only potentially bridges the non-moral and moral domains, but also generates the evaluative foundation for all other ('thicker') moral concepts.

As Wright and Bartsch (2008) first discovered, and this study has extended and confirmed, young children and their parents typically utilize only a subset of these (namely, *good* and *bad*) while only rarely using the others (*right* and *wrong*) when engaging in moral evaluation. This suggests that the bridge children first encounter between the non-moral and the moral domains is one that involves their connection to, and concern for, *values*; that, for young children, morality may essentially be about people, behaviors, thoughts, ideas and things that are *good* (vs. *bad*) for themselves and others, that produce *good* (vs. *bad*) outcomes, that possess *good* (vs. *bad*) qualities. Given that by 2 years of age, young children are already becoming adept at navigating a world comprised of needs, desires (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995) and feelings (Lagattuta & Wellman, 2002)—some of which compose their early moral sense—this entry into the moral domain seems a natural one.

It is also noteworthy that *good* and *bad* can be qualities of people, animals, objects and events (e.g., *good/bad* boy, *good/bad* deed, *good/bad* idea) in a way that *right* and *wrong* cannot—*right/wrong* are most commonly qualities of actions/outcomes (e.g., we don't speak of someone as a *right/wrong* girl, but we do speak of her *right/wrong* actions). As such, value concepts may provide young children with the linguistic flexibility to appreciate the moral importance of both qualities of people and their internal states (e.g., emotions/intentions), as well as actions (and their outcomes).

It was interesting to find such a strong focus on the internal dispositional/psychological states and behaviors of others (and for the children, their own), while at the same time much less explicit reference to standards, expectations and rules. While discussion about the goodness/badness of certain kinds of actions requires referencing norms (e.g., 'you need to raise your hand in class before talking *because your teacher wants you to* or *because that's the rule*'), it appears that children and their caregivers evaluate the goodness/badness of morally relevant behaviors as being directly connected to the internal states that cause them (e.g., 'he hurt the puppy *because he was a bad man*') and/or to the outcomes they cause (e.g., 'sharing your toys was good to do *because it made all the other children happy*').

Thus, there is much less frequent appeal to norms, either for the purposes of moral instruction/explanation or for (dis)approval—a finding that fits nicely with those of Turiel (1983) and others, who revealed that young children make clear distinctions between

conventional transgressions (e.g., failing to raise one's hand before talking) and moral transgressions (e.g., hitting another child), viewing the former's wrongness to be grounded by the existence of (potentially changeable) 'authority-dependent' norms/rules and the latter's by (unchangeable) 'authority-independent' characteristics/features (e.g., harm caused) of the situation.

It was also interesting to find such young children evaluating the moral significance of internal dispositional/psychological states more frequently than external behaviors/outcomes. Though early research (Piaget, 1965/1932) on young children's moral development emphasized a preferential focus on behaviors/outcomes over internal states (like intentions) when engaging in moral evaluation, more recent work has revealed that young children display an early appreciation of the moral significance of people's intentions (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010) and can take those intentions into account when assigning blame/praise for people's actions (Jones & Thomson, 2001; Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Pellizzoni, Siegal, & Surian, 2009), though they are not as good at inferring other mental states (e.g., beliefs) from those intentions as adults (Shiverick & Moore, 2007). Our findings support the idea that, for young children, the moral domain involves as much their own and other people's internal states as it does their observable behaviors and their outcomes.

Finally, this study confirmed the age trend discovered by Wright and Bartsch (2008)—as in their study, the peak frequency of moral concept use occurred at 2–2.5 years and then declined over time for both the children and their caregivers. While this decline could reflect the fact that children's overall utterances increased over time at a higher rate than their moral utterances, this would not account for a similar pattern in their parents, whose overall utterances over time remained relatively stable. More likely, it is (as mentioned earlier) a reflection of the 2-year-olds' increasing autonomy, mobility and active participation in the world, which often involves bursts of self-assertion (Bullock & Lutkenhaus, 1989, 1990) and parent/child conflict (Dunn, 1988; Laible & Thompson, 2000, 2002), resulting in the need for more frequent conversations about moral boundaries. But, given the paucity of parent/child references to standards/expectations/rules and obedience/punishment, it may be instead that young children's newfound conceptual/linguistic tools for expressing their moral awareness—and/or parents' desire to cultivate this awareness—simply creates an environment for early discussion that gradually becomes less central in daily parent/child discussions.¹

Given the ubiquity of all four evaluative concepts in the parent/child transcripts, how can we explain young children's and their caregivers' failure to employ *right* and *wrong* for moral evaluation? It may simply be, as hypothesized earlier, that because these deontic concepts are more tightly linked to the domain of truth/correctness/obligation, they are less readily 'translatable' into the moral domain—at least not until the development of more abstract moral concepts (e.g., rights, duties, obligations, justice) begins to occur. In other words, it may make more sense to a child that a person's intentions and actions can be *good* or *bad* (like a box of chocolates is *good* and a rotten apple is *bad*) than that they can be *right* or *wrong* (like an answer to a math problem can be *right* or the spelling of a word can be *wrong*).

What is somewhat puzzling about this is that young children have been found, in certain contexts, to be good deontic reasoners (Harris & Nunez, 1996; Nunez & Harris, 1998; Wellman & Miller, 2008). Specifically, 3–4-year-old children have been found to be able to pick out instances of rule violations (i.e., an example of a child not doing what they are

supposed to be doing), even though under identical conditions, they are unable to pick out instances of statistical norm violations (i.e., an example of a child not doing what they normally do). This and other research (e.g., Dunn, 1987; Dunn & Munn, 1986) makes it clear that young children understand the normative nature of rules and are sensitive to whether or not they are being followed. But clearly this does not require that they grasp the deontic nature of duty or obligation itself; they may simply evaluate the violation of a rule in aretaic (value) terms as being something that is bad (something not good, not beneficial, undesirable etc.), rather than wrong.²

Given our very preliminary investigation of adult patterns of thin moral evaluation (outside the context of parent/child conversations), there is at least some reason to believe that the deontic concepts gain more traction in our daily moral exchanges—though clearly more research will be needed to uncover the nature and timing of a developmental trajectory, should there indeed be one. One hypothesis is that it would occur around adolescence, as formal operational thinking is coming online (Piaget, 1952).

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. For one, we examined only a sampling of child-parent at home conversations and it is possible that contexts within which different patterns of thin moral evaluation occurred, but not captured in the transcripts. Second, we focused on at home child-parent conversations, but children have conversations with adults outside of the home context—e.g., at school. Examining the use of thin moral evaluation in these contexts would also be very interesting, and may reveal different patterns. Perhaps the most important limitation, though, is that our investigation involved an exclusively English-speaking sample. It is therefore not clear whether the patterns of thin moral evaluation found here would replicate cross-culturally. Nor is it clear that the age-related differences would replicate—for example, Rogoff & Mosier (2003) have found that the “terrible-twins” are not culturally universal, being found in some cultures (such as the US), but not others.

Notes

1. Interestingly, the use of good/bad for moral evaluation in a primate sample also appears to spike towards the end of the second year of life—the authors speculate this may be the result of the apes attempting to verify and negotiate the meaning and application of the concepts (Lyn, Franks, & Savage-Rumbaugh, 2008).
2. Also surely of relevance here is children’s developing appreciation for the importance of epistemic considerations (e.g., holding true/false beliefs) in their moral evaluations (see Chandler, Sokol, & Hallet, 2001; Chandler, Sokol, & Wainryb, 2000; Wainryb & Ford, 1998).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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