The Moral Development of Children - Research Proposal

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Date

Introduction

A fascinating issue is whether babies are born with an innate desire to assist others or if society moulds them into this disposition. It is an evolutionarily uncommon trait to possess because altruism may be detrimental to one's own existence, such as sharing scarce food resources with others. The issue of whether people are born with an inherent moral sense and the rationale for human beings to assist one another is constantly being explored via experiments on babies' feelings of altruism. It is important to understand how one's moral sense develops because knowing how altruism develops may assist society in steering people toward making moral choices rather than immoral ones. If society can reduce immoral choices made by the young, this would have a significant impact on the globe, such as a decrease in crime, an increase in people assisting one another, etc. One of the foundational theories of moral development is Piaget's theory, which asserts that a combination of cognitive and social factors results in a transition from heteronomous morality, in which one is solely concerned with the consequences of one's actions, to autonomous morality, in which one is concerned with the intentions and motivations for one's actions (Siegler et al., 2014, pg. 556).   Piaget's theory is significant because it explains how moral thinking develops from something rigid and unchanging, such as stealing is always bad, to something malleable and situation-dependent. For example, stealing may be essential in certain situations. He also discusses the role of cognitive and social variables in moral growth. However, Piaget's theory has a flaw: it undervalues the skills of young children, even though studies indicate that even three-year-olds can identify when a person is performing an unethical
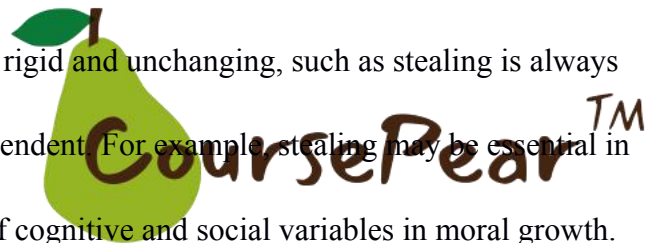
behaviour on purpose. (2014) (Siegler et al., p. 558). Infants will assist others in achieving their objectives, which involves a knowledge of the aims of others and an altruistic desire to assist others (Warkeneken & Tomasello, 2006). This implies that development does not occur in discrete, distinguishable phases as Piaget proposed. On the other hand, other research has suggested that these results are the consequence of mere association rather than any inherent moral sense (Scarf et al., 2014). Rather than having an inherent moral sense, this research suggests that babies respond to circumstances depending on their aesthetics. I would want to suggest a research study that combines the two aforementioned study kinds to determine whether babies respond to circumstances based on their moral or aesthetic senses. The next section will demonstrate that moral growth is influenced by both an inherent moral sense and external influences.

Infants' Altruistic Assistance

One of the most contentious scientific issues is whether the moral sense of humans is inherent. One research examined this issue by placing 24 eighteen-month-old babies in various settings in which a male experimenter was having difficulty completing his task. The infants were presented with the following situations: a marker was out of reach of the male experimenter; the male experimenter collided with the closed doors of a cabinet while attempting to insert magazines; a book fell from the stack the adult placed the book on, and the male experimenter was unable to reach a spoon through a small hole despite the presence of a larger flap on the other side. The barriers that the experimenter encounters are classified as items that are out of reach,
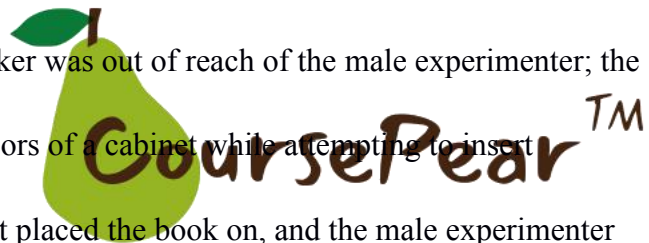
the experimenter being stopped by a physical impediment, the experimenter is doing a task

poorly, and the experimenter is misusing an object. (2006) (Warkeneken & Tomasello). Five of

these experimental and control tasks provided the baby with identical fundamental scenarios, yet

the adult had no difficulty completing the task. The experimenter focused on the item for one to

ten seconds, then alternated gaze between the object and the baby for ten more seconds, and

lastly verbalized the issue to the infant while continuing to alternate gaze for ten additional

seconds for the experimenter task. The researcher merely gazed at the item for twenty seconds

with a neutral facial expression (Warkeneken & Tomasello, 2006). The babies were required to

deduce what the adult was attempting and what difficulties the adult was experiencing, and their

reactions to these circumstances were then recorded. Infants aided adults in six out of ten

activities given. Twenty-two of the twenty-four babies assisted with at least one activity nearly

instantly, with an average of 5.2 seconds (Warkeneken & Tomasello, 2006). This indicates that

the baby aided the experimenter prior to the experimenter having to look at the infant. The

findings of this research showed that human babies were eager to assist strangers in achieving

their objectives even when the baby received no personal benefit, demonstrating an inherent

moral sense. However, the study's shortcomings include small sample size, an ambiguous sense

of cultural variety among the participants, and an ambiguous understanding of how parents

previously responded to babies assisting others. In general, this experiment did not adequately

evaluate the environmental circumstances present, implying that environmental factors may have

influenced the babies' choices.
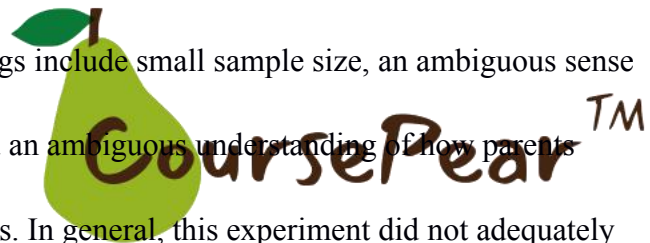
The Validity of Research Methods Used to Determine Moral Sensibility

Another research was performed to demonstrate that babies do have an inherent moral sense. This was accomplished by showing 28 six- and ten-month-old infants various films of social interactions. The babies viewed one movie in which a helper assisted a climber in accomplishing his objective of ascending a hill. The baby also saw a hinderer preventing a climber from climbing the slope in another video. Finally, two control films were shown to the babies in which the helper or hinderer was shown as a neutral figure (Hamlin et al., 2007). Following each film, babies were invited to choose a toy representation of one of the characters. Following the experimental films, 14 of 16 ten-month-olds and 12 of 12 six-month-olds consistently selected the assistant. There was no preference for the character after the control video with the helper and neutral character, but 60% of babies preferred the neutral character to the hinderer following the hinderer with the climber movie (Hamlin et al., 2007). Hamlin concluded that babies preferred the helper because they saw the helper as the morally right character, as shown by their refusal to select the hinderer above the neutral character. On the other hand, the University of Otago performed research to contradict Hamlin's cross-sectional study's results. They hypothesized that babies did not choose assistance based on moral judgments but rather on perceptual experiences. Each video in Hamlin's research included a collision that occurred in which the climber collided with either the helper or the hinderer. The assistance assisted the climber in the films showed the helper bouncing up and down at the summit. The University of Otago altered the films so that the helper did not bounce up and down in the first video the babies saw and that a neutral figure did
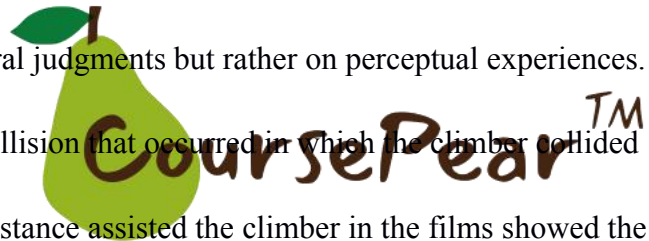
not collide with the climber as the helper did in the second video. They showed these movies to

eight 10-month-old babies, and seven of the eight infants preferred the neutral character over the

helpful figure (Scarf et al., 2014).   According to the University of Otago, babies considered the

collision event to be painful and disagreeable but found the bouncing event to be pleasant and

visually appealing. Due to the uncomfortable nature of the collision between the helper and the

climber, the babies in this cross-sectional research favored the neutral character. The university's

second trial showed 48 ten-month-old babies films of a helper doing a bouncing act, a hinderer

performing a bouncing act, or both performing a bouncing act. Twelve out of sixteen babies

consistently selected the figure that bounced in the first two videos and showed no preference in

the last video, which included both characters bouncing (Scarf et al., 2014). These findings

demonstrate that while doing a study on moral development, researchers must assess the babies'

sense of morality and not their preferences for environmental circumstances. The study's

shortcomings would include limited sample size, an imprecise impression of the participants'

variety, and the infant's choice if both the hinderer and the helper had a collision event but not a

bouncing event. This last restriction may have aided the research in determining if babies have

any inherent moral sense at all.

Proposal for Research

I'd like to suggest research in which we replicate Warneken and Tomasello's job of keeping

the marker out of reach of the male experimenter. I'd want to utilize just one task from their

research to help distinguish between my dependent and independent variables. Since I will be

utilizing a single category rather than many categories like Warneken and Tomasello used, I

should be able to see if changing the job has a discernible impact on the findings. I'd also want to

address the University of Otago's issue about whether babies assist adults because of an inherent

moral sense or out of self-interest in the jobs by making them immoral. I would modify the male

experimenter's job of reaching for an out-of-reach marker to reaching for an out-of-reach marker

in the hands of another experimenter who is utilizing it. Taking the marker would be unethical

since it would be a kind of theft from the experimenter using it. The male experimenter would

concentrate on the marker for one to ten seconds, then alternate gaze between the marker and the

kid for another ten seconds, and lastly voice the issue to the baby while continuing to alternate

gaze for another ten seconds. The other experimenter will either use the marker to write or keep

the marker away from the male experimenter.

The experimenter's task will be randomly assigned to babies through a randomization

procedure. The control task will be the same as the one used by Warneken and Tomasello, except

that the marker will be out of reach and no other experimenter will be present. This is my control

task, which allows me to directly compare the impact of altering the work from moral to immoral.

Suppose the baby removes the marker during the experimental activity. In that case, the

experimenter will either do nothing or have a negative response that includes looking unhappy

for the first ten seconds, then at the kid and then at the marker, and finally verbalizing the issue to

the infant for the last ten seconds. Randomization will also determine how the experimenter will

respond to the baby taking his marker. This research will be observational in nature, with the
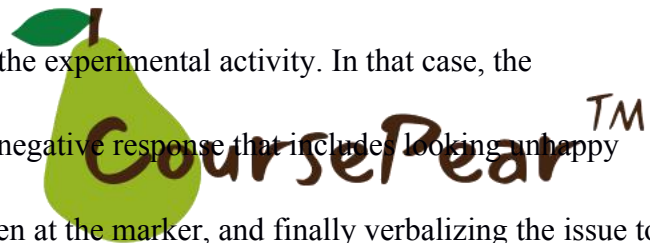
baby being observed during the trial. I'm curious if babies are more or less likely to take the

marker if it's already being used and how they will respond if the experimenter from whom

they're taking the marker is angry. Suppose the babies return the marker to the other experimenter

or do not take it at all. In that case, it may be because they understand that taking another's

belongings is bad, showing an inherent moral sense. If they do take the marker, they may be

perceptually engaged in the act of taking it. My cross-sectional data will include

eighteen-month-old babies, allowing me to directly compare my findings to those of Warneken

and Tomasello since this is the age they utilized as well. My independent variables are the

experiments conducted by the experimenters, and my dependent variables are the infant's

reactions during the experiment. Hopefully, this experiment will provide insight on whether

babies possess an inherent moral sense, make choices depending on their environment, or a

combination of the two, shedding light on the issue of moral development.

Discussion

According to the current study, babies may make decisions in a scenario based on a mix of

an inherent moral sense and contextual influences since studies focusing only on one or the other

discovered inconsistencies. Additional study will be required to determine the veracity of this

assertion. There are still many unanswered issues about this subject, including what babies

consider to be moral and immoral, the impact of cultural variety, how the concept of altruism

evolved, and why altruism is a biological predisposition. My finding implies that moral growth is

far more flexible than Piaget initially claimed and that development does not occur in a linear
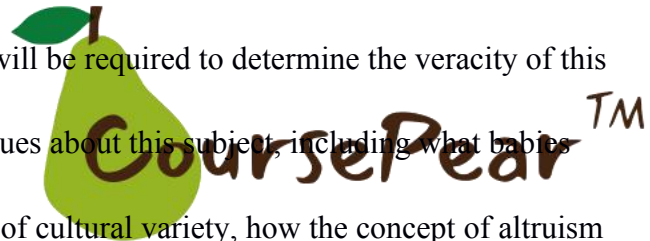
fashion beginning around the age of 10. Rather than that, it is dynamic and ever-changing in

response to the circumstances. Implications for daily life include establishing settings and

parenting methods that promote morality, ensuring that children grow up with the greatest

potential influence to do the right thing. If we learn more about moral growth, we may be able to

transform the world into a more positive one.

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