CHAPTER 10

Moral Reasoning: Theory and Research in Developmental Science

AUDUN DAHL AND MELANIE KILLEN

INTRODUCTION

Moral reasoning plays a central role in psychological functioning throughout the life span. From Aristotle, to Darwin, to Durkheim, and to Freud, theorists have viewed morality as essential to the human condition. Moral philosophers have formulated views of morality that have guided psychological approaches to morality and its development (Appiah, 2005; Gewirth, 1978; Kant, 1785/1959; Nussbaum, 1999; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009). Psychological theories of morality address how humans determine the best way to live, form social groups, create norms for regulating social interactions, and challenge social inequalities and unfair treatment of others.

Across the different philosophical formulations of morality, whether the focus lies with virtues, emotions, judgments, or behavior, moral reasoning has been a core component: Reasoning allows humans to go beyond the social abilities of nonhuman primates. Whereas great apes may cooperate with friends and show anger at foes (Tomasello, 2016), only humans apply general evaluative principles to experienced, observed, or hypothetical events from a first-, second-, and third-party perspective (Turiel, 2014).

The role of moral reasoning has been debated in current psychological research on moral judgment. Although the original formulations of moral reasoning in psychological research primarily came from developmental psychology, beginning with Piaget (1932) and followed by Kohlberg (1969), with elaborations from Turiel (1983) and Smetana (2013), the topic has been taken up more recently by experimental psychologists, social psychologists, experimental philosophers, behavioral economists, and evolutionary biologists (Killen & Smetana, 2015). At the center of recent debates is the question of what role, if any, reasoning plays when people make moral judgments.

This chapter discusses evidence about the nature of moral reasoning in children and adults. Although most of the research reviewed comes from developmental psychology, the theories and methods discussed have broader implications for the study of human morality across the disciplines. A key point in this chapter is that moral considerations differ from other evaluative considerations, such as those pertaining to cultural traditions, conventions, group norms, and rituals. These latter forms of regulating group interactions may, at times, include moral considerations, but they are not defined...
by moral principles. Groups organize themselves in ways that regulate their interactions. The violation of the group norms does not necessarily result in unfair and unequal treatment of others, as we discuss. We argue that developmental changes in children's reasoning within the moral domain, and in their reasoning about conflicts between moral and nonmoral considerations support our proposition that morality is not a subset of group norms. Instead, morality emerges as a set of judgments that are not defined by groups or cultural traditions.

Researchers have used the term “moral reasoning” in diverging ways, in part because morality is studied by so many different fields, within and outside of psychology, and across such a wide age range, from infancy to adulthood. We therefore begin this chapter by defining the moral domain—what moral reasoning is about. We then discuss what kind of evidence is required for inferring that people engage in moral reasoning. We contrast our approach to an intuitionist one, which has argued that much or most of morality does not involve moral reasoning.

In the main part of the chapter, we discuss developmental research on the precursors and early forms of moral reasoning from infancy to preschool age. We then review research on moral reasoning and judgments in group contexts, and specifically reasoning and judgments about challenging topics involving social exclusion, prejudice, bias, and discrimination of others. There are other contexts in which morality is challenged, but we focus on the group—and intergroup—context, given the programmatic research in this area and the timeliness of this area of research for current societal discussions about social inequalities, inequities, and the various forms of prejudice that have arisen in many societies around the globe. Finally, we outline several new directions for research on moral reasoning.

**MORAL REASONING**

**Moral Domain**

Children and adults make a large number of evaluative judgments, including personal preferences (“I don’t like pizza”), hypothetical imperatives (“If you are going to Los Angeles, you should take Interstate 5”), and interpersonal prohibitions (“Don’t hit him!”). Such judgments build on different types of knowledge and experiences and apply to different circumstances, making it necessary to distinguish between types of judgments. Of particular relevance for this chapter is the observation that not all judgments about right and wrong are moral judgments (Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel, 1983). For example, declaratives regarding hygiene (“It’s wrong to not brush your teeth”) or conventions (“One should not wear pajamas to school”) are rarely viewed as moral judgments.

In our definition, moral judgments are evaluations based on considerations of others’ welfare, rights, fairness, and justice. This definition, rooted in social domain theory (Turiel, 1983, 2002, 2014), is based on philosophical definitions regarding how individuals ought to treat one another (Appiah, 2005; Gewirth, 1978; Nussbaum, 1999; Sen, 2009) as well as an extensive body of empirical research on how individuals evaluate social events and interactions in the world (see section titled “Origins and Development of Moral Reasoning”). The social domain approach has asserted that evaluations of moral considerations (moral domain) are distinct from concerns that pertain to how groups regulate their interactions (societal domain) and those about individual prerogatives (psychological/personal domain). Empirical research conducted in a wide range of societal and cultural contexts (with participants from childhood to adulthood) has supported these assertions (see Turiel & Dahl, in press).
People often perceive events as reflecting moral as well as group or individual concerns (Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 2014), however, and this theory is well situated to address what has been referred to as multifaceted domain events. For instance, when faced with decisions about whether to exclude members of an out group, children and adolescents attempt to integrate moral considerations of fairness with societal considerations about how an out-group member might affect group functioning (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013). In fact, transitions in children’s ability to coordinate conflicting considerations are an important aspect of moral development (Nucci & Turiel, 2009).

However, children and adults do not always give priority to moral concerns when making evaluative judgments in multifaceted situations. That is, by defining morality as concerns with others’ welfare, rights, fairness, and justice, we do not claim that these concerns always are, or should be, treated as more important than other evaluative considerations (Tisak & Turiel, 1988; Turiel & Dahl, in press). There are situations in which people give priority to nonmoral concerns, such as conventional concerns with maintaining the smooth functioning on social groups or prudential concerns with avoiding negative personal consequences (Wainryb & Turiel, 1994).

What Is (Moral) Reasoning?

We define reasoning as transitions in thought in accordance with endorsed principles (Adler, 2008; Harman, 1986). An example of a principle of reasoning is: “It is bad to harm others because of the negative intentions to inflict pain on another person.” If a person who endorses this principle believes that Tom is harming Henry and therefore judges that “Tom is doing something bad to Henry,” then this person has engaged in reasoning. Our definition distinguishes reasoning from other mental processes, such as associations (“This cookie reminds me of one I tasted in my childhood”) or spontaneous thoughts (“I have a sudden craving for ice cream”). Although these events are transitions in thought, these transitions do not follow endorsed principles for how one should think or act.

Moral reasoning is, in this view, reasoning based on evaluative judgments pertaining to others’ welfare, rights, fairness, or justice. Hence, we distinguish between moral reasoning and other forms of evaluative reasoning, such as reasoning about whether an action violates a social convention or puts the agent in danger. Moral reasoning—the formation of judgments based on moral principles—is not the only form of reasoning relevant to moral judgments. First, reasoning also is involved in the weighing of multiple considerations, such as in intergroup contexts. We return to this type of reasoning later in the chapter (see section titled “Moral Reasoning in Complex Contexts”). Second, reasoning about material facts—termed “ informational assumptions”—also can influence moral judgments (Wainryb, 1991). For instance, beliefs about whether corporal punishment teaches children to behave better (an informational assumption) can be changed when faced with counter evidence (children do not learn but acquire antisocial behavior when disciplined with corporal punishment; Turiel, Hildebrandt, & Wainryb, 1991).

Contrary to our proposition that reasoning is central to morality, others have argued that many or most moral judgments are not based on reasoning but on affective, automatic, and unconscious reactions (sometimes called intuitions; e.g. Greene, 2014; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008). According to this intuitionist view, people regularly form moral judgments based on “gut feelings,” such as an aversive affective reaction to the idea of pushing someone or the experience of disgust while
watching an action. The differences between our reasoning-based view and the intuitionist views of moral functioning largely consist in two interrelated issues: First, the intuitionist view has adopted a restrictive definition of moral reasoning as relatively slow and effortful. Second, based on this restrictive definition of reasoning, the intuitionist view has claimed that people rarely reason about moral issues.

Proponents of intuitionist views have conceptualized moral reasoning as conscious mental activity; that is, intentional, effortful, and controllable activity (Greene, 2014; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008). For instance, Haidt and Bjorklund (2008) defined moral reasoning as “conscious mental activity that consists of transforming given information about people in order to reach a moral judgment” (p. 189). They contrast such moral reasoning with “moral intuitions,” which are defined as “the sudden appearance in consciousness, or at the fringe of consciousness, of an evaluative feeling (like–dislike, good–bad) about the character or actions of a person, without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion” (p. 188).

The intuitionist view of moral reasoning as consciously and effortfully going through multiple steps of thought differs starkly from our definition of reasoning as the formation of judgments in accordance with endorsed principles. Our definition of reasoning does not require that people consciously go through multiple steps of thought in order to formulate a reason before making a judgment. On the contrary, over the course of development, many forms of moral reasoning may become so well rehearsed that such reasoning appears to happen automatically and without effort, yet it can be applied flexibly to a variety of situations (Pizzarro & Bloom, 2003; Turiel & Killen, 2010). This view of reasoning as sometimes rehearsed, fast, and effortless is consistent with other theoretical approaches to reasoning (Adler, 2008; Frank & Goodman, 2012; Oaksford & Chater, 2001). The effects of rehearsal on reasoning are evidenced by research on expertise. For instance, physics experts solve even simple physics problems much faster than novices and do seemingly with minimal planning (Larkin, McDermott, Simon, & Simon, 1980). This rehearsed aspect of moral reasoning in adulthood emerges out of a long, protracted development from infancy to late adolescence. What appears to be accessed easily in adulthood (e.g., judgments about the infliction of harm or the denial of resources) takes many years of experience, abstraction, reflection, and action over the course of child and adolescence development, as we discuss below (see section titled “Origins and Development of Moral Reasoning”).

In our view, the key criteria for determining whether someone engaged in moral reasoning are whether the person can articulate reasons for their judgments when prompted and whether those reasons are consistent with their judgments. For instance, when explaining why it is wrong to hit someone, preschoolers and older children often say that hitting negatively affects the welfare of the victim (e.g., Dahl & Kim, 2014; Killen & Smetana, 1999; Turiel, 2008). In contrast, when explaining why it is wrong to wear a bathing suit to school, children often refer to rules or authority commands (e.g., there is a rule that you cannot wear a swimsuit to school). These reasons are generally consistent with children’s pattern of judgments. For instance, most children would say it would not be okay to hit someone else even if teachers said so it was (since the victim is still hurt), whereas it would be okay to wear a bathing suit to school if there were no teacher commands or rules against it (e.g., if the teacher said it was okay then we could
do it, like “pajama day”!). By stating that children (and adults) reason about moral and other social issues, we are not claiming that they always consciously go through steps of reasoning prior to making judgments. Rather, we argue that children and adults readily provide and endorse valid reasons for their judgments in most situations when prompted. (Nonetheless, there are contexts that make the straightforward application of moral reasoning difficult, such as when the attributions of intentions are unclear or group identity changes the interpretation of who fully merits fair and just treatment. In these complex contexts, we expect that moral reasoning is sometimes effortful and may involve consciously going through multiple steps of thought.)

Our view differs from the intuitionist view not only by our definition of moral reasoning but also about how common moral reasoning is in the lives of children and adults. Contrary to our claim about the centrality of moral reasoning, intuitionist approaches have claimed that people often, or even typically, do not reason about moral issues (Haidt, 2008). This claim is, to a large extent, based on research purporting to show that people are either unable to provide justifications for their judgments (“moral dumbfounding”) or provide post hoc rationalization that do not explain their judgments (Greene, 2014; Haidt, 2001). If it were the case that people frequently were unable to explain their moral judgments, or provided judgments that were inconsistent with their judgments, this would indeed run counter to our claim that people typically reason about moral issues and that their judgments are based on principles they can articulate and endorse. However, the empirical support for moral dumbfounding and post hoc rationalization is highly limited. And, in contrast, there is extensive empirical support for moral reasoning from childhood to adulthood (see Killen & Smetana, 2015).

Although space prevents an in-depth discussion, we note that claims about moral dumbfounding and post-hoc rationalization are based on just a handful of studies. In contrast, a large number of studies have shown that children and adults can justify their judgments (see sections titled “Emergence of Moral Reasoning” and “Moral Reasoning in Complex Contexts”). Furthermore, the few studies purporting to show moral dumbfounding have asked people to judge highly unusual situations (e.g., sex between siblings, sacrificing one life to save others), are unpublished (Haidt, Bjorklund, & Murphy, 2000), have asked people to justify differences between judgments rather than the judgments themselves (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Hauser, Cushman, Young, Kang-Xing Jin, & Mikhail, 2007), or have included only anecdotal reporting of participants’ justifications (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). These limitations call into question the basis by which researchers have denied the role of meaningful and authentic moral reasoning in how individuals make decisions in their everyday lives. To read more about these issues, the reader is referred to discussions elsewhere (Jacobson, 2012; Royzman, Kim, & Leeman, 2015; Turiel & Dahl, in press).

Our definition of moral reasoning leads to two important clarifications that have implications for research on moral orientations and their development: First, individuals may endorse principles of reasoning not endorsed by researchers; and, second, they may reason about several reasonable options, not just a single option.

People May Endorse Principles Not Endorsed by Researchers

Our definition of reasoning recognizes that individuals hold multiple principles of moral reasoning. These principles sometimes enter into conflict, as in moral dilemmas in which
principles of individual rights are pitted against the utilitarian principle of maximizing overall welfare (Foot, 1967; Nussbaum, 1999). Whether a person can be said to hold a given moral principle depends on whether the person endorses that principle upon reflection (Rawls, 1971). If, after thinking about it, a person believes that, other things being equal, it is wrong to harm others, we would say that this person holds the principle that it is wrong to harm others (other things being equal). Hence, our definition of moral reasoning does not require that the principle conform to an a priori criterion of valid reasoning, such as the maxims of rational choice theory or the utilitarian principle of maximizing the sum of welfare across all affected parties (Greene, 2014; Jacobson, 2012).

We avoid a reliance on a small set of “a priori” principles for valid reasoning because the unique validity of such a set would be far from self-evident against the backdrop of the relevant philosophical literature (Elqayam & Evans, 2011). We do not see how psychologists can be the judges of which moral principles are valid and which are “irrational.” Rather, we propose that researchers accept as reasonable those principles that reflect philosophical criteria endorsed by their research participants upon reflection. Moreover, empirical psychological research provides the basis by which we can validate that individuals value and cherish these principles.

**People May Reason About Several Reasonable Options, Not Just a Single Option**

Reasoning does not always lead to a single acceptable solution to a problem (Scanlon, 2014; Searle, 2003). On the contrary, reasoning can leave room for arbitrariness and uncertainty. A child may have very good reasons to lie and very good reasons to tell the truth, making it very difficult to make a reasoned choice between the two courses of action. In the so-called “trolley car dilemmas” (Foot, 1967; Thomson, 1976), in which the protagonist has to choose between letting five persons die and sacrificing another life to save the five persons, people readily articulate both reasons for intervening (e.g., maximizing the number of lives saved) and reasons against intervening (e.g., the general prohibition against actively killing others; Dahl, Uttich, Gingo, & Turiel, 2013). Most people appear to find it very difficult to make a judgment about these and other dilemmas of life and death, not because they fail to reason but, on the contrary, because their reasoning does not yield a unanimous judgment about the situation.

We hypothesize that nonreasoning processes will exert the biggest effects when participants are choosing among several “reasonable” options and lack the time or the information to make principled decisions. For instance, Payne, Jacoby, and Lambert (2005) found that racial bias had the largest effect on decisions when participants are forced to respond quickly and therefore act on less accurate perceptions (more ambiguity). The inverse relation between nonreasoned racial bias and ambiguity of the stimulus further illustrates how indeterminacy of reasoning operates. When people lack compelling reasons for choosing one act or belief over another, nonreasoned processes may play a greater role, so to speak as “tie-breakers” (Kihlstrom, 2013). Further, how individuals assign blame is often a result of the misattribution of intentions. In childhood, for example, children who lack “theory of mind” (i.e., recognizing that others have intentions, desires, and emotions different from the self) are more likely to assign blame in situations than are children who have “theory of mind.” This is particularly evident when there is ambiguity regarding the intentions of the transgressor, such as in an “accidental
transgressor” context (Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011).

Similarly, social psychologists have demonstrated that in straightforward contexts, most individuals show egalitarian orientations; racial bias and stereotyping are more likely to be revealed in situations that are complex or ambiguous, suggesting that when individuals are cognitively overloaded, they resort to stereotypic responses when they have difficulty making decisions (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005).

Our definitions of morality and reasoning provide a theoretical framework for studying the development of moral reasoning from early childhood to adulthood. In the next section we review research on the origins and development of moral reasoning, followed by a focus on moral reasoning in complex contexts, such as those in which prejudice, bias, and discrimination—forms of social inequalities—are salient.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL REASONING

Precursors of Moral Reasoning in the First Years

Our definition of moral reasoning requires that children express moral judgments based on principled considerations of rights, others’ welfare, or fairness. By this definition, moral reasoning is not present in infancy. We argue that infants do not express judgments of right and wrong as defined by principled considerations, that is, considerations that are generalizable, obligatory, and prescriptive. Yet moral reasoning builds on orientations and skills that emerge and develop during infancy. We therefore differentiate the precursors of moral reasoning, which include empathic responsiveness, social understanding, and signs of guilt and shame, from early moral awareness (for a review, see Killen & Smetana, 2015), which we define as the beginning of obligatory and prescriptive judgments about right and wrong (Gewirth, 1978; Rawls, 1971). In our view, a comprehensive developmental account of moral reasoning will discuss not only developmental changes that take place after children have begun to reason about moral issues but also the building blocks in the first years that make the emergence of moral reasoning possible. In subsequent sections, we discuss research on these early building blocks of moral reasoning.

Empathic Responsiveness to Distress

Empathic responsiveness to the distress of another individual—the concern for the well-being of others—is a key aspect of human morality. If people did not care about others’ well-being then they could not have a moral sense as we know it now. However, despite its moral significance, full-fledged empathy is not genetically preprogrammed or present at birth but develops gradually through social interactions over the first years. Also, empathy, even in its fully developed form, is not sufficient for the emergence of moral reasoning; nor is it definitional of the moral domain.

There is some evidence that infants react negatively to others’ distress soon after birth. In the standard paradigm, researchers assess infants’ reactions to recordings of different crying sounds, both the infants’ own cries and the cries of other infants or children. Neonates cry more when hearing the cry of another neonate than when hearing a recording of their own cry (Martin & Clark, 1982; Sagi & Hoffman, 1976). However, neonates also cry more at the sound of another neonate crying than at the sound of an older child crying. The latter finding may reflect important differences between empathic distress in neonates and empathic distress in older children and adults. For instance, some have
argued that neonatal crying upon hearing other neonates cry may reflect competition for attention rather than empathy (Campos et al., 2008).

Later in the first year and into the second, infants show increasing levels of interest in or concern with others’ distress (Davidov, Zahn-Waxler, Roth-Hanania, & Knafo, 2013; Hay, Nash, & Pedersen, 1981; Roth-Hanania, Davidov, & Zahn-Waxler, 2011; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). As an example, in a study by Roth-Hanania, Davidov, and Zahn-Waxler (2011), 8- to 16-month-old infants witnessed their mother simulating distress (e.g., after pretending to hit her finger with a toy hammer). With age, infants showed growing interest in the mothers’ distress, such as by looking back and forth between the hurt finger and the mother’s face.

However, even in the second year of life, infants’ empathic capabilities remain limited. A phenomenon illustrating these limitations is infants’ tendencies to use force against others without any provocation or sign of frustration. In one study, most infants in their second year engaged in such acts of unprovoked force against others (Dahl, 2016a). For instance, an infant could walk up to a parent sitting on the floor and hit the parent in the face without any sign of anger. Since these acts happen without signs of distress, they cannot be attributed easily to limitations in infants’ ability to regulate their frustration (Hay, 2005; Thompson & Goodvin, 2007).

Although it is currently unclear whether infants fail to understand that these acts cause pain to others or whether they are not sufficiently concerned with preventing others’ pain, acts of unprovoked force indicate limitations in infants’ concern with the well-being of others. The rate of such behaviors appears to decrease late in the second year, suggesting that children begin to avoid actions that cause distress or negative reactions in others unless they are highly motivated to do so. In fact, the rate of provoked acts of force, as during property conflicts, appears to increase throughout the second year (Dahl, 2016a; Hay, 2005).

Over the course of the second and third years, children increasingly seek to relieve the distress of others, including when they themselves have caused the distress (Hoffman, 2000; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). Svetlova, Nichols, and Brownell (2010) introduced 18- and 30-month-olds to a distressed experimenter with a specific need (e.g., an experimenter who was demonstrating behavior that indicated that she was very cold [shivering]). The researcher had previously shown the children how a blanket located in the same room made her warm. The 30-month-olds provided the blanket far more readily than did the 18-month-olds.

Yet there is substantial individual and situational variability in children’s propensity to comfort persons in distress. Using parental report and direct observation, studies of children around their second birthday have reported that only in about half of everyday instances of distress do these children respond with attempts to relieve others’ distress, as by bringing a toy to cheer the person up (Dunn & Munn, 1986; Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). Other studies have shown systematic individual differences. For instance, Young, Fox, and Zahn-Waxler (1999) found that infants low in emotional reactivity to novel stimuli at 4 months (e.g., videos of brightly colored mobiles with Winnie-the-Pooh characters) showed less concern for a distressed person at 24 months.

In sum, negative reactions to others’ distress are seen from birth. From late in the first year until the end of the second
year, infants show substantial increases both in overall interest in others’ distress and in attempts to relieve others’ suffering, although there is substantial intra- and inter-individual variability.

By definition, empathy requires some grasp of another person’s experience or situation (Hoffman, 2000). Changes in social understanding thus likely set the stage for several of the changes in empathic responses seen during infancy and toddlerhood just described. Moreover, the limitations in social understanding at the end of toddlerhood place constraints on children’s ability to empathize with and respond to others. For instance, 2-year-olds will have difficulties understanding that a person can be sad after a negative event if the person is not showing outward signs of sadness (Pons, Harris, & Rosnay, 2004). Further advances in social understanding are required before children can perceive and respond to such situations adequately. We now turn to the early development of social understanding and preferences, before discussing the emergence of explicit moral judgments.

Understanding and Evaluating What Others Want: Social Cognitive Development in Infancy and Toddlerhood

Moral reasoning and judgment rely on understanding of others’ beliefs, goals, and desires. Fully developed moral evaluations involve attribution of intentions to agents (e.g., the attribution of harmful intent). Moreover, actions often are evaluated on the basis of their intended or foreseeable consequences of actions (e.g., the foreseeable [harmful] consequences of making fun of someone’s physical appearance). Thus, moral evaluations of actions build on attributions of psychological states to victims or beneficiaries as well as to agents (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012; Killen & Smetana, 2015; Wainryb, 1991). The abilities to understand and respond to others’ psychological states undergo major transformations in the first 3 years of life. In this section, we briefly review research on these abilities and their limitations.

Within a few weeks after birth, infants’ orientations toward people differ qualitatively from their orientations toward objects (Trevarthen, 1979). Around 4 to 8 weeks of age, infants begin to smile in response to social stimuli, as during vigorous tactile stimulation or the presentation of moving faces (Sroufe, 1996). By 3 months, infants also show greater negativity (such as crying) when mothers are unresponsive than during natural, responsive interactions, suggesting that infants at this age expect and want reciprocal interactions with others (Cohn & Tronick, 1983; Tronick, 1989).

A number of studies have investigated infants’ sensitivity to intentional actions from early in the first year, typically relying on looking patterns to indicate whether infants’ perceive actions as intentional. For instance, Woodward (1998) habituated 5- and 9-month-olds to seeing a hand reaching for one of two toys. In the test trials, the location of the toys was flipped. Infants saw the hand either reaching for the original toy in the new location (new movement but same goal as before) or reaching for the new toy in the original location (same movement but new goal). Infants looked longer when the hand reached for the new toy in the original location than when it reached for the original toy in the new location, suggesting that infants expected the hand to seek a particular object rather than repeating the same physical movement. (Findings were only marginally significant for 5-month-olds.) When a rod rather than a hand was “reaching” for the toy, infants looked longer at the new movement/old goal display, suggesting that they did not view the rod as intending to reach the ball. Other studies have found that
infants may perceive actions as intentional already at 3 months if given experience with holding objects (Sommerville, Woodward, & Needham, 2005; Woodward, 2009). In fact, infants’ understanding that others have goals, beliefs, and desires at age 7 months (goal encoding) and at 18 months (implicit false belief understanding) predicts children’s morally relevant theory of mind (an understanding of an accidental transgressor’s moral intentions) at age 5 years (Sodian et al., 2016).

There is also evidence that infants, from early in the first year, visually prefer “prosocial” puppets (acting in ways that are conducive to others’ goals) over “antisocial” puppets (acting in ways that keep others from reaching their goals). Hamlin and Wynn (2011) showed 3- and 5-month-olds interactions among three puppets. A neutral puppet rolled a ball to the two other puppets. The “antisocial” puppet kept the ball, whereas the “prosocial” puppet returned it to the neutral puppet. Three-month-olds preferred (i.e., looked more toward) the prosocial than the antisocial puppet, and 5-month-olds were more likely to reach toward the prosocial than the antisocial puppet (Hamlin, 2014; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007).

Infants’ preferences for looking or reaching toward certain agents likely influence their subsequent development regarding agent–action relationships. These preferences, however, differ from moral judgments observed later in childhood. First, it is unclear whether these preferences reflect moral evaluations. Instead, it may be that these preferences simply reveal desires to interact with prosocial agents. Further indicating that infants’ preferences may not reflect moral evaluations, several studies have shown that infants’ preferences also are guided by events that are morally irrelevant, such as whether the agent shares food preferences with the child or previously has imitated another agent (Hamlin, Mahajan, Liberman, & Wynn, 2013; Powell & Spelke, 2014). Moreover, young children’s decisions to approach one agent rather than another appear to be based on preferences as opposed to categorical evaluations. For instance, in some studies, toddlers and preschoolers observed one agent acting helpful toward a neutral agent and another agent acting in an uncooperative or destructive way (Dahl, Schuck, & Campos, 2013; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010). Although children preferred to help the helpful agent in a subsequent task, most were willing to help the uncooperative or destructive agent if the helpful agent was unavailable. Thus, infants’ third-party reactions to violations (e.g., hindering actions) may be relative (a preference for one over the other) rather than categorical (a categorically negative evaluation of one agent, as in a moral condemnation; Dahl, 2014).

Late in the first year and into the second, a strong sensitivity to others’ intentions and desires is evident in a variety of infants’ actions. Infants are increasingly skilled at following the point and gaze of another person, even when the person is attending to objects outside the infants’ field of view (Butterworth & Jarrett, 1991). By the middle of the second year, infants can not only follow but also direct others’ visual attention toward objects (Carpenter, Nagell, & Tomasello, 1998).

From around the first birthday, infants are able to use their understanding of others’ intentions to join and contribute to others’ activities. Warneken and Tomasello (2007) presented 14-month-olds with an adult researcher who needed help (e.g., because she dropped a marker on the floor and could not reach it). The majority of infants helped at least once (e.g., by handing back the dropped marker). Later in the second year, children help in more complex tasks and sometimes even without explicit signals of need from the
experiment (Warneken, 2013; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006): Warneken (2013) found that 24-month-olds would help an experimenter who unknowingly knocked an object off the table even before the experimenter noticed that the object had fallen down.

Infant helping and participation also take place in family homes, not just in the laboratory (Dahl, 2015; Dunn & Munn, 1986). In fact, several pieces of evidence suggest that infant helping and participation may be facilitated by adult encouragement during everyday social interactions. Dahl (2015) used maternal reports and direct observations of everyday interactions to document the social context of helping in the everyday life of U.S. middle-class families. Most infants engaged in at least some forms of helping from around the first birthday. Moreover, longitudinal data showed that helping rates were positively associated with caregiver encouragement of helping on previous observation points (Pettygrove, Hammond, Karahuta, Waugh, & Brownell, 2013; Waugh, Brownell, & Pollock, 2015).

An experimental follow-up further suggested that adult encouragement plays a crucial role in the early development of infant helping (Dahl, Satlof-Bedrick, et al., 2017). In this study, infants aged 13 to 18 months witnessed an experimenter accidentally drop objects, such as a pen, onto the floor and unsuccessfully reach for them. A second experimenter was also present and played with the infants between each trial. Half of infants were assigned to receive encouragement (e.g. “Do you want to help her?,” “Do you want to hand her the pen?”) and praise (“Great job! Thank you for helping!”), while the other half served as a control group and received no encouragement or praise from the experimenters. Among the younger infants in the study, encouragement and praise doubled helping rates, both on trials when infants were encouraged and praised and on subsequent trials without encouragement or praise. Coding of infants’ looking behavior indicated that the experimental manipulation did not merely help infants notice the experimenter in need, as all infants looked toward the reaching experimenter. In contrast, the older infants in the study appeared to have mastered this simple helping task without the need for adult support. Moreover, older infants’ helping rates were higher than those of younger infants and were unaffected by the experimental manipulation (Warneken & Tomasello, 2013). However, it is possible, and even likely, that adult encouragement and other forms of support may facilitate children’s helping on more complex tasks (Hammond & Carpendale, 2015; Rogoff, 2003).

In the second year, infants also guide their behaviors by emotional and other signals about what others do not want. In a classic study on social referencing, Sorce, Emde, Campos, and Klinnert (1985) found that 12-month-olds were more likely to avoid an apparent 30 cm “cliff” (covered by transparent glass) when their mothers displayed a fearful or angry facial expression than when their mothers displayed joy or interest. Gradually, infants also come to realize their desires are not always shared by others. In a study by Repacholi and Gopnik (1997), 14- and 18-month-olds first observed whether an adult expressed disgust or joy when eating broccoli or Goldfish crackers. The infants then had the option of giving either broccoli or Goldfish crackers to the adult. The younger children tended to give whichever food type they preferred for themselves, while the older children tended to give the type of food over which the experimenter previously had expressed joy.

Negative signals from others are especially common after prohibited or unwanted behaviors in the everyday lives of infants and their families. Naturalistic studies have found
that conflicts about prohibited behaviors can occur 10 or more times per hour in the second year (Dahl, 2016b; Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Girnius-Brown, 1987; Power & Parke, 1986). These conflicts provide young children with information about not only other people’s expectations but also the nature of those expectations. From early in the second year, if not before, there are systematic differences in how caregivers respond to different types of infant violations. Several studies have found that when infants hit, bit, kicked, or otherwise used force against others (a moral violation), caregivers responded with heightened anger, more physical interventions, and more references to the consequences of such acts for other people (Dahl, 2015; Dahl & Campos, 2013; Dahl, Sherlock, Campos, & Theunissen, 2014; Smetana, 1989). In contrast, when infants created inconvenience, such as by throwing food on the floor, or when they do something that could affect their own welfare, such as climbing on a couch, caregivers responded with more distraction (e.g., drawing infant attention to a toy), more positive tones of voice (e.g., to comfort infant after prohibition), and more compromising (e.g., letting infant engage in the prohibited behavior for a limited period and under adult supervision).

Children become increasingly aware of others’ negative reactions to their behaviors over the course of the second year. A clear sign of such awareness is children’s tendency to look at a parent and smile, or even elicit the parent’s attention, before engaging in a prohibited behavior (e.g., before approaching a prohibited kitchen cabinet). The first signs of such anticipation are reported around the first birthday, but the behavior appears to become increasingly common during the second year (Bretherton & Bates, 1979; Dahl & Freda, 2017; Dunn & Munn, 1985). Relatedly, longitudinal naturalistic research by Dunn (1988) described how children became adept at teasing over the course of the second year by acting in ways they knew would upset their older sibling.

When receiving prohibitions, children become increasingly likely to acknowledge, rather than simply ignore, such prohibitions during infancy and toddlerhood. However, children’s increasingly common acknowledgments of parental commands may take the form of compliance, negotiation, or refusal (Dahl, 2016b; Kaler & Kopp, 1990; Klimes-Dougan & Kopp, 1999; Kuczynski et al., 1987). In short, improvements in children’s social understanding during the second year go along with an increasing awareness of what others expect of them, but this awareness does not by itself lead children to accept and meet those expectations. An additional, crucial component is children’s evaluation of their actions and the consequences of those actions.

Children’s negative evaluations of their own transgressions may be based on a concern with not upsetting others or with a genuine adoption of a particular rule, such as the prohibition against harming others. Children’s concerns with not upsetting others are indicated, in part, by the precursors of guilt and shame. Importantly, the precursors of guilt and shame are not by themselves signs of moral reasoning but are, at most, early steps toward genuine moral judgments and reasoning. We briefly review the early development of guilt and shame in the next subsection. Children’s endorsement of rules is seen most unambiguously in their third-party evaluations of interactions between others, for instance when one person is hitting or stealing from another. Evidence of such categorical third-party judgments, in the form of protests or verbal judgments, has been found in the third year (as we discuss in the section titled “Emergence of Moral Reasoning: Early Preschool Years”).
**Early Roots of Guilt and Shame**

The earliest signs of self-evaluation have been reported in the second half of the second year (Barrett, 2005; Cole, Barrett, & Zahn-Waxler, 1992; Stipek, Recchia, McClintic, & Lewis, 1992). Research on the development of guilt and shame—two key affective correlates of self-evaluation—often has used the so-called “broken toy” paradigm (Barrett, 2005; Cole et al., 1992; Kochanska, Gross, Lin, & Nichols, 2002). In this paradigm, children get to play with a toy said to be important for the adult researcher. The toy is rigged so that when the children touch it in the researcher’s absence, the toy’s leg breaks. Barrett (2005) found that, at 17 months, a large proportion of children engaged in guilt-related behaviors (e.g., drawing the parent’s or experimenter’s attention to the broken leg) or shame-related behaviors (e.g., avoiding the experimenter when she returns). Attempts to repair and tell the experimenter, as well as gaze aversion, are even more common among 2-year-olds than among 17-month-olds in the broken toy paradigm (Barrett, 2005; Barrett, Zahn-Waxler, & Cole, 1993).

Importantly, the reported attempts at repairation, communication, and avoidance in the broken toy paradigm may or may not reflect children’s negative self-evaluations of their own actions. These reactions could equally well indicate a concern with the researcher’s anticipated negative reaction or curiosity about the broken object (Kagan, 1981).

There is limited evidence for when children begin to apply unambiguous negative evaluations of their own moral and nonmoral violations (Eisenberg, 2000). Anecdotal evidence from a study by Zahn-Waxler and Kochanska (1990) suggest that at least some children apply negative evaluations to themselves already in the second year and even apologize for hurting others. Still, signals of guilt based on a negative self-evaluation, as described in these anecdotes, appeared clearer and more robust in the third year. Stipek, Gralinski, and Kopp (1990) found that, although some mothers reported that their infants expressed self-evaluation and negative reactions at their own transgressions in the second year, the proportion of reporting such behaviors in their infants increased dramatically into the third year. These findings are consistent with theoretical proposals by Mascolo and Fischer (2007), who argued that children in their third year become capable of expressing guilt or remorse even in the absence of explicit negative reactions from others.

The development of guilt and shame continues into the preschool years and beyond (Mascolo & Fischer, 2007). Recent studies found children to be more motivated to help another person after causing accidental damage to the person’s property than when they had not caused such damage (Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2017; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2016). Another study found that 2-year-olds who showed guilt-like behaviors in a broken toy paradigm were more helpful toward the “victim” in a subsequent situation than children who showed shame-like (avoidant) behaviors (Drummond, Hammond, Satlof-Bedrick, Waugh, & Brownell, 2017). Whatever the nature of children’s self-evaluation, these studies suggest that young children’s perceptions of their own responsibility for events influence their actions toward others.

In sum, the first years are a period when infants make dramatic advances in their empathic responsiveness to distress and in their social understanding. At the same time, there is no clear evidence that infants make moral evaluations of right and wrong based on principles about well-being, rights, and justice. The stage is set for a major moral transition taking place in the early preschool years.
Emergence of Moral Reasoning: Early Preschool Years

The third year of life reveals the emergence of moral reasoning with the onset of verbal explanations that include prescriptive, obligatory judgments regarding specific acts of harm, the denial of resources, and victimization. At this age, children begin to express judgments of right and wrong and protest against rule violations (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Rizzo & Killen, 2016; Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Smetana et al., 2012). Children begin to articulate justifications for their judgments in the third year of life. Their reasons are not consistently applied to all judgments but are reliably codified and indicate principled moral considerations about welfare, rights, and fairness. In one paradigm, children are asked about a series of hypothetical situations involving moral and conventional rule violations (e.g., a child hitting or stealing from another child). By the end of the third year, most children judge it as wrong to harm or steal from others even if teachers or parents were to say it was permissible and even if it happened in another school where there was no rule against it (Smetana et al., 2012). In contrast, children at this age tend to judge violations of social conventions as permissible if adults said these acts were permissible or if there was no rule against them, revealing an underlying distinction between moral and social-conventional transgressions.

These judgments indicate that children view moral rules, but not social conventions, as based on intrinsic features of the actions (e.g., harm to a victim) rather than prescriptions from adults. In a different paradigm, children witness puppets committing transgressions against each other. For instance, 3-year-olds protested more when one puppet destroyed the drawing made by another puppet than when the puppet destroyed his own drawing (Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011; see also Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2013).

Between the third and the fourth birthday, children’s distinctions between moral and other events becomes increasingly robust (Smetana, 2013). At this age, children distinguish hypothetical moral violations not only from conventional violations but also from prudential violations (pertaining to the agent’s own welfare) and personal issues (issues under personal jurisdiction, e.g., choice of clothing; Dahl & Kim, 2014; Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Tisak, 1993). Their principled moral concerns with others’ welfare, rights, and fairness are reflected both in their patterns of judgments (such as whether the action would be permissible in the absence of a rule) and also in their justifications. When asked to justify why it is wrong to harm or steal from others, 3-year-olds, as well as older children, refer to consequences to the victim (“It hurts him!”) or property rights (“It’s his truck!”; Dahl & Kim, 2014; Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci & Weber, 1995).

These judgments reveal children’s spontaneous forms of reasoning in response to semistructured probes in which counterintuitive premises are described to children for their evaluation (e.g., “What if the teacher said it was all right to hit someone? Then would it be all right?”). The value of the counterintuitive premise is that it reveals whether children are using an underlying principle to explain their judgment (e.g., in response to the teacher premise: “It would still be wrong because someone would be hurt and how will they feel that you did that?”). Children will reject authority mandates and punishment as the reasons for why it is wrong to inflict harm on others and instead refer to the pain experienced by a victim.
Preschoolers’ judgments and reasoning about moral issues appear to build on the empathic tendencies and emotional skills that develop during the early years. For instance, studies have found positive associations between preschoolers’ empathic responsiveness to others’ distress and how negatively they view moral transgressions (Ball, Smetana, & Sturge-Apple, 2017) and their reasoning about and engagement in helpful actions (Miller, Eisenberg, Fabes, & Shell, 1996). Other research has shown that preschoolers reason about, and sometimes regret, their own harmful actions toward others (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). Further, children starting at 3 years of age recognize the unfairness as well as the harm to others’ welfare when someone is denied necessary resources (Rizzo & Killen, 2016).

The conceptual distinctions between moral and other violations are reflected in children’s social interactions with one another as well as their responses to hypothetical scenarios (Turiel, 2008). In everyday social interactions, preschoolers, as well as adults, respond differently to moral violations than to conventional violations (e.g., referring consequences to the victim in response to moral violations but not in response to conventional violations; Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1989). In sum, preschoolers show a principled (general) concern with the protection and the promotion of others’ rights and well-being that is reflected in their judgments as well as their actions.

MORAL REASONING IN COMPLEX CONTEXTS

Children’s moral reasoning in the third and fourth years of life are revealed in fairly straightforward contexts (transgressions such as the infliction of harm and the denial of resources, which comprise the most common violations to moral principles). The social world of older children becomes increasingly complex, and the major developmental changes are seen less in dealing with straightforward issues (where we see development in the early years) but in dealing with multifaceted issues. For example, social relationships increasingly are comprised of nonparental adults (at school, in the neighborhood, and the community), peer groups (beyond dyads and triads), complex friendships (best friends, friends, acquaintances, antagonistic peers), and strangers. (For a review, see Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006.) Along with an expanded social world, children’s social cognitive abilities change dramatically. Children’s social cognitive capacities include mental state knowledge (“theory of mind”; Wellman & Liu, 2004), judgments about intentional states (Turiel, 2002), and intergroup attitudes and relationships (Rutland & Killen, 2015).

The complexity of the social world and the increase in social cognitive judgments make the task of the application of moral reasoning to everyday life multifaceted and nuanced. How does children’s understanding of the group that they belong to guide their decisions about whom to include and whom to exclude? To what extent do children take social relationships into account when making decisions about how to divide resources? Over the past several decades, these questions have been addressed by researchers pursuing how moral reasoning changes over the course of child and adolescent development (Killen, Elenbaas, & Rutland, 2015; Mulvey, 2016).

In many situations, decisions involving moral considerations create dilemmas. Research on moral judgment has investigated how children and adolescents weigh multiple considerations when evaluating such dilemmas. To do so requires identifying
other nonmoral compelling considerations. As mentioned, one aspect of children’s worlds that changes after early childhood has to do with the onset of intergroup attitudes and relationships (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Nesdale & Flessier, 2001). This context creates some of the most challenging situations for the application of morality because out-group attitudes can transform into discrimination, social exclusion, and bias, which reflect some of the most atrocious forms of moral transgressions in adulthood (R. J. Brown & Gaertner, 2001). Thus, attention to the origins of these contexts for moral reasoning in childhood is warranted. In the next subsection, we provide a review of how children weigh multiple decisions in morally relevant intergroup contexts.

Morality and Group Identity

One of the compelling considerations that make moral decisions complex has to do with the role of groups and group identity in social life (Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010). Early on, children identify with and affiliate with groups, forming attachments that provide a buffer to the complexity and often discomfort associated with a multitude of social expectations (Nesdale & Flessier, 2001; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2006). Groups often are organized by highly perceptually salient features, such as gender, race, and ethnicity. In addition, groups are formed by shared interests and activities. Not unlike the adult world, however, children form in-group preferences as they affiliate with groups (Bennett & Sani, 2004). In morally relevant contexts, in-group preferences can manifest as inclusion preferences (preferring in-group peers in situations involving opportunities) as well as resource preferences (allocating more resources to in-group peers than to others). In-group preferences that turn into out-group dislike form the basis of prejudice as well as discrimination and bias (Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, & Griffiths, 2005).

Thus, these contexts are different from straightforward moral transgressions where the challenge to acting in a way consistent with one’s moral reasoning is the opportunity for selfish gain. Here the motivation is to preserve the in-group at a cost to treatment of the out-group. In this case, there is potentially a nonselfish gain for preferring the in-group, one that provides a justification that can be interpreted as legitimate, such as diverting resources to a member of an in-group instead of an out-group (but not to the self). Nonetheless, the implication of such acts has been viewed as wrong from a moral viewpoint because it violates expectations of impartiality and fairness. How children make moral decisions in the context of intergroup relationships has been the focus of much recent research in developmental science, demonstrating the age-related changes that exist for these types of decisions.

Different theories have been proposed, identifying how cognitive, emotional, motivational, and relational changes explain, in part, the age-related changes in identifying with groups and making moral judgments. Studies examine implicit attitudes and biases—responses that people may be unaware of and that have negative consequences to others. At the same time, there has also been a robust body of research on the explicit social and moral reasoning that children and adolescents provide to explain their evaluation of intergroup contexts, such as interracial ones or situations in which others are viewed as out-groups due to their gender, sexual orientation, different cultural membership, or immigrant status. These explicit judgments reveal areas of inconsistencies in moral reasoning created by the salience of group identity and the pervasiveness of messages in cultures regarding maintaining status hierarchies,
power, and the status quo (Ridgeway, 2013). Thus, in the next subsection, we report on the developmental trajectories in moral reasoning in group contexts and what the data reveal for how children weigh these complex considerations. We organize the report of the empirical studies by starting with morality and intergroup social exclusion, followed by morality and intergroup allocation of resources and social inequalities.

**Morality and Social Exclusion**

Social exclusion from groups is an event that occurs frequently in social life. In childhood, these exclusion events often are extremely salient with long-term negative consequences (Killen & Rutland, 2011). With age, children understand that there are many contexts in which social exclusion is justified to make the group work well. For example, for a swim team to be competitive, the team has to exclude those swimmers who are too slow to help the team win. Children learn early that social exclusion is often necessary, even when the excluded individual might feel disappointed. There are also contexts, though, in which morality enters into the decision (not just the outcome), such as when peers are excluded for reasons based on group membership, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality. In these cases, the decision is unfair and violates basic norms about equal treatment. Children are very much attuned to issues of equality, but in the context of social groups, these decisions become difficult. In the case of intergroup exclusion (excluding a swimmer because of ethnicity, not talent), morality is pitted against group membership. With age, children become able to apply their moral knowledge to these contexts.

One line of research investigated children’s evaluation of contexts in which one group of children excludes a peer from joining the group when stereotypes are activated (Rutland & Killen, 2015). As one example, when young children were asked whether it was okay to exclude someone who did not fit the stereotypic expectations of an activity-based peer group (playing dolls or trucks), the majority of children ages 3 to 5 years (87%) indicated that it would be unfair (“Dolls are for everyone—that’s not fair”; “Girls like trucks too, and they will feel sad if the boys don’t let them play”; Killen, Piscacane, Lee-Kim, & Ardila-Rey, 2001). Despite the fact that children are consistently exposed to gender stereotypes (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006) and that children have high knowledge for what types of activities are associated with gender (Liben & Bigler, 2002), children view social exclusion based on gender-stereotypic expectations as unfair and wrong.

Yet research has shown that stereotypes often are activated when situations are complex or ambiguous. Inclusion decisions, for example, are often more complex than exclusion decisions when the inclusion choice is to choose between two individuals. In the study just described (Killen et al., 2001), children also were asked whom to include in their doll-playing or truck-playing peer group. (Should the girls’ group pick the boy or the girl for doll-playing? Should the boys’ group pick the girl or the boy for truck-playing?) In this condition, children cited group identity (girls want the girl to join) or stereotypes (boys do not like dolls) to justify their inclusion decision of the child who fit the stereotype (Killen et al., 2001), even when they took a fully moral position in the straightforward exclusion condition. Children recognized the unfairness pertaining to gender exclusion from activities but also were influenced by stereotypic expectations when making decisions that were complex (such as whom to include).

To investigate how group identity plays a role on children’s moral judgments after the
preschool years, research has examined group dynamics in the context of moral decision making. The term “group dynamics” refers to group norms and the role of group loyalty (Abrams, Rutland, Pelletier, & Ferrell, 2009). Using the group dynamics framework (Abrams & Rutland, 2008), studies have examined whether group identity is defined by children as group membership (loyalty to one’s group makeup defined by gender, race, nationality) or group norms (traditions and moral values held by the group).

Previous research has shown that, with age, children give priority to group norms (traditions and moral values) over group membership (gender, nationality). When asked about whether one’s own group (boys or girls) would be likely to exclude an in-group member who deviated from (or rejects) the norms of the in-group, with age, children expected that the group would not want to exclude that in-group member; group loyalty matters (Killen et al., 2013). For example, children from 9 to 13 years of age were assigned to actual groups (asked to create a group name and logo) and informed that their group had an unequal norm (preferring to divide resources to advantage their own group) and an out-group had an equal norm (preferring to divide up resources equally between the in-group and the out-group). Children and adolescents gave priority to adhering to the norm of equal allocation (even if it meant rejecting a member of their own group and including the out-group member); equality matters even at the cost of allegiance to the group norm (Killen et al., 2013).

This set of judgments involved a complex decision-making process because children had to reject a member of their own group who advocated against equality; equality trumped group loyalty. Although the younger children focused on the moral norm of equality, they also were willing to exclude an in-group member who did not support the norm; older children were not as willing to exclude this member, citing group identity as their reason (Hitti, Mulvey, Rutland, Abrams, & Killen, 2013).

Moreover, children do not treat different types of group identity the same in morally relevant contexts. When comparing gender identity, for example, with school identity (identity based on school affiliation—your school versus a rival school), children were less concerned with group identity in the gender context. For the school-based identity, children were likely to support their in-group member who wanted to give more resources to their own group than to the rival school group (Mulvey, Hitti, Rutland, Abrams, & Killen, 2014). These findings reveal how different aspects of group identity and group norms are taken into account when making decisions about inclusion and exclusion as well as resource allocation.

To further probe the tension between morality and group norms, children’s evaluations of group dynamics in a gender context in which stereotypes were highly salient, such as football and ballet, were investigated (Mulvey & Killen, 2015). The goal was to determine whether participants, ages 9 to 14 years, thought that their peers would support an in-group member who challenged a gender-stereotypic activity (such as supporting a group member who asked the girls’ group to try football instead of ballet). With age, participants were less likely to expect that their group would support the challenger, even though they personally supported this type of resistance, and they were more likely to expect that anyone who challenged the group would be excluded from the group. Children also evaluated this lack of support as unfair but fitting in with group expectations.
Thus, with age, children viewed the lack of support for challenging gender-stereotypic expectations as unfair but also as part of how groups maintain their identity. The strength of group identity in adolescence is well documented (Horn, 2012; Thijs, Verkuyten, & Grundel, 2014), and how it intersects with moral judgments provides new information regarding the contexts in which group identity maintains its salience. This knowledge is important as it provides information on how to enable groups to be more inclusive. The term “social exclusion” refers not only to the exclusion of peers from social groups; it also refers to the exclusion of individuals from opportunities that are necessary for healthy well-being. In these situations, the denial of access to resources and opportunities provides another complex moral context in which children’s moral reasoning emerges early in development.

**Moral Reasoning and the Allocation of Resources and Social Inequalities**

Research on children’s allocation of resources has investigated the claims for resources that children view to be important when determining what constitutes a fair and equal allocation (Kanngiesser & Warneken, 2012; Kenward & Dahl, 2011; Shaw & Olson, 2012). With a few exceptions, research has measured children’s preferences and choices (for how to distribute resources) and only a few studies have examined children’s moral reasoning (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Damon, 1977; McGillicuddy-De Lisi, Daly, & Neal, 2006; Schmidt, Svetlova, Johe, & Tomasello, 2016). Studies that have examined moral reasoning have demonstrated that, for the most part, young children focus on strict equality; with age, children use reasons based on merit and effort. How children coordinate their concepts of equality and merit in different allocation contexts is not well understood.

To test whether younger children take both equality and merit into account, children 3 to 8 years of age were asked to distribute resources that were necessary (need to have to stay healthy) or “luxuries” (fun to have and play with but not necessary; Rizzo, Elenbaas, Cooley, & Killen, 2016). This distinction was investigated to examine whether children would use moral reasoning based on a concern for others’ welfare in the necessary condition, along with merit when the recipient was deserving of the resources. Most of the prior research with young children has focused on luxury resources (the distribution of cookies, candy, and stickers) and found that children first use equality reasoning and then use moral reasoning based on merit. In the Rizzo et al. (2016) study, children distributed necessary resources (e.g., such as medicine) equally to a hardworking or lazy character and used reasoning based on others’ welfare. Children distributed luxury resources differently, however, giving more to a hardworking character than to a lazy character, using reasons based on effort and merit. Thus, children as young as 3 to 8 years of age evidenced three types of moral reasoning in this context: equality, equity, and others’ welfare. A novel dimension of the findings was the use of moral reasoning about others’ welfare by young children when considering resource allocation, given the predominant focus on whether children use reasoning based on equity. In fact, children give priority to considerations for others’ welfare over equity when resources are necessary for healthy development.

Turning the focus more specifically to the large group context of necessary resources, Elenbaas, Cooley, Rizzo, and Killen (2016) investigated how children distribute necessary resources to groups of children who were disadvantaged (i.e., those who were lacking access to necessary resources, such as school supplies). Children gave more resources to
the disadvantaged children than to those who were not disadvantaged using reasoning based on a moral concern for equity and others’ welfare. Rectifying inequalities involves complex moral reasoning: To ensure fairness, one has to distribute resources “unequally” to “level the playing field.” Although the majority of all children gave more resources to the disadvantaged children, there were also age-related differences in whether in-group bias was displayed. Younger children gave more school supplies when their own group (by race) was disadvantaged than when the out-group was disadvantaged. Older children did not display a bias and, in fact, gave more resources to the societally consistent disadvantaged group (African American) than to the other group, using reasoning that referred to past inequality.

Thus, with age, children rectified the inequality and explained their decisions using moral reasoning, such as references to others’ welfare, and social equality. In the study by Elenbaas and colleagues (2016), social knowledge about the factors that contribute to social inequalities were related to children’s distribution behavior and their moral reasoning. Thus, children display moral reasoning in complex situations involving social exclusion and resource allocation, even when their moral judgments are challenged by competing claims of group identity, group norms, and societal messages about maintaining the status quo.

In sum, moral reasoning emerges during the preschool period and is applied to a wide range of social contexts, including those that concern social exclusion and resource allocation. Children and adolescents apply their moral reasoning to many complex situations, including those involving parent–adolescent conflict (Smetana, 2011), civil liberties (Helwig, Ruck, & Peterson-Badali, 2014), cultural conflict (Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2009), and sexual identity (Horn, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Moral reasoning is evident in early childhood. The roots are established with early social orientations, empathetic understanding, and moral awareness. Children apply moral reasoning to basic prototypic moral transgressions and understand that not all rule transgressions are the same. Yet as social life becomes highly differentiated with multiple arenas of social relationships (school, family, neighborhood, community) and with the development of different areas of social knowledge (intentionality, group identity, group norms), the application of moral reasoning to social events and interactions is often complicated. Nonetheless, children’s moral reasoning continues to be robust, stable, and consistent as they encounter multifaceted situations. Throughout childhood, children not only use moral reasoning in complex situations but challenge social inequalities and inequities. When children advocate for conformity to group norms at the expense of fairness, they often justify these decisions based on conventions, customs, and traditions of the group (rather than resort to selfish orientations). Yet even as groups have a powerful influence on moral decisions, children maintain their concerns for the fair and just treatment of others.

There are also many situations in which children do not challenge moral transgressions that they witness or hear about. Explanations for a lack of acting on one’s moral viewpoints include fears of retaliation and exclusion, the misattribution of intentionality of others, the salience of group loyalty, and an uncertainty that intervention will be effective. The role of adults in enabling children to understand connections between acts and consequences, to disentangle moral and nonmoral elements in situations that are multifaceted, and to support children’s
desires to challenge inequality and unfairness is essential.

This chapter began with definitions of morality (issues of others’ welfare, rights, fairness, and justice) and moral reasoning (the formation of judgments on the basis of endorsed moral principles). By these definitions, not all evaluative issues are moral, and not all processes leading to moral judgments count as reasoning. Indeed, several parts of this chapter were dedicated to describing the integration of moral and nonmoral (e.g., conventional) reasoning and interactions between reasoning and nonreasoning processes. We now suggest some key areas of future research on the development of moral reasoning and its relation to other aspects of psychological functioning.

First, how do children adopt new moral principles? Not all principles emerge at the same time. For instance, although property rights are seen in preschoolers, there is less evidence that preschoolers believe that people have other types of rights such as those pertaining to autonomy and free speech, as examples (Helwig et al., 2014; Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2013; Tisak, 1993; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011). What kinds of thoughts and experiences lead children to endorse new rights? Answering these developmental questions will require not only interviews and laboratory experiments but also research into children’s everyday experiences (e.g., through naturalistic observations; Dahl, 2017; Turiel, 1983; Willems, 1967).

Second, what leads children and adults to change their ways of coordinating different evaluative principles? For instance, how do children come to concern themselves increasingly with historical and societal inequalities in deciding how resources should be allocated? (Elenbaas et al., 2016). The world of childhood is both vertical and hierarchical as children develop concepts of equality, on one hand, and create social status categories that are associated with power and entitlement, on the other hand (C. S. Brown & Bigler, 2005). Children make inferences about what they witness in their peer culture, leading them to accept and reject power hierarchies and status, but doing so is not easy (Mulvey et al., 2013; Nesdale & Flesser, 2001). Challenging the group has a high cost, including potential exclusion from the group. With age, children transfer their knowledge about the peer world to the larger societal world with its traditions and norms that reinforce hierarchical and, at times, unfair treatment of others. This knowledge enables children to make decisions that will either rectify or perpetuate social inequalities that stem from the broader culture, such as those based on gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016).

Third, how do reasoning and nonreasoning processes jointly influence judgments? Much has been made of findings suggesting that manipulations of incidental features (e.g., whether research participants are sitting in a dirty or smelly room) influence evaluative judgments (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). However, the effects of incidental disgust on evaluative judgments are generally small and rarely compared the effects of endorsed principles (Kayyal, Pochedly, McCarthy, & Russell, 2015; Kihlstrom, 2013; Landy & Goodwin, 2015). The effects of incidental disgust typically involve making negative evaluations slightly more negative rather than, for instance, making positive or neutral judgments negative (Pizarro, Inbar, & Helion, 2011). Moreover, other “gut” reactions, such as fear, do not necessarily restrict moral action or moral reasoning, as shown by acts of disobedience designed to create social justice (Appiah, 2005; Nussbaum, 1999). In contrast, the presence of an action that violates a moral principle typically is sufficient,
and even necessary, in order for children and adults to judge an action as wrong (Killen & Smetana, 2015).

Fourth, what types of social experiences are motivating for children for acting on their moral reasoning in a range of situations that they confront in social life? Developmental science often identifies essential experiences in broad categories, such as peer or adult–child relationships. More recently research has demonstrated that specific types of peer relationships are important to enhance moral judgments, such as cross-group friendships (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). But what specific aspects of these relationships compel children to challenge wrong deeds by others? Research has focused on whether children attend ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous schools (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007), for example, and more research about what aspects of diversity provide children with positive experiences that contribute to promoting moral judgment and reasoning in development would be enlightening.

This chapter outlined a conceptual framework for research, summarized and systematized what we already know, and pointed to some of the exciting areas of inquiry about the development of moral reasoning. On the basis of the research reviewed here, we venture to propose that moral reasoning is essential to understanding the origins and development of human morality.

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