NEW PERSPECTIVES ON MORAL DEVELOPMENT

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HELPING, HITTING AND DEVELOPING
Toward a Constructivist–Interactionist Account of Early Morality

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The first years of life are unlike any other period in moral development, characterized by both transformative advances and apparent paradoxes. During this period, young children’s orientations toward moral issues are transformed as children acquire the willingness and ability to help others, express and justify judgements about moral violations, and protest against moral violations even as unaffected third parties (Dahl, 2015; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Rizzo & Killen, 2016; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012; Smetana et al., 2012; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). These transformations constitute qualitative advances toward a developed morality.

Yet early moral development is also characterized by paradoxes and limitations. For instance, while children become more helpful and empathic in the second year, they also increasingly use force against others (sometimes without provocation or distress), intentionally elicit caregiver prohibitions, and tease their siblings (Dahl, 2015; Dahl, 2016a; Dunn, 1988; Hay, 2005; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). Most children hit, bite or kick others more often during their second and third years than during any other period in their lives (Hay, 2005). Behaviours considered “prosocial” (e.g., helping others) and “antisocial” (e.g., harming others) are negatively correlated in older children and adults, but uncorrelated or positively correlated in early childhood (see Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015).

The unique facts of early moral development suggest that young children approach helpful and harmful actions in fundamentally different ways than older children. For instance, we will argue that at first infants do not view harming others as categorically wrong, nor do they view helping others as morally good or required. In contrast, preschoolers and older children view moral violations as categorically wrong, apply moral judgements flexibly across multifaceted situations, and demonstrate actions and emotional reactions that reflect these moral judgements.
separating the influences of "biology" and "culture", it is useful to outline the key features of contemporary approaches to early moral development that emphasize innate characteristics or socialization processes.

Nativist approaches

Several theorists have recently argued that key components of human morality are innate or emerge independently of specific social experiences such as caregiver socialization (Blomm, 2012; Hamilton, 2015; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). According to these accounts, core aspects of morality, such as moral evaluations or altruistic helping, emerge too early for parental encouragement or other specific social experiences to have had an effect (or before such experiences have even occurred). A second line of argument for nativist theories builds on propositions that the evolutionary benefits of morally relevant capacities make it likely that natural selection "encoded" the capacities in our genetic inheritance.

Laboratory studies with young infants provide a main source of empirical evidence for nativist accounts. For instance, studies have found looking and reaching preferences for prosocial (helpful) over antisocial (hindering) geometric shapes or puppets in infants 3 months or older (Hamilton & Wynn, 2011; Hamilton, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007). Another line of research has shown that infants help adults, for instance by handing back out-of-reach objects, shortly after their first birthday (Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). Proponents of nativist or related claims argue that these abilities are shown so early, and are so evolutionarily beneficial, that they are most likely biologically predetermined (Hamilton & Wynn, 2011; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009).

Socialization approaches

A contrasting set of approaches to early moral development view morality as the result of socialization. Socialization is, in one common definition, "the processes by which new members of a group are assisted by more experienced others to adopt the values, standards, and behaviors of that group" (Genes, Chaparro, Johnston, & Sherman, 2014, p. 113; Kochanska & Aksan, 2006). In explaining early socio-moral development, socialization researchers have typically emphasized how parents instruct or coerce their children to engage in or refrain from certain behaviors, such as playing with a particular toy (Kochanska, Aksan, & Nichols, 2003; LeCuyer & Houck, 2006). Successful socialization is deemed to have occurred when children begin complying with these instructions in the absence of the caregiver, an outcome referred to as internalization. Proposing one mechanism of internalization, Kochanska and Aksan (2006) argued that children internalize the norms and values of their parents into their own as parents are responsive to the children's needs and interests.
Beyond the dichotomy of "biology" and "culture" in early moral development

Research motivated by nativist and socialization approaches has yielded important findings about what infants can do in social situations. Still, in our view, these theoretical frameworks do not readily account for the major transformations taking place in early moral development.

It is notoriously difficult to specify what it means for a moral characteristic to be innate or genetically preprogrammed (Dahl, 2014; Spencer et al., 2009). A main reason is that, from a biological perspective, all developmental processes involve some form of organism–environment coaction (Gottlieb, 1998; Spencer et al., 2009). Nativist approaches to early moral development typically do not propose that innate characteristics are present at birth. Rather, these characteristics are proposed to develop independently of relevant experiences. For instance, Bloom defines "innate" as "[f]ord gotten into the head by means of the extraction of information from the environment" (Bloom, 2012, p. 72). However, no nativist would argue that innate capabilities would emerge if infants developed in severely deprived pre-natal or post-natal environments (e.g. without caregivers). For this reason, nativist accounts must rest on a distinction between "general" organism–environment interactions and "specific" organism–environment interactions (for a related distinction, see Hamlin, 2015). General organism–environment interactions are those necessary for innate characteristics to emerge, which remain compatible with nativism. Specific organism–environment interactions, on the other hand, are interactions deemed too closely related to the developing phenomenon, and hence incompatible with a nativist account, such as parental encouragement. However, it is particularly difficult to argue that infants lack specific experiences relevant to moral development, since morality is about how we treat others. Infants undoubtedly spend a great deal of time interacting with others from very early on in life (e.g. Richards & Bental, 1972; Trevathan, 1979).

While we do not adopt a nativist stance, we also do not adopt a socialization approach to early moral development. Most socialization approaches characterise morality as the adoption of the values of parents and other socialization agents (i.e. internalization, see above). A number of studies have shown that young children do not automatically adopt the norms and values of adults, nor do they grant adults the right to decide about all forms of rights and wrong (Dahl, 2016b; Helwig & To, this volume; Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Gerrits-Brown, 1967; Niccii & Weber, 1995; Smetana et al., 2012; Smetana & Jambon, this volume).

Whereas children do justify judgements about conventional (e.g. dress code) violations by referring to authorities and rules, and say adults can change these rules, they do not view moral issues of welfare, rights and fairness in the same way (see Smetana & Jambon, this volume). By 3 to 4 years of age, children indicate that it is wrong to hurt others because it causes harm and say hurting would be wrong even if adults gave them permission to hit. Around this age, children also judge that there are certain personal issues over which parents should not have jurisdiction,
to coordinate social organization, for instance dress codes) (Dahl & Kim, 2014; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetana et al., 2012). These studies have also shown that children justify their moral judgements based on considerations about others’ welfare and rights, whereas they tend to refer to rules and authorities when explaining why conventional violations (e.g., wearing a bathing suit to work) are wrong (for recent reviews, see Kellen & Smetana, 2015; Tur威尔, 2015). In seeking to explain the development of children’s moral concerns, we also seek to explain how these moral concepts come to differ from concerns with social conventions, safety norms and other rules.

We view a definition of morality as an essential starting point for a developmental account of how children acquire moral concerns. Without such a definition, there would be no way of knowing what we were trying to explain. Our definition of morality as concerns with welfare, rights and fairness is based on philosophical analyses and past empirical research (see Tur威尔, 2015). Contrary to some claims (Haidt & Graham, 2007), our definition of morality does not seek to capture all of the many ways in which the word “morality” is used by laypersons or researchers. We adopt the above definition of morality because it identifies a unified and important domain of inquiry and is consistent with many philosophical treatments of morality (see Dahl, 2014; Tur威尔, 2015).

Constant interaction

Morality is about how we ought to treat others. A key way of learning about others’ expectations about and reactions to actions is to observe and participate in interactions. From birth, children engage in reciprocal social interactions for hours each day (Richards & Bemal, 1972; Trevarthen, 1979). Many everyday interactions contain information about how people react to certain actions, for instance hating or helping (Dahl, 2015; Dahl, 2014a). A starting point for our framework is that children at all ages have social experiences that reflect the goals, preferences and emotional states of others. The question is not whether but how these experiences contribute to early moral development, and how they do so in concert with, not in opposition to, biological (e.g., genetic and neural) processes (Spencer et al., 2009). To understand the specific roles of everyday experiences in moral development it is crucial to investigate children’s everyday experiences directly, for instance using naturalistic observations (Dahl, in press).

Children’s constructive role

A third characteristic of our approach is our emphasis on children’s constructive role in their own development. This constructive role has at least two aspects. First, children’s actions are not just as recipients, in their everyday interactions. For instance, while infants may observe interactions in which others me force against each other, most infants in their second year also instigate such interactions by hating, kicking, biting, or otherwise using force against others (Dahl, 2016a; Hay, 2006). These actions in turn elicit reactions from caregivers and other family members expressing that others generally do not like being hit or kicked (Dahl, 2016a; Dahl, 2016b; Dahl, Sherlock, Campos, & Thelemann, 2014; Smetana, 1984). Second, the development of moral concerns requires the construction of autonomous judgements and principles that sometimes conflict with the views of adults. By most accounts, a developed morality involves a concern with moral issues in the absence of, and even in opposition to, adult commands (Kohlberg, 1971; Tur威尔, 2015). Conflicts between children and adults often arise because children and parents differ in their views about what children have the right to make decisions about (Nucci, 2014; Smetana & Jambron, this volume). Thus, a key feature of early moral development is the construction of judgements about right and wrong that are separable from, and sometimes in opposition to, the judgements of parents and others (see also Smetana & Jambron, this volume).

Harming and helping: key transitions in early moral development

We maintain that a constructivist-interactionist approach provides a useful and valid framework for understanding early development. In the remainder of this chapter we will apply this framework to the development of children’s orientations toward helpful and harmful behaviours. We will argue that during the first three to four years of life children come to view harming others as wrong and helping others as good (and sometimes required). Acquiring these moral orientations involves major developmental transitions not readily accounted for by nativist or socialization theories. Rather than providing a comprehensive review of the development of helping and harming orientations, we highlight key phenomena and their theoretical relevance (for reviews of research on the development of children’s orientations toward helpful and harmful behaviours, see Dahl & Freda, 2017; Hay, 2005; Hay & Cook, 2007).

How do children come to view harming others as wrong?

The general prohibition against violence is a basic feature of morality, yet it is not easy to acquire. To view forceful actions against others as morally wrong requires children to understand that acts of force cause harm to others, be concerned that others not be harmed, and view concerns with avoiding harm as obligatory (Dahl & Freda, 2017). On their path to viewing harmful actions as wrong, young children go through periods of low rates of empathic responses to distress and increasing rates of aggressive and forceful actions (Dahl, 2016a; Hay, 2005; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). In response to their many forceful actions, children receive negative reactions from others that reflect how hating or kicking afflicts the well-being of those around them (Dahl, 2016a; Dahl, 2016b; Dahl & Campos, 2013; Dahl et al., 2014; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979). In our view, children’s use of these and other recurring interactions about force during the first five years of life set the stage for the emergence of a moral concern with not harming others. In what
favors, we highlight four key phases in the development of children’s orientations toward the use of interpersonal force from a constructivist–interactionist view: the absence of moral judgements at or around birth, the use of unprovoked acts of force, the decrease in acts of force, and the emergence of categorical moral evaluations of physical harm.

**Children are not born thinking that harming others is wrong**

We begin with the proposition that infants do not make categorical negative evaluations of harmful actions against others in their first year of life. Our assertion runs counter to recent claims that infants have innate moral intuitions (e.g. Bloom, 2012; Hamlin, 2013). The main claim about innate moral evaluations is based on findings that infants as young as 3 months of age show preferential looking, and later reaching, toward helpful rather than hindering puppets or geometric shapes (e.g. Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin et al., 2007). In one paradigm, infants observed a neutral puppet rolling a ball to two other puppets, a giver puppet and a taker puppet. The receiving puppet either returned the ball to the neutral puppet (giver) or ran away with the ball (taker) (Hamlin & Wynn, 2011). When given a choice between the giver and taker puppet, 3-month-olds looked longer at the giver than the taker, and 3-month-olds were more likely to reach toward the giver puppet (although some studies using similar methods have not found evidence of such preferences; see Cowell & Decety, 2015; Salvadori et al., 2015).

There are two main reasons why we do not believe that preferential looking and reaching demonstrate that infants view harmful or hindering actions as morally wrong. First, the studies demonstrate relative preferences, not categorical evaluations. That is, infants are always given a choice between two agents, and are not shown to react negatively to a single act or agent. At least by late in the first year, infants are capable of directing angry reactions toward others, for instance when someone retrieves the infant’s toys (Stenberg & Campos, 1990). However, there is no evidence that infants live in their first year show such categorically negative reactions to moral violations from a third-party perspective. The second reason is that preferential looking or reaching may not be based on moral concerns with the victim’s welfare. Infants also show preferential reaching for characters that imitate others and characters that help rather than hinder a character that shared the infants’ food preferences (Hamlin, Mahajan, Liberman, & Wynn, 2013; Powell & Spelke, 2014). Thus, infants’ looking and reaching may reflect a preference for which characters they would prefer to interact with, rather than agent-oriented evaluation of the kind seen in older children and adults. In sum, current evidence does not indicate that infants can make categorical moral evaluations in the first year of life.

**Infants use unprovoked force**

Naturalistic observations and parental reports have shown that acts of force against others become increasingly common from the first to the second year (Dahl, 2016a; Hay, 2005). Infants’ forceful actions are often viewed as the result of frustration or distress (Bloom, 2013; Hay, 2005), for instance during a conflict about a toy. However, this frustration-aggression model does not account for all acts of force during infancy. In one study of everyday family interactions in the second year, approximately half of infants’ forceful actions were unprovoked (Dahl, 2016a); that is, they occurred without any apparent frustration of the infant’s desires or goals. Supporting the distinction between provoked and unprovoked acts of force, infants rarely showed distress when engaging in unprovoked acts of force but commonly expressed distress during provoked episodes.

As noted, infants’ acts of force elicit negative reactions that may inform infants about the unique consequences of such actions. In fact, one motivation behind infants’ unprovoked acts of force may be to elicit reactions or communicative signals from others (Brownell & Hamer, 1999; Dahl, 2016a). Compared to other types of transgressions, such as making a mess, infants’ acts of force against others elicit more physical interventions, more direct commands, more angry tones of voice, more references to consequences to others, and fewer demonstrations and complaints (Dahl, 2016b; Dahl & Campos, 2013; Dahl et al., 2014). In the study by Dahl (2016a), unprovoked acts of force were even more likely than provoked and accidental acts of force to elicit negative reactions from others. It is possible that caregivers view unprovoked acts of force as providing a particularly suitable opportunity for empathizing that it is wrong to harm others since infants are rarely distressed in these situations. In addition, most caregivers view unprovoked acts of force as unsatisfactory and undesirable (e.g. Cole & Tan, 2015), whereas provoked acts are encouraged or at least accepted in some contexts (Antilla–Rey, Killen, & Bremick, 2009; Miller & Sperry, 1987).

Infants grow increasingly sensitive to caregivers’ prohibitive reactions (Dunn, 1988), indicating that acts of force may help infants learn about their social environment. One study investigated infants’ sensitivity to different prohibitive vocal tones by asking mothers to watch video recordings of infant transgressions and pretend to verbally prohibit the infant in the recording (Dahl & Tran, 2016). Next, the mothers’ vocal recordings were played back to their own children (aged 13 to 25 months) whenever the children approached a novel toy. Older children avoided the toy more than younger children after hearing a vocal prohibition elicited by a moral transgression (using force against others). In contrast, there was no difference between the age groups when they heard prohibitions elicited by a pragmatic transgression (making a mess). Another study found that during naturally occurring conflicts, infants were less likely to protest caregivers’ prohibitions of interpersonal force than to protest prohibitions of acts that created a mess or pertained to infant safety (Dahl, 2016b). The latter finding suggests that infants had become sensitive to how some prohibitions, for instance about mess-making, were more negotiable than other prohibitions, especially the prohibition against interpersonal force (Dahl, 2016b). Other studies have found that children become less likely to ignore parental prohibitions, and more likely to try to negotiate with caregivers from the second and into the third year (Kuczynski et al., 1987). Thus,
through recurring parent–child conflicts during everyday life (Dahl, 2016b; Rijit-Plooij & Plooij, 1993), children become increasingly attuned to adult expectations and prohibitions during the second year, even though they do not always comply with those expectations.

In short, we view the second year as a time of both limitations in (pre)morality abilities and experiential foundations for further developments in children's orientations toward force. The nature and frequency of infants' acts of force in the second year suggest that children at this age are not reliably concerned with avoiding hitting or otherwise harming others. This apparent lack of concern in turn generates signals from others about how forceful actions are affecting victims, and infants appear to grow sensitive to these signals.

Children's harmful acts towards others decrease

In the third year, children's acts of physical force against others have begun to decrease (Hay, 2009). Dahl (2016a) found that unprovoked acts of force, unlike provoked acts, had begun decreasing already in the second half of the second year. Although toddlers and even preschoolers occasionally use physical force against others, especially during conflicts, interpersonal force becomes increasingly rare as children grow older (see Hay, 2009).

There are probably several interrelated reasons why acts of force decrease with age. One, mentioned above, is children's growing sensitivity to prohibitive signals from others. A second source is the strengthening of children's empathic responsiveness to distress during the second and third years (Sveva et al., 2010; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). In the first year, a predominant response to other's distress is interest, sometimes mixed with concern (Hay, Nash, & Pederson, 1981). In contrast, 2-year-olds are very likely to attempt to comfort a familiar person in distress, for instance by bringing them a toy or another favourite object (Hoffman, 2000; Sveva et al., 2010). A third likely contributor to the decrease in force is the increase in self-regulatory capabilities from infancy to preschool age, which may make children better able to inhibit their inclinations to use force against others (Calkins, 2007; Shaw, Owens, Giovannetti, & Windle, 2007), at least insofar as they are concerned with not causing harm or eliciting prohibitions from others.

Importantly, a decrease in acts of interpersonal force does not by itself mean that 2-year-olds view harming others as categorically wrong. By analogy, a child may stop playing with a toy not because the child views playing with the toy as wrong, but because the child lost interest in the toy or became wary of being reprimanded by caregivers. Indeed, the decrease in children's acts of force could instead be due exclusively to the factors listed above and not to the acquisition of negative moral evaluations of interpersonal force. The emergence of categorical moral evaluations marks a major transformation in early moral development, and one that requires not only compliance with parental prohibitions but also the child's active construction of judgements based on moral concerns for others' welfare.

Children begin to view harming others as categorically wrong

By 3 to 4 years of age most children view hitting or kicking others as wrong and base such evaluations on concerns for others' welfare (Dahl & Kim, 2014; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetsers, 1981). Children distinguish judgements about interpersonal force from judgements about violations of social conventions and violations of safety rules, as evidenced both by the justifications they provide and the conditions under which they would view violations as permissible. For instance, most preschoolers say that it would be permissible to violate a social convention if adults gave permission or if the rules were changed, but do not say it would be permissible to hit someone else under similar circumstances (Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetsers, 1981; Smetsers et al., 2012).

Children's moral and social evaluations are also reflected in their actions, for instance in their responses to violations against others. Although studies have not investigated young children's protests against interpersonal harm, several studies have shown that 3- to 4-year-olds protest when one puppet destroys the property of another puppet (Schmidt et al., 2012; Vaish et al., 2011). These findings are particularly telling since the children are reacting to violations that do not directly affect them, indicating that children at this age are becoming concerned with moral issues from a third-party point of view.

How preschoolers construct moral judgements of right and wrong remains one of the most difficult questions about early moral development (Dahl & Freda, 2017). The emergence of moral judgements cannot merely be the result of prohibitions from their parents, since most parents prohibit some activities already in infancy. Although empathy probably contributes to moral judgements, empathic responses to others' distress does not guarantee a moral judgement, since we can respond to others' distress without negatively evaluating the person or event causing the distress (e.g. in the case of accidents). As argued by Hoffman (2000), empathic anger and moral outrage require a judgement that someone has done something wrong and should be blamed for the suffering of the victim.

Studies have documented both cognitive and experiential predictors of children's ability to distinguish moral from conventional rules. These predictors include the time they have spent in preschool, the kinds of messages they receive from their caregivers, temperament characteristics, linguistic abilities, and their ability to understand others' mental states (e.g. Jagers, Bingham, & Hans, 1996; Smetsers et al., 2012). Still, no studies to date have investigated how children's ability to make categorical moral evaluations about interpersonal force first emerges.

Dahl and Freda (2017) speculated that the emergence of categorical moral evaluations may be tied to changes in children's capabilities for mental representation. In order to negatively evaluate an entire class of actions such as hitting (regardless of who the agent and victims are), children must: (a) represent the general causal connection between the actions and their consequences to others' welfare; (b) view those consequences as undesirable; and (c) view the actions as bad based on their anticipated consequences. Although this account remains speculative, there is
no doubt that the emergence of categorical, negative evaluations of interpersonal harm must involve major transformations in low children view acts of force against others. The empirical evidence reviewed here indicates that this transformation is neither innate nor a result of the mere acceptance of parental messages, but rather involves processes of cognitive and affective construction in the young child.

How do children come to view helping others as good and sometimes required?

Moral concerns with others’ welfare and rights are not only reflected in negative evaluations of harmful actions toward others, but also in positive evaluations of helpful actions. That is, if we view concerns with others’ well-being as obligatory, we would generally approve of actions that promote others’ well-being and sometimes even view such actions as morally required. Indeed, older children and adults are often not only motivated to help, but also view helping as good and sometimes required (Fisenberg et al., 2015; Sahn, 1992; Killen & Turkel, 1998; Miller, Benoff, & Farwood, 1999). In the following sections, we discuss key phases in the early development of orientations toward helpful actions in a constructivist-interactionist approach. We argue that helping emerges through everyday interactions late in the first year, that engagement in helping does not imply that children view helping as good, and that children may not view helping as morally good or required until preschool age.

Helping is not present at birth, but emerges through everyday interactions

In our developmental work, we have defined helping as acts that, when executed successfully, directly facilitate the acquisition of another person’s goal (Dahl, 2015). Our definition thereby makes no assumptions about the motivation behind the actions, for instance whether a helpful infant is ultimately seeking to participate in caregiver activities or to promote the well-being of others. The definition also includes both simple acts of handing out-of-reach objects back to an experimenter (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006) and participation in family chores that fulfill caregiver goals of household maintenance (Dahl, 2015). In the months after birth, children lack the motoric abilities to help others.

Based on preferential reaching research, it has been proposed that infants positively evaluate helpful actions in the first year of life (Haradin et al., 2007). We argued above that these findings, while intriguing, do not show evaluations that are moral in the sense defined here. The preferential reaching and looking behaviors are evidence of relative preferences rather than categorical evaluations, and are not necessarily based on agent-neutral moral concerns with others’ welfare.

Infants appear to start helping others around the first birthday (Carpendale, Kettem, & Audet, 2015; Dahl, 2015; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). Early in life, rates of helping appear to be fairly similar in different communities, although differences emerge by middle childhood (e.g. Acalá, Rogoff, Mejía-Araza, Coppens, & Dexter, 2014). Based on these findings, along with the finding that chimpanzees also help others (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), some have argued that infants have a natural altruistic tendency that develops independently of caregiver scaffolding (i.e. encouragement, praise, or other ways of facilitating children’s helping; Martin & Olson, 2015; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009).

Additional evidence in support of the natural tendency hypothesis includes findings that encouragement and praise did not increase helping in 20- and 24-month-olds (Engelmann & Tomasello, this volume; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008, 2013).

In contrast, we propose that infant helping emerges out of infants’ general eagerness and increasing ability to participate in joint activities with others (Carpendale et al., 2015; Dahl, 2015; Riehling, 1982). From this point of view, activities classified as “helping” by researchers represent one of many activities in which infants observe and engage in with adults. Crucially, we also hypothesize that adults are generally welcoming of infant helpful participation and therefore scaffold infant helping in everyday life. Naturalistic research has shown that caregivers scaffold infant helping in numerous ways starting around the time when infants begin to help (Carpendale et al., 2015; Dahl, 2015). For instance, Dahl (2015) found that, starting late in the second year, most infants helped at home and the vast majority of helping situations involved encouragement, praise or thanking by caregivers. Over the second year, infant helping became increasingly frequent.

The presence of encouragement increased over the course of the second year, whereas praise and thanking decreased, possibly reflecting that caregivers come to expect infants’ helpful participation in everyday activities. A critical question for several theoretical approaches to infant helping is how helping situations begin: do infants initiate helping situations, reflecting a developed desire and ability to help, or are they guided to begin helping by family members? Our approach hypothesizes that, especially when infants begin to help, they show social interest in what caregivers are doing, but little spontaneous helping prior to caregiver scaffolding efforts. An ongoing naturalistic investigation in our laboratory is addressing this issue by studying everyday helping situations from late in the first year into the second year. While data coding is still ongoing, preliminary data from 49 families support our hypothesis that scaffolding is central to getting infants involved in helping situations (Dahl et al., 2016). Late in the first year and early in the second year, most helping situations began by infants observing adults’ activities, but not yet initiating helping, and caregivers subsequently got involved (for instance by directing them to pick up an object and put it away). Later in the second year, infants were increasingly likely to initiate helping activities prior to caregiver scaffolding, suggesting a more developed ability to help spontaneously. These preliminary findings highlight both the active role of infants and the guiding role of caregivers in the construction of helping skills: infants have a deep interest in others’ activities, but caregiver scaffolding may be needed to convert this interest into helping.
Naturalistic studies are critical for investigating what happens in everyday life, but are less suited to answering questions of causality (Dahl, in press). To test the hypothesis that scaffolding is particularly crucial when infants are less skilled helpers, a recent experimental study manipulated the presence of encouragement and praise for one group of younger infants (aged 13 to 14 months) and one group of older infants (aged 15 to 17 months) faced with the simple helping task of handing back an out-of-reach object (Dahl et al., in press). Consistent with our hypotheses, encouragement, praise, and thanking doubled rates of simple helping among the younger infants, but had no effect on simple helping rates among the older infants. Thus, not only do encouragement, praise, and thanking co-occur with infant helping in everyday life, but such scaffolding can also facilitate infant helping behaviour (see also Xu, Sanher, & Soranaree, 2016). Scaffolding may be particularly influential in the early phases of the development of helping skills.

**Helping behaviour does not mean that children view helping as morally good or required**

Children’s increasing engagement in helping does not imply that they view such helping as morally good or required, just as decreasing use of forceful behaviour does not imply that they view harming others as wrong. One indication of how infants are unlikely to view simple helping as required is that infants, unlike older toddlers, do not help on every trial even in simple helping tasks (Svetlova et al., 2010; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2007). Rather, infants sometimes wander around or observe the person in need of help (Dahl et al., in press; Waugh et al., 2015). Even when infants do help, they sometimes also engage in seemingly counterproductive behaviour, for instance by first helping to put toys away in a toy box and then dumping the toy box out again (Carpentdale et al., 2015).

Over the course of the second year and into the third, children become increasingly reliable helpers. They show helping rats near ceiling in simple helping tasks, appear to want to see other persons helped even if they are not doing the helping, and sometimes help even when recipients are not yet aware of their own need (Hepach, Vain, & Tomasello, 2012; Svetlova et al., 2010; Warneken, 2013).

Still, regarding helping just as a forceful action, we argue that a moral orientation requires the emergence of categorical evaluations of right and wrong, or good and bad, based on concerns with others’ welfare.

**When do children begin to view helping others as good, and sometimes required?**

There is limited research on when children begin to judge helping as morally good or required. As noted above, negative judgements about harming and stealing based on concerns for others’ welfare and rights emerge by three or four years of age (Dahl & Kim, 2014; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetana et al., 2012). However, there is minimal research on whether children at these ages believe it is good to help or permissible not to help. Kahn (1992) reported that nearly all 8- to 13-year-olds said a protagonist should share resources with someone in need when doing so had a low cost for the giver. Still, the children did not always view helping as obligatory in these situations: only about half of the participants indicated that it would be wrong not to help. Relatedly, Miller and her colleagues found that nearly all 7- and 10-year-olds in US and India samples said a protagonist was obligated to help another person in extreme need (Miller et al., 1999).

Other studies provide more indirect evidence about children’s perception of moral obligations to help someone, primarily when the recipient is in distress. One study found that nearly all preschoolers said that someone should respond to another child in distress, but most of them said that it was the teacher’s responsibility to do so (Caplan & Hay, 1989). Other laboratory studies indicate that toddlers and preschoolers do perceive themselves as culpable when causing distress to another person, motivating them to relieve the person’s distress (Chapman, Zahn-Waxler, Cooperman, & Lammott, 1987; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, in press). However, none of the cited studies indicate whether preschoolers generally view people as obligated to help others in at least some situations.

Since most preschoolers endorse some general obligations toward others’ welfare (see above discussion of orientations toward force and harm), we would expect that children at these ages also endorse general obligations to help others in dire need. In line with findings about children’s judgements of harm, we hypothesize that children’s judgements about helping others in extreme need would be based on considerations of welfare and would not be contingent on the existence of rules or authority commands. When others’ need is less extreme, conceptions about roles and relationships appear to be important for children’s evaluations of helpful actions (Killen & Turati, 1998; Miller et al., 1999). It will be important to investigate how contextualized evaluations about helping are influenced by children’s own experiences with helping and being helped. Another area for future research is the developmental transformation from merely engaging in helping to also viewing helping as generally good and sometimes obligatory.

**Conclusions**

This chapter began by discussing some of the transformations and paradoxes of moral development in the first years of life. A central task for those studying early moral development is to understand how children develop genuine moral concerns with others’ rights and welfare through these transformations and paradoxes. In responding to this task, our approach emphasizes the constructive role of the child in engendering, interpreting, and evaluating everyday interactions. We exemplified these ideas by applying them to the development of children’s orientations toward helping and harming.

This chapter proposed to reorient theory and research about early moral development. We have argued that current nativist and socialization theories do not readily explain key features of moral development in the first years of life.
The goal of the chapter was to justify and outline a constructivist and interactionist framework for studying early moral development. It did not, however, seek to provide a comprehensive overview of all aspects of early moral development. Several important phenomena were not discussed, or were only discussed in passing, such as empathy (see Malti, Dys, Colasante, & Peplak, this volume) and orientations toward rights and fairness (see Helwig & To, this volume). Moreover, references to cultural variability were limited, as we focused on developments that take place in most or all communities (the development of the views that, generally speaking, using physical force against others is morally wrong and helping others is morally good and sometimes required). Finally, important empirical questions remain about some of the transitions described, for instance the emergence of categorical judgements about harmful and helpful actions toward others. These are some of the major areas in need of additional empirical and theoretical work.

We believe that further progress toward understanding moral development can be made by carefully defining morally relevant phenomena and their developmental precursors (Dahl, 2014), by using naturalistic methods in addition to experimental methods (Dahl, in press), and by assessing multiple aspects of moral development (e.g., both helpful and harmful orientations, both judgements and behaviours). In their developed form, moral concerns with others’ welfare and rights are reflected in both stable and flexible judgements, justifications, actions and emotional reactions across a multitude of situations (Kellen & Smetana, 2015; Turiel & Dahl, in press). It is only in this robust form, applied flexibly across situations, that our moral capacities can promote and protect the rights and welfare of individuals and the peaceful functioning of societies. By aiming to explain the gradual emergence of obligatory concerns with others’ rights and welfare, research on early moral development takes on a difficult yet necessary task.

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References


