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Commentary title: The Moral Obligations of Conflict and Resistance

Authors of Commentary:

Melanie Killen

Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology

University of Maryland

College Park, MD 20742

301-405-3176

mkillen@umd.edu

www.killenlab.umd.edu

Audun Dahl

Psychology Department

University of California, Santa Cruz

1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064

831-459-3557

dahl@ucsc.edu

<https://esil.ucsc.edu/people/audun-dahl/>

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Abstract

Morality has two key features: (1) moral judgments are not determined by what your group thinks, and (2) moral judgments are applied to members of other groups as well as your own group. Cooperative motives do not explain how young children reject unfairness, and assert moral obligations, both inside and outside their groups. Resistance and experience with conflicts, alongside cooperation, is key to the emergence and development of moral obligation.

The Moral Obligations of Conflict and Resistance

How do humans acquire moral obligation, a unique species-specific ability that enables individuals to live in large groups peacefully, create rules of justice, fairness, and rights, and protect the interests of the minority? Tomasello's thought-provoking answer, motivated by an evolutionary perspective, starts with cooperation, through which identification with groups, and the internalization of cultural norms, provides the basis for an objective moral obligation. Tomasello proposes that individuals live up to their moral obligations because they identify with their social groups: "I am obligated to conform and identify with those around me or else I really and truly, objectively, will cease to be who I am in the group" (p. 22).

By rooting moral obligations in cooperation and group identification, however, Tomasello's account invites two challenges: (1) How to explain that individuals, including young children, separate group norms from moral norms, often sparking conflicts; and (2) How to explain that individuals, including young children, extend moral norms to members of other groups? Answers to these questions will explain how individuals seek to rectify failures of moral obligation to others that permeate human existence.

Concerns with others' welfare, rights, and justice often conflict with group norms or authority commands. These conflicts give rise to civil rights movements, corrections to gendered and racial discrimination, and intrapersonal dilemmas about whether to obey an authority (Killen & Smetana, 2015; Turiel & Dahl, 2019). The abundance of such conflicts have led philosophers and developmental psychologists to separate moral concerns from norms imposed by authorities and groups (Sen, 2009; Turiel, 2002). This contrast is evident, for instance, when authority commands conflict with moral obligations to protect others: "a good soldier obeys orders, but a good human being doesn't massacre the innocent" (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 102; see Turiel & Dahl, 2019).

On this view, morality has two key features: (1) moral judgments are not determined by what your group thinks, and (2) moral judgments are applied to members of other groups as well as your own group. Initially, some researchers proposed that young children confuse group norms and moral concerns with rights, welfare, and justice (Kohlberg, 1971; Piaget, 1932). Over the past 40 years, however, researchers have shown that children separate moral concerns with welfare, rights, and justice from authority commands and group consensus by around three years of age (Dahl & Killen, 2018; Killen & Smetana, 2015; Turiel, 2002). Based on this research, we contend that resistance and reflecting on social conflicts, alongside cooperation, is key to the emergence and development of moral obligations.

Thus, while we grant that cooperation plays a fundamental role in moral development, young children also disagree with parents, peers, and siblings about which clothes they should wear, who owns which toy, and whether it is okay to hit back (Dahl, 2014; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Ross, Friedman, & Field, 2014; Smetana, et al., 2012; Wainryb et al., 2005). The dynamics of young children's resolutions to peer conflict reveal that prosocial behaviors during conflict are related to peaceful post-conflict interactions, indicating that cooperation often stems from interpersonal conflict (Spivak, 2016).

A further question that arises is how do children determine which cultural norms are legitimate, and which norms perpetrate negative social interactions with others? Cultures are notoriously complex, emanating and disseminating messages that are contradictory and inconsistent (Gelfand, et al, 2016). Children evaluate social norms, often rejecting normative expectations that could harm others or deny deserved resources (Rizzo et al., 2018). In fact, the existence of conflict between different types of obligation demonstrates that morality is separated from group norms (or there would be no conflict).

Tomasello proposes that children (and early humans) adhere to an obligation to apply moral codes to the in-group prior to the out-group, until at some point, when a “universalization” based on the identification with all humans (not Martians) takes place. In fact, young children endorse moral obligations toward both in-group and out-group members. Conflicts with in-group members reveal that interactions are not always cooperative: siblings have extensive conflicts over sharing toys and refraining from the infliction of harm (Goulding & Friedman, 2018), and same-gender peers have conflicts about whose turn it is to play a game.

Conflict within the in-group may even appear prior to conflict with the out-group, given the lack of exposure to other groups early in development (exceptions include children from biracial and bicultural families; see Gaither, et al., 2014). While some moral transgressions toward in-group members are rated as more serious, moral transgressions toward out-group members are still judged as wrong (Chalik & Rhodes, 2013; Mulvey, 2016). With age, recognize that in-group preferences are unfair (Rutland & Killen, 2015).

No doubt, in-group preferences and outgroup distrust create challenges for children (and adults) when considering inter-individual treatment. Preference for the in-group occurs when there is outgroup threat (Tajfel & Turner, 1987). Without an obvious threat, though, children have a propensity to seek out other children whether they are from the same group or a different group (Nesdale, 2004). Children from various racial and ethnic backgrounds also reason that moral obligations apply to those from different gender and ethnic groups (Killen, 2007).

The developing ability to separate moral obligations from group norms, and to apply moral obligations to both in- and out-group members, provide the basis for addressing pressing societal questions. From an early age, children recognize that non-cooperative behavior is often necessary to achieve moral aims. This leads them to rectify inequalities, resist unfair practices, and challenge stereotypic expectations in situations involving inter-individual treatment (Elenbaas, 2019; Rizzo, et al., 2018; Rochat et al., 2014). Children understand the cost of resistance to group norms, however, and are concerned about such consequences as social exclusion (Mulvey, 2016; Rutland, et al. 2016) and ostracism (Song, Over, & Carpenter, 2015).

Balancing competing moral and group obligations begins at an early age, sometimes collaborating and sometimes challenging group norms. Yet these balancing acts continue to develop through intra- and interpersonal as well as intragroup and intergroup conflicts across the lifespan, shaping the trajectory of human societies.

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