

For reasons of fairness and empathy, adolescents experience a variety of negative emotions when intentionally harming or excluding others.

Adolescents with higher sympathy are more likely to report feelings of guilt following these moral and social conflict situations.

Adolescents' Emotions and Reasoning in Contexts of Moral Conflict and Social Exclusion

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This article explores how adolescents feel and think about contexts of moral conflict and social exclusion. We asked 12-year-old adolescents how they would feel about intentionally harming another peer, omitting a pro-social duty, and excluding another peer. We then asked them to explain the reasoning behind their feelings and report on levels of sympathy. In all contexts, adolescents anticipated a variety of negative emotions for reasons of fairness and empathy. However, more feelings of guilt were reported in contexts of intentional harm than in other contexts. Adolescents with high levels of sympathy reported more guilt, for reasons of fairness and empathy, than adolescents with low levels of sympathy. These findings provide a window into adolescents' emotions and reasoning regarding moral and social issues.

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EMOTIONS play an important role in adolescent moral development and morally relevant behaviors, such as aggression and prosociality. How we feel about a moral conflict situation and the involved parties is likely to affect our reasoning in such situations. In turn, these feelings are likely to influence why we adhere or fail to adhere to our own moral standards.¹ Thus, moral emotions such as guilt may serve as key motives for moral reasoning and moral action tendencies.²

How do adolescents feel during everyday experiences of moral conflict and social inclusion or exclusion, and how do they reason about these issues? In this chapter, we aim to address these questions by integrating developmental research on emotions and reasoning in situations involving moral transgressions and social exclusion. We will focus on 12-year-old adolescents' emotions and reasoning in three contexts: intentionally harming another peer, omitting pro-social duties, and excluding another peer who is an out-group member. These contexts were chosen because they represent different moral and social issues and, as such, may elicit different types of emotions and reasoning.³

Previous developmental research has investigated how children and adolescents judge and reason about moral conflicts⁴ and social exclusion⁵. More recently, researchers have begun to integrate this social reasoning research with examinations of adolescents' emotions following everyday experiences of social exclusion.⁶ However, we still know little about how adolescents coordinate emotions and reasoning about these issues, and we know even less about how adolescents' overt tendency to sympathize with others relates to their emotions and reasoning about moral issues.

Understanding the emotions involved in experiences of morality and social exclusion is

important because the development of cognition and emotions is closely interrelated in the context of moral conflict and social exclusion.⁷ Likewise, the emotional ability to sympathize with others and to anticipate the consequences of one's own actions for another's feelings may facilitate other-oriented, altruistic moral reasoning at the cognitive level.

Emotions and Reasoning in Situations Involving Moral Conflict and Social Exclusion

Emotions such as guilt are elicited when an individual feels that they have violated their own internalized moral standards. Feelings of guilt also arise when an individual develops an understanding of another person's circumstances in a conflict situation.⁸ Guilt has been identified as a prototypical moral emotion. Such emotions are evoked by the individual's understanding and evaluation of the self.^{9, 10} Previous research on moral emotions has focused on the affective state that children and adolescents attribute to either hypothetical wrongdoers, or to themselves in the role of wrongdoer.^{11, 12} In this paradigm, children and adolescents are typically confronted with a moral transgression, such as not keeping a promise to a friend, and are then asked how they would feel if they had been responsible for that transgression. This research has documented age-related changes in the attribution of negative (i.e., moral) emotions to the self in the role of victimizer.¹³ Specifically, as children get older, they increasingly attribute negative emotions to the self-as-victimizer. Research has also shown that the attribution of negative (i.e., moral) emotions is typically accompanied by moral reasons, such as empathy for the victim, fairness, and equality.¹⁴ Although research has demonstrated that many adolescents attribute guilt or related feelings of sadness to themselves in the role of transgressor, inter-individual variability remains well into mid-adolescence.¹⁵ This variability suggests that, in addition to developmental change, the anticipation of moral emotions is also affected by both contextual differences and inter-individual differences among adolescents. . Here, we investigate how both contextual and

individual characteristics are related to adolescents' feelings and reasoning about moral issues. We study three different morally relevant situations as contextual characteristics and sympathy as an individual characteristic.

Contextual Differences in Moral Emotions and Moral Reasoning

Moral development research has revealed that children and adolescents distinguish between contexts when making judgments about moral conflicts.¹⁶ In the paragraphs to follow, we investigate two well-studied moral contexts (intentional harm and the omission of pro-social duties¹⁷), as well as the context of social exclusion, all in relation to emotions and reasoning.¹⁸

Emotions and reasoning following moral transgressions have been intensely studied in developmental research within the happy-victimizer paradigm (for a review, see ¹⁹). Research in this tradition has revealed that the majority of children and adolescents evaluate others' acts of intentional harm as more severe than others' failure to perform pro-social duties. This greater severity of intentional harm, as compared to pro-social omission, has also been found when children and adolescents imagine the self as victimizer.²⁰

Investigating contexts of social exclusion further elucidates children's and adolescents' emotions and reasoning about morally relevant behavior.²¹ Social domain research has studied children's and adolescents' reasoning about exclusion to understand how children coordinate moral and social conventional knowledge when evaluating social events.²²

In our own research, we have recently begun to incorporate the aforementioned findings into our work on emotions. For example, we have examined the question of how children and adolescents judge *and* feel about social exclusion. Samples of Swiss and non-Swiss adolescents (i.e., majority and minority groups) were asked to attribute emotions to excluders or excluded individuals. Interestingly, not only did adolescents attribute moral emotions of guilt to the

excluder target, they also attributed positively valenced, amoral emotions such as pride and happiness to the excluder target. In contrast, they attributed emotions of sadness and anger to the excluded target.²³ This finding was surprising because it suggests that adolescents were aware of the negative feelings of the excluded target, but still sometimes attribute amoral emotions to excluder targets, because it may require the balancing of group norms and moral norms. Previous research indicates that adolescents acquire an increasingly differentiated understanding of group functioning as they develop.²⁴ Thus, it is likely that the role of group norms is important in adolescent's emotions and reasoning about social exclusion.

In summary, we have a good understanding of children's and adolescents' reasoning about moral transgressions and social exclusion. Happy-victimizer research has also revealed general age-related changes from positive (immoral) to negative (moral) emotion attributions to victimizers. Yet, little is known about how children and adolescents feel about contexts in which a peer is being excluded, what types of emotions adolescents anticipate, and if these emotions are similar or different from the ones that are anticipated when a person is being harmed, or when pro-social obligations are disregarded.

Adolescents' Sympathy: Relations with Moral Emotions and Moral Reasoning

Sympathy entails feelings of concern for the other that stem from the apprehension of another's emotional state. Unlike the related process of empathy, sympathy does not involve feeling the same emotion as another.²⁵ As such, sympathy requires rudimentary social perspective-taking skills, such as a basic understanding of the protagonist's situation and feelings, as well as how one's own actions affect these factors.²⁶

Although the development of sympathy as a morally relevant process has been studied widely, it is not well known if and how adolescents with high levels of dispositional sympathy are more prone to feeling guilty in situations entailing moral transgressions or social exclusion. Sympathy and feeling guilt are both considered morally relevant emotional processes²⁷. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the ability to step into another's shoes and sympathize with his or her situation is associated with the internalization of moral norms and related feelings of guilt. However, this link has not been examined systematically. In previous research, we have investigated associations between sympathy and guilt following moral transgressions in middle childhood, but findings revealed only small to modest relations.²⁸

Adolescents who generally sympathize with needy others may be more prone to anticipating negative consequences for the victim and integrating this perspective into their own affective and cognitive experiences of morally relevant conflicts. The link between sympathy and other-oriented, pro-social moral reasoning in adolescence has been empirically supported in several studies with findings suggesting that sympathy may stimulate the use of moral reasoning that is based on care and concern for others' welfare.²⁹

By contrast, very little is known about how sympathy relates to moral emotions and moral reasoning in the context of social exclusion. To the best of our knowledge, only one study has investigated empathy towards children with disabilities and social inclusion.³⁰ In this study, 10- and 16-year-old American and Japanese children had to respond to a situation in which a group of children wanted to go swimming and one child in a wheelchair wanted to join them. The children were asked how they would feel if the child with the disability joined them for swimming. Results revealed that children often reported feeling empathy, acceptance of the peer

with the disability, and a wish to help him/her. Here, we extend this study and investigate how sympathy impacts perceptions of, and emotions associated with, experiences of social exclusion.

To summarize, there is evidence that: a) adolescents anticipate negative emotions following moral transgressions in peer relationships and that b) these negative emotions are in meaningful ways associated with their reasoning about these moral issues. Conversely, evidence is lacking with respect to: a) what types of emotions adolescents anticipate in these contexts, b) if these emotions and reasons are similar, or different, from emotions and reasoning about social exclusion and, finally, c) how adolescents' general tendency to sympathize with needy others is related to their moral emotions and moral reasoning in contexts of everyday moral conflict and social exclusion.

The Current Study

For the current study, we were interested in investigating the following research questions: What kinds of emotions do adolescents attribute to themselves in the role of transgressor and excluder, and what reasons do they provide for these emotions? Do the emotions and reasons provided differ across the contexts of intentional harm, omission of pro-social duties, and exclusion of an out-group member? How does adolescents' overt sympathy relate to their reasons and emotions associated with experiences of moral transgressions and exclusion?

To address these research questions, we employed an ethnically diverse, community sample of 84, 12-year-old children from a major Canadian city (M age = 12.50, SD = 0.27, 42 girls). Ethnic backgrounds reported by primary caregivers included Western European (32%), Eastern European (13%), South and East Asian (10%), Caribbean (6%), West and Central Asian (4%), African (2%), Central and South American (1%), and other/multiple origins (28%).

Moral Emotions and Moral Reasoning Task. To measure children’s anticipation of moral emotions and moral reasoning, participants responded to six vignettes that were designed to elicit moral emotions and reasoning.³¹ The vignettes represented three distinct moral contexts: failing to perform pro-social duties (e.g., choosing not to share with a friend), excluding an out-group member (e.g., not letting a new kid at school join in play), and intentionally harming others (e.g., pushing a peer out of line to obtain the last candy). Following each story, adolescents were asked how they would feel (emotions) and why they would feel that way (reasoning).

Coding of emotions and reasoning. The anticipation of emotions was coded as a) guilt, b) basic moral emotions (e.g., sad, bad), c) embarrassment/shame, d) moral anger, e) basic amoral emotions (e.g., happy, good), and f) neutral emotions (e.g., as usual, normal).

Justifications for emotions were assessed from an open-ended “why” question in the interview and later placed in the following categories: (a) moral reasons, which refer to norms, rules and obligations (e.g., “It is not fair to steal”), (b) empathic concern for the victim (e.g., “The other child will be sad”), (c) sanction-oriented reasons, which refer to sanctions by an authority (e.g., “The kindergarten teacher may find out and get angry”), (d) hedonistic, self-serving reasons (e.g., “He just likes all pencils so much”), (e) unelaborated and unclassifiable reasons, which reflect undifferentiated statements (e.g., “It is not nice/ He has the pencils”), or no reasons. Inter-rater reliability for the coding of moral reasoning was $\kappa = .95$ (based on 15% of the data).

Sympathy. Sympathy was measured using five self-report items from³² (i.e., “When I see another child who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for him or her”). Cronbach’s α for the sympathy scale was .80.

Results

We first describe the type of emotions that young adolescents attributed to themselves in the role of victimizer/excluder for the three contexts. Figure 1 shows that adolescents anticipate a wide range of emotions across contexts, including a) complex moral emotions such as guilt, anger, embarrassment and shame, and b) basic moral and amoral emotions such as sad or bad, happy or good, and neutral emotion. The anticipation of several emotions varied across contexts, including feeling guilty, $F(2, 652) = 15.82, p < .001$, sad/bad, $F(2, 652) = 8.43, p < .001$, happy/good, $F(2, 652) = 3.39, p < .05$, and neutral, $F(2, 652) = 7.44, p < .001$. Guilt was anticipated more frequently after imagining intentional harm than after social exclusion or pro-social omissions ($ps < .001$), whereas more basic moral emotions (i.e., sad or bad) were anticipated more often in contexts of social exclusion and pro-social omission ($p < .01, p < .001$, respectively). Positive emotions (i.e., happy or good) were anticipated more frequently in contexts of causing intentional harm than in contexts of social exclusion ($p < .05$), and feeling neutral was anticipated more frequently after participants imagined excluding an out-group peer than after causing intentional harm ($p < .001$).

Adolescents' reasons for their emotion attributions provided additional information on the motives underlying their affective states. Findings revealed that the majority of adolescents were concerned about moral issues such as fairness or equality (Figure 2). For example, in the words of one adolescent: "I wasn't treating everyone equally. Since she was new, she probably didn't have anyone to hang out with and I made it worse." Many adolescents also provided reasons based on empathy towards others, for example: "...when somebody don't want to play and another person comes and you say no, it hurts." Adolescents also provided hedonistic and sanction-based reasons for their anticipated emotions. There were significant differences in the use of different types of reasoning depending on the type of transgression. Specifically, moral

reasons were more frequent in contexts of intentional harm than in contexts of pro-social omission or exclusion ($p < .001$), whereas hedonistic reasons were more frequent after contexts of social exclusion ($p < .001$, $p < .05$), than after contexts of intentional harm and pro-social omission, respectively. Interestingly, social exclusion contexts elicited empathy-based reasoning more frequently than either intentional harm or pro-social omission contexts ($p < .05$, $p < .01$, respectively), while reasoning based on sanctions or rules was more common in contexts of intentional harm than in contexts of social exclusion, $p < .01$.

Adolescents' sympathy was associated with both their emotions in situations of moral conflict and social exclusion, and with the reasons they provided for their affective state. To assess the role of sympathy in adolescents' emotion attributions, we examined whether each emotion attribution was anticipated differentially for adolescents who were low (at least 1 *SD* below the mean), average (within 1 *SD* of the mean), or high in sympathy (at least 1 *SD* above the mean). There were significant differences across the three levels of sympathy in the anticipation of guilt, $F(2, 622) = 4.23$, $p < .05$, anger, $F(2, 622) = 3.11$, $p < .05$, and positive emotions, such as feeling happy or good, $F(2, 622) = 3.68$, $p < .05$. Moral anger on behalf of the victims occurred more frequently in adolescents with high levels of sympathy, as did the moral emotion of guilt. By contrast, amoral positive emotions (i.e., happy, good) were associated with low levels of sympathy. In addition, moral reasoning occurred more often amongst adolescents with higher sympathy, $F(2, 584) = 3.00$, $p = .05$, while hedonistic reasoning occurred more often amongst adolescents with lower sympathy, $F(2, 584) = 8.09$, $p < .001$.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we studied the types of emotions that adolescents anticipate when violating moral rules or excluding a peer, as well as the justifications they provide for these anticipated

emotions. We also investigated the role of sympathy in adolescents' anticipation of and reasoning about morally relevant emotions.

Our findings showed that young adolescents anticipate a wide range of negatively valenced emotions in contexts of moral transgressions and social exclusion, and, to a lesser extent, positively valenced and neutral (amoral) emotions. Adolescents' negative emotions were primarily accompanied by moral justifications, including concerns about fairness and equality. Interestingly, most adolescents also viewed excluding others as causing negative emotions in the self, and these emotions were justified by moral and empathic concerns. In addition, adolescents' anticipation of emotions and the reasons they use to justify these emotions differed across contexts of moral transgression and social exclusion. While contexts of intentional harm elicited complex moral emotions (i.e., guilt) and amoral positive emotions (i.e., happy or good feelings) more frequently, contexts of pro-social omission and social exclusion elicited more basic moral emotions (i.e., feeling sad). In combination with the greater use of moral reasoning in contexts of intentional harm, these findings suggest that adolescents view acts of intentional harm as more serious and morally relevant than the failure to help, share, or include others. Interestingly, the context of social exclusion elicited the highest levels of both empathy-based and hedonistic reasoning, suggesting that concerns over personal gains and group functioning compete with concerns of fairness and empathy in decisions to exclude or include peers.

We found evidence suggesting that overt sympathy plays an important role in adolescents' emotion attributions and reasoning in moral conflict situations. High levels of sympathy were associated with emotions and justifications that emphasized the wrongfulness of hypothetical transgressions. For example, adolescents with high levels of sympathy anticipated guilt and moral anger over transgressions more often than those who were low in sympathy.

Inversely, adolescents who were low in sympathy were more likely than those with high levels of sympathy to experience positive, amoral emotions after imagining moral transgressions and social exclusion. Consistent with associations between sympathy and anticipated emotion, findings regarding sympathy and reasoning showed that highly-sympathetic adolescents were more likely to use moral reasons to justify their emotions, whereas those who were low in sympathy were more likely to justify their emotion attributions with hedonistic reasoning focused on personal gains. Thus, these findings support the view that emotions and cognitions about moral issues may be integrated into one's identity by early adolescence³³, which leads to more consistency between different moral emotions and moral reasoning.

Further research on early, mid-, and late adolescence is warranted to address developmental similarities and differences in emotions and reasons about everyday experiences of moral conflict and social exclusion. Emotions are important for adolescents' reasoning and morally relevant behavior. Studying these affective experiences can help us understand why adolescents think and act the way they do in critical, everyday situations of moral and social conflict.

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Figure Captions.

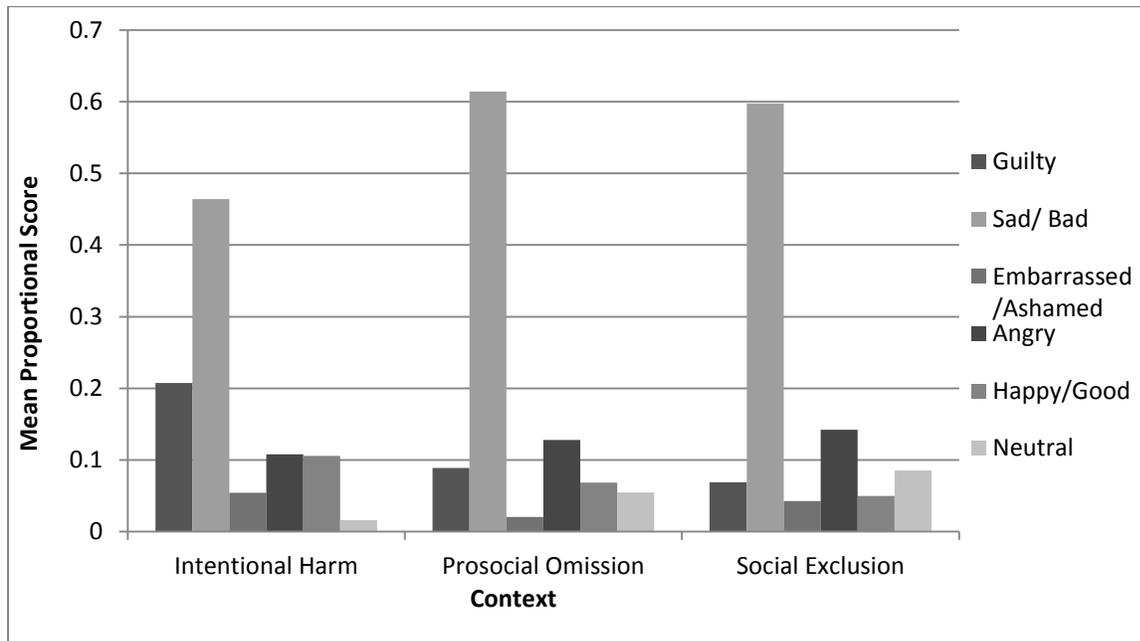


Figure 1. Adolescents' emotions following intentional harm, omission of prosocial duties, and social exclusion.

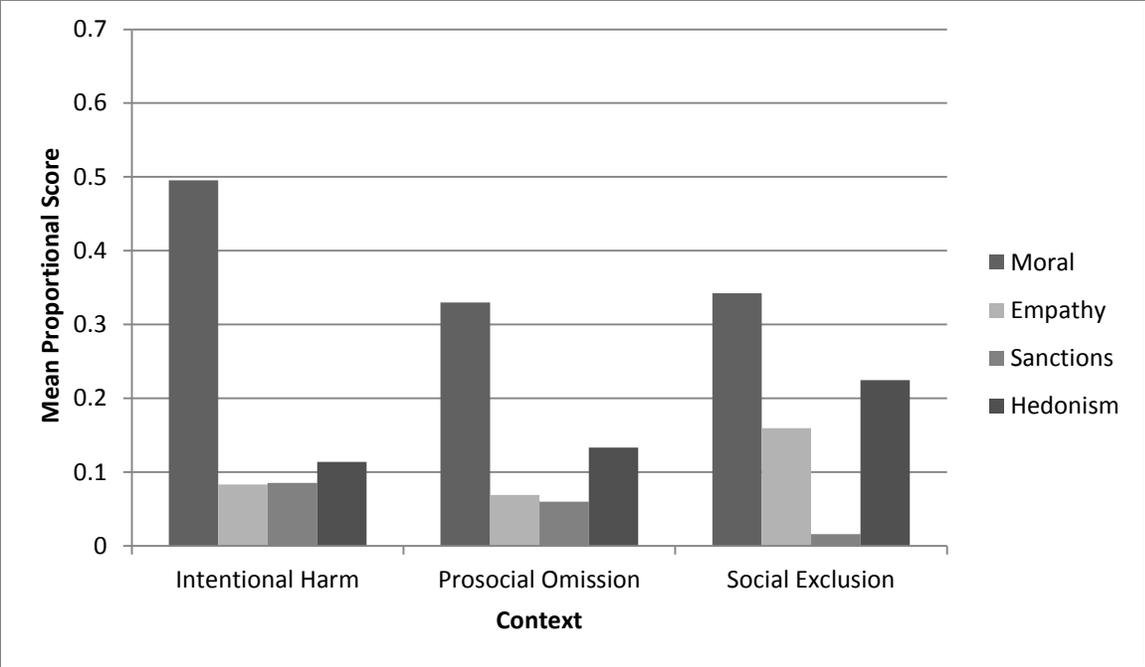


Figure 2. Adolescents' reasons following intentional harm, omission of prosocial duties, and social exclusion.