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## **Children's Development of Moral Explanations and Explicit Reasoning**

### **Project Overview**

There are many reasons an action can be wrong. For example, it may cause harm, elicit disgust, or create unfairness. Each of these rules has exceptions, and the context of the situation can affect what rules even apply in the first place, making it difficult to pinpoint the cognitive mechanisms we use to learn and reason about moral situations.

Lawrence Kohlberg proposed a model of moral development in which children started with rigid, externally-motivated ideas of right and wrong. Over time, they would slowly incorporate the social context necessary to generate a more nuanced perspective. In addition, most studies focus on children's development in reasoning about harm or fairness. However, we believe that even young children are capable of flexible moral reasoning across a wide variety of reasons.

The main goal of this project is to explore the range of explanations children use in moral situations. In the experiment, children from three to six years old will see short vignettes in which a character does something good or bad. They will then be asked to explain why that action was good or bad. These stories will cover a range of different concepts (harm, danger, care, gratitude, universalization, fairness, rules, roles, property rights, consideration, respect for authority, loyalty, utility, and disgust). We hypothesize that the children will mention a variety of concepts in their explanations outside of just harm or fairness. In addition, we expect children to be better at reasoning about 'bad' behavior than 'good' behavior, and that the range and accuracy of explanations overall will increase with age.

Investigating how children explicitly respond to moral situations can help us understand how they apply different concepts. Comparing their behavior to adult moral reasoning can provide insight to help develop a different model of how moral reasoning develops that doesn't just focus on harm and fairness. It can also help us teach moral lessons and communicate moral values in a way that children can understand and internalize.

I will be working on this project with Laura Schulz and Sydney Levine.

### **Communication with Mentor(s)**

I will meet with my supervisor every Monday via Zoom or in person to discuss UROP progress. In addition, at major checkpoints I will also contact other researchers with a stake in the project to keep them in the loop about our current progress.

## Research Role & Tentative Work Plan

- *Personal Research Role*  
Main researcher in charge of the direction and progress of the project
- *Responsibilities/Duties*  
Develop experimental stimuli  
Recruit participants and handle all communications and compensation  
Code video recordings and analyze data  
Develop future directions for further study  
Analyze relevant literature and contextualize the current project  
Write a draft of the paper
- *Anticipated deliverables*  
Data replicating previous post-doc work for the project  
A 6-page paper to submit to the Cognitive Science Society conference

## Personal Statement/Goals

- *Why you are interested in this UROP*  
I'm interested in learning more about both the philosophical theory of moral reasoning and the cognitive computation that goes into actual moral intuition. This project gives me an opportunity to do a deep dive into both literatures and add to the existing research. Additionally, I want to follow an experiment through its entire lifecycle, from ideation to conference paper.
- *What you hope to gain from the UROP*  
I hope to gain experience working independently on a research project. I'm especially excited about seeing all parts of the research cycle and gaining general common-sense knowledge about doing research. Also, I want to develop my ability to grapple with and communicate with other researchers about complicated technical concepts.
- *Personal goals throughout the term*  
Personally, I aim to commit to seeing this project through to the end. I want to work consistently and with intention to put out a project and paper that I can be proud of. In addition, I want to become more familiar with this area of research, including the seminal papers and important figures in this field.