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Children's Developing Respect: Looking to Future Research

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In their *Monograph*, [The Development of Respect in Children and Adolescents](#), Malti, Peplak, and Zhang (2020) argue that although philosophers and psychologists have often thought about the concept of respect, researchers have seldom studied its development and correlates. These authors address this gap by investigating how children think about the concept of respect using two samples across a broad age range in childhood (5 to 15) years. In this commentary, I first discuss key contributions of the monograph, and I then suggest three areas for future research. Specifically, I highlight how we might think about respect motivations, how we might consider individual differences in respect, and how we might study children's and adolescents' respect toward various recipients, such as adults, strangers, and outgroup members.

Key Contributions

One of the key contributions of this work is the nuanced thinking about the concept of respect. Research to date on moral emotions generally does not include respect, and researchers should continue to consider the role of respect on children's moral behavior. It is especially useful to distinguish respect from other related moral emotions such as sympathy, empathy, and guilt, as well as to distinguish respect from affiliative emotions (i.e., liking, adoration, admiration). Because this monograph is one of the first investigations to focus on the emotional and behavioral correlates of children's thinking about respect, there is more to learn about how respect co-occurs with or influences other moral emotions.

This monograph advances our understanding of developmental trends in respect. Results indicate that the themes of equity, fairness, and prosociality (and to some extent, social conventions) are particularly salient features of respect for children. The findings indicate that across two samples, the concept of respect as pertaining to fairness and reciprocity appears to increase with age, perhaps as children develop more advanced perspective-taking skills, emotional and social competence, and abstract thinking. The results indicate that there are different developmental pathways for various domains and contexts of respect. Rigorous longitudinal work on these dimensions of children's respect is critical to advancing understanding of the emergence and trajectories of respect over time.

In addition to focusing on developmental trends among children in general, Malti and colleagues examine individual differences in children's conceptualization of respect. The

authors showed associations, albeit not consistently across both samples, of participants' dispositional sympathy and prosocial behavior to their respect evaluations and reasoning. These findings provide some preliminary evidence that there is overlap between feelings of respect and sympathy. Because sympathy is often seen as a motivator for prosocial behavior (see Eisenberg et al., 2016), it stands to reason that children who generally feel concern for others or who behave in helpful ways, tend to evaluate prosocial behaviors as respect-worthy.

Another key contribution of the current work is the novel approach to studying respect. The authors used qualitative and quantitative data in the study and created a new measure to examine children's respect evaluations and reasoning. In future research, investigators could consider ways to measure real-time feelings of respect across various situations or to measure children's and adolescents' proneness to respectful feelings (i.e., a dispositional measure). The current monograph provides a jumping board for designing new measures to study the experience of respect in children and adolescents.

Future Research

Respect as a motivator for ethical action. The authors argue that respect, because it is other-oriented, is likely to be a core motivator for prosocial or ethical action. It may be useful to apply the model of prosocial motivation proposed by Eisenberg, VanSchyndel, and Spinrad (2016) to the emotion of respect. Specifically, Eisenberg et al. (2016) discussed motivations for prosocial actions on a continuum that places motives at one end that are more strongly oriented to benefit others (e.g., altruism) to motives at the other end that are oriented to benefitting self (e.g., avoiding punishment, obtain rewards). It is possible that respect itself may likewise sometimes be other-oriented and sometimes be self-oriented. When respect is other-oriented, as described in this monograph, it should be considered highly moral and likely to promote attention to others' needs, desires, and, in turn, promote prosocial behavior. However, respect may sometimes be addressed for self-focused reasons, such as to obtain approval or to elicit reciprocal respect. These forms of respect would be considered less ethically motivated. Drawing from the coding system used in the present work, conceptualizing the notion of respect as other-oriented (e.g., "I shared to make her happy") could be viewed as showing a more ethical motivation than an open-ended response such as, "They respected me, I respected them back..." or "When my teacher says to do something, I do it." Malti and colleagues have provided a first step in thinking about children's conceptualizations of respect, and the notion of a continuum in respect as a motivator for ethical action would be an interesting focus of future work.

Another question is whether children or adolescents conceptualize respect based solely on fairness (i.e., focus on equal distributions) or if some youth consider respect based on the potential needs of the recipients (i.e., focus on equity). Research on prosocial behavior shows that even very young children appear to consider the recipients' need when sharing (Svetlova et al., 2010). Further, older children might consider issues of cost, such that some prosocial acts (i.e., helping someone pick up dropped books) are less costly than others (i.e., giving up one's own money or resources to help another). In future work, researchers should consider issues of merit, equity, and equality in studies involving children's conceptualizations of respect.

Individual differences in respect. In addition to understanding the development and context of respect, it would be important to understand the role of individual characteristics in predicting

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children's expressions of respect beyond other moral emotions and behaviors. Various aspects of temperament may be related to respect. For example, researchers could consider the role of temperamental emotionality or regulatory skills on children's respect conceptualizations. One might expect that children who are prone to positive emotionality or who have the skills needed to maintain optimal levels of arousal may be more likely to focus on others' needs and desires and to experience respect, particularly in contexts of prosocial and good behavior (Edwards et al., 2015; Xiao et al., 2019). Consistent with this idea, there is ample evidence that well-regulated individuals tend to respond to others' distress with sympathy and prosocial behavior (see Eisenberg et al., 2006). Examining how temperamental emotionality and regulation are tied to children's feelings about respect in different contexts could shed light on the antecedents of respect. Further, it would be worthwhile to examine the mediational role of children's sympathy on the relation of temperamental characteristics (especially regulation) to children's respect.

Socialization experiences, such as the quality of relationships, warmth and support, and disciplinary behaviors also are likely to impact children's conceptions of and expressions of respect. Research on the socialization of prosocial behavior and sympathy can guide this work. For example, parental warmth and support may foster children's ethical reasoning and experience of respect because nurturing interactions likely model reciprocal and positive interpersonal relationships. Indeed, my colleagues and I have shown that maternal positive affect, encouragement, maternal sensitivity, and supportive emotion socialization have been positively related to children's empathy and/or sympathy (Spinrad et al., 1999; Spinrad & Stifter, 2006; Taylor et al., 2013, 2015). On the other hand, parents' power assertive practices, particularly punitive discipline, may over-arouse children such that they have difficulty reasoning in other-oriented ways. Parents' socialization of emotions, and especially the ways that parents respond to their children's emotions, are likely to be linked to children's learning about their own and others' feelings (Eisenberg et al., 2014), which, in turn, may lead to various conceptualizations about respect.

Researchers should continue to focus on the ways that children's and adolescents' characteristics may serve as mediators or moderators of the relations of parenting to children's moral emotions. We have shown that children's self-regulation skills (i.e., effortful control) mediates the relation between socialization behaviors and children's sympathy (Taylor et al., 2015). Parenting practices also may interact with children's characteristics to predict children's moral emotions. In a classic example, Kochanska and colleagues (2007) showed that maternal gentle control predicted higher internalization of values (i.e., guilt) for children who were temperamentally fearful, but not for children who were low in fearfulness. Aspects of temperament may interact with other dispositional characteristics to predict moral behavior and emotions (Xiao et al., 2019). Thus, parenting practices do not operate in isolation, and the connections between parenting and children's respect may be moderated by a number of child and adolescent factors including sex, age, temperament, and socio-cognitive skills.

Recipients of Respect. One area that deserves further attention is understanding the degree to which children experience moral emotions towards various recipients, and respect is no exception. In the monograph, children's respect towards peers was examined. In future work, researchers should try to understand children's conceptualizations and expressions of respect towards adults, family members, disliked peers, strangers, ingroups, and outgroups (e.g., other

sex, race, religion, nationality). Such knowledge could help inform children's sympathy, prosocial behavior and aggression (and possibly discrimination) towards various recipients.

There is evidence that children consider the recipient in their moral emotions and behavior. For example, toddlers as young as 18 months show more concern towards their distressed mother than toward a stranger (Spinrad & Stifter, 2006), and White children reported that they would feel more positive about helping an ingroup child than an outgroup child (Weller & Lagattuta, 2014). Although adults tend to empathize more with ingroup than outgroup members, our recent work using neurological measures did not show such biases in young children (KG-2nd grade). Specifically, White children's EEG mu suppression (an index of empathy) did not differ when viewing films of a Black versus White child being mistreated by a peer (Fraser et al., 2020). However, there is very little research on children's observed or reported moral emotions towards outgroup members, particularly toward members of ethnic or racial outgroups. My colleagues and I have been examining this issue by having children view sympathy-inducing films of either a White or Black film protagonist being mistreated by a peer. Our data indicate that White kindergarteners (but not first or second graders) exhibit more facial concern for ingroup (White) than for outgroup (Black) peers (Spinrad et al., 2020). Given that children's sympathy is thought to be a primary motivator of prosocial behavior, this work can inform intervention efforts to induce sympathy and prosocial behavior (and likely respect) towards others.

Further, researchers have not examined the development of moral emotions towards ingroup and outgroup members longitudinally. It is possible that the notion of fairness and equity as a context for respect changes over time when considering the recipients of respect. That is, the development of respect in "fair/reciprocal" or "prosocial" contexts may depend on the recipient. As children develop more sophisticated moral reasoning skills, they may increase in their respect toward a broader slice of humanity, including strangers or outgroup members. Ultimately, it is important to understand how children (and adults) become exemplars of respect, particularly in terms of respect towards all people.

Conclusions

The Development of Respect in Children and Adolescents provides an innovative look into ethical emotions by studying youths' conceptions, evaluations, and reasoning about an understudied emotion—respect. This work provides a roadmap for future work examining further complexities in understanding the development of respect in children and adolescents. In particular, examining the antecedents of respect (e.g., temperament, parenting) and studying the processes that contribute to its development will be essential to better understand of the development of respect. Further, determining additional nuances in the concept of respect (i.e., if it is always other-oriented and adaptive) will be an important area for future study. Researchers should also consider whether children's respect varies as a function of the recipients of children's and adolescents' respect, such as peers, adults, ingroup and outgroup members. Finally, the role of school-based and parent-focused prevention and intervention programs designed to build children's social and emotional well-being could emphasize the role of respect as both a precursor to socially competent behavior as well as viewing respect as an indicator of children's adjustment.

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