

Using decisional bias as an implicit measure of moral judgment

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The act of identifying a perpetrator does not just involve memory and thinking, but also constitutes a moral decision. This is because, by the act of identifying or not identifying someone, the eyewitness runs the risk of either convicting an innocent person or letting a guilty person go free.

In an article published recently in *Archives of Scientific Psychology*, Spring et al. (2015) discuss two studies in which [children](#) and adolescents of different ages watched a film involving a potential wrong-doing: throwing a lit birthday cake into a wastebasket, either with or without the intention of starting a fire and resulting in either no fire or a serious fire. The filmed act is identical in all conditions; what is varied is the way the filmed act is 'framed' or described by a voice-over.

In study 1, 138 children, ages 7 to 18, were shown a film that was framed as either (a) an intended fire that fizzled out resulting in no fire damage or (b) an unintended or innocent act, but one that caused a fire which burned the restaurant down. Each child was shown individual photos of the '[perpetrator](#),' others in the film and someone not in the film one at a time and asked whether that person was the one who committed the act and how confident they were on a four-point scale. Analysis using Signal Detection reveals an interaction of age and condition on decisional bias. The framing of the act had no effect on the 7-9 year olds, but did have an effect on decisional bias for the other age groups. Decisional bias was more lax (indicating more false alarms) in the intended condition for 10-12 and 13-15 year olds but was more stringent (with fewer false alarms) for the 16-18 year olds. This pattern of age and condition differs from the pattern of explicit judgments ('how bad the act was, how much punishment it deserved, and how bad it is to commit a false alarm or a miss').

Study 2 was conducted to confirm and expand the findings for the 10-12 year olds. Forty-two children, ages 10-12, viewed the same film, in which the act

was framed as unintended but resulting either in (a) major or (b) minor fire damage. Approximately half of the children were randomly assigned to condition (a) and half to (b). There were lower bias scores (more false alarms) in the major damage conditions than the minor damage for the 10-12 year-olds when intentions were bad.

Thus, from both studies, the authors conclude that decisional bias is more lenient (resulting in more false alarms) for 10-12 year olds when either bad intent or bad damage is highlighted. In both studies, after performing the task, the participants were asked in an age-appropriate way, which kind of error, a false positive or false negative was worse and why. It became apparent why the framing instructions had no effect on the 7-9 year olds; in all the studies we have conducted, it was clear that 7-9 year olds do not think of identifying a perpetrator as a [moral decision](#).

What conclusions can be drawn from the findings? First, most generally, the decisional criteria implicitly used by children or adolescents when identifying a perpetrator are substantially influenced by the moral nature of the act interacting with the age (developmental status) of the eyewitness. The research further suggests that:

1. a moral development framework is useful for examining developmental changes in eyewitness identification, as measured by signal detection analysis;
2. children's understanding of the task changes with age, as reflected in their implicit decisional strategy and their explicit answers to why false alarms and misses are bad; and,
3. their implicit, moral evaluation of the act, which changes with age, is evidenced in their performance specifically, the decisional bias, which influences their eyewitness judgments.

Thus, one might even view decisional bias as a kind of implicit measure of moral judgment.

More information: Spring, T., Saltzstein, H. D., & Vidal, B. (2015). A moral developmental perspective on children's eyewitness identification: Does intent matter? *Archives of Scientific Psychology*, 3(1), 1-7.
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