The Construction of Moral Agency in Mother-Child Conversations About Helping and Hurting Across Childhood and Adolescence

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The Construction of Moral Agency in Mother–Child Conversations About Helping and Hurting Across Childhood and Adolescence

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This study examined mother–child conversations about children’s and adolescents’ past harmful and helpful actions. The sample included 100 mothers and their 7-, 11-, or 16-year-old children; each dyad discussed events when the child (a) helped a friend and (b) hurt a friend. Analyses suggested that conversations about help may serve to facilitate children’s sense of themselves as prosocial moral agents; mothers focused on children’s feelings of pride, positive judgments of the child’s behavior, and positive insights about the child’s characteristics that could be drawn from the event. In turn, conversations about harm were more elaborated and contentious than those about help, and reflected more complex maternal goals; although mothers highlighted children’s wrongdoing (e.g., by noting negative consequences of the child’s actions for others), they also engaged in a variety of strategies that may support children’s ability to reconcile their harmful actions with a positive self-view (e.g., by noting what children did do well or their capacity for repair). With respect to age effects, results revealed that older children played an increasingly active and spontaneous role in discussions. Furthermore, as compared with 7-year-olds, conversations with 11- and 16-year-olds focused more on psychological insights that could be drawn from experiences and less on children’s concrete harmful and helpful actions. Overall, results illuminate the processes whereby conversations with mothers may further children’s developing understandings of their own and others’ moral agency, and how discussions of prosocial and transgressive moral experiences may provide distinct but complementary opportunities for moral socialization.

Keywords: moral development, socialization, mother–child conversation, prosociality, transgression

The study of children’s moral thinking has largely focused on reasoning about hypothetical scenarios (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Turiel, 2006). More recently, researchers have begun to emphasize the importance of going beyond hypothetical thinking by examining children’s reasoning about their own everyday experiences involving fairness and welfare (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). However, children’s ability to fully make sense of these experiences in ways that further their understandings of themselves as moral agents does not develop in a vacuum, but is scaffolded by contributions from socialization agents such as parents. Indeed, it is widely agreed that parents make unique contributions to children’s moral development (e.g., Grusec, 2006; Smetana, 1999; Thompson, 2006), yet researchers have rarely examined these processes in action, as parents and their children converse about morally laden experiences.

Morally laden experiences take different forms; in the course of their everyday interactions, all children will help others, but will also occasionally hurt or upset others. Although research on moral development has examined children’s thinking about both prosocial (e.g., helping) and transgressive (e.g., hurting) behaviors, these two types of experiences have rarely been considered alongside one another as distinct and complementary contexts for moral socialization and moral development. Analyses of parent–child conversations about children’s own prosocial and transgressive moral experiences can enrich and broaden our understanding of how positive and negative experiences can serve as contexts for the development of moral agency.

Although parents play a crucial role in their children’s development across childhood and adolescence, parent–child conversations about moral issues are likely to change with age, in response to children’s evolving developmental capacities. Yet surprisingly, almost no research has examined age-related changes in the contents and processes of parent–child conversations about children’s morally laden experiences. Research charting these evolving features of conversations can make a unique contribution to theories of moral development by demonstrating how discussions of moral concepts and judgments intersect with other facets of development, including children’s developing self-concepts and identities and their understandings of their own and others’ cognitions, motivations, and emotions.
In sum, this study builds on recent scholarship examining children’s construction of meanings about their morally laden experiences (e.g., Wainryb et al., 2005) by examining how conversations with parents may support children’s developing capacities to make sense of their own transgressive and prosocial actions. Specifically, we assessed how 7-, 11-, and 16-year-old children and their mothers constructed meanings in reflective conversations about children’s own past harmful and helpful actions. In particular, we examined how the contents and processes of these conversations differed across discussions of children’s prosocial and transgressive experiences, and also how these conversations changed with age.

Conversation About Helping and Hurting: 
Two Sides of the Same Coin?

Although research on moral development has examined both transgressive and prosocial forms of moral action, research has not directly contrasted parents’ verbal socialization strategies in response to children’s hurting and helping behaviors. There is good reason to expect that parents’ strategies in response to children’s transgressive and prosocial behavior may not simply be “two sides of the same coin” (see McGinley & Carlo, 2007). Parents want their children to develop moral values and engage in appropriate behavior as well as to develop a positive self-view and sense of self-efficacy, and these goals have been shown to organize parents’ strategies for responding to children’s behavior (Hastings & Grusec, 1998). When children engage in prosocial behavior, these two socialization goals are not in conflict, and parents are likely to respond in ways that may support children’s sense of themselves as prosocial moral agents. For example, parents tend to underscore the positivity of children’s and adolescents’ good deeds via encouragement and praise (Miller, Fung, Lin, Chen, & Boldt, 2012; Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2006). In contrast, when children engage in transgressive behaviors, parental goals may be somewhat more complex. Specifically, in addition to highlighting children’s wrongdoing, it is possible that parents may also engage in strategies that aim to help children to reconcile their harmful behavior with their prevailingly positive self-views. Indeed, parents have been observed to highlight the negative consequences of children’s transgressive behaviors via strategies such as other-oriented inducements (Smetana, 1999), but also to mitigate the negativity of children’s misbehaviors by discussing them in lighthearted ways (Miller et al., 2012).

Given these findings, we did not expect mothers to respond in merely opposite ways to children’s prosocial and transgressive behavior. Although we expected mothers’ responses to children’s past prosocial behaviors to be generally laudatory and encouraging (e.g., by engaging in verbal strategies such as praise), we did not anticipate that maternal responses to children’s transgressions would be primarily condemning or punitive. To some extent, we expected that conversations about transgressions would focus on harm to others (e.g., by referring to negative emotional consequences) and negative judgments of children’s behavior. However, we also anticipated that mothers’ responses might also aim to mitigate the negativity of children’s behavior (e.g., by referring to the child’s legitimate reasons) and/or help the child behave more constructively in the future (e.g., by suggesting alternative strategies for achieving goals).

What Is the Role of Conversation in Supporting Children’s Moral Understandings, and How Is It Likely to Change With Age?

Research has documented the unique impact of parent–child conversations about past events on young children’s understanding of the social and psychological world (see Fivush & Nelson, 2006, for a review). Specifically, by highlighting children’s own and others’ internal experience (motivations, cognitions, and emotions), parents help children to further their understandings of themselves and others as psychological beings with unique perspectives on events. Conversations with parents continue to serve as an important resource for older children (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011), albeit in different ways. For instance, whereas teenagers have developed relatively sophisticated understandings of the psychological world, they may need support as they attempt to use their experiences to draw broader insights about themselves, others, and relationships (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012).

Arguably, children’s psychological understandings are crucial to their developing moral capacities (e.g., Wainryb & Brehl, 2006). Although the role of parents’ other-oriented inductions (i.e., promoting children’s understanding of others’ perspectives) in both prosocial and transgressive moral socialization has been acknowledged (e.g., Carlo, Knight, McGinley, & Hayes, 2011; Hoffman, 2000), research on parent–child reminiscing suggests that parents may be equally critical in helping children to further their understandings of their own perspectives and desires (Laible, 2004; Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007). Unfortunately, little research has examined these patterns in the context of conversations about children’s morally laden experiences. For example, in addition to underscoring the emotional consequences of children’s actions for others, to what extent do parents help children to explore their own motivations for helping and hurting others as well as their own emotions resulting from their harmful and helpful actions (e.g., guilt and pride)?

Furthermore, during adolescence, youths’ moral understandings are posited to become increasingly integrated with their broader self-concepts (Blasi, 1995; Hardy & Carlo, 2011), and youths’ reflections on past experiences in conversations with others may be key in this constructive process (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). By examining conversations between adolescents and their parents about morally laden experiences, our study is uniquely positioned to explore how conversations with parents may support adolescents’ capacity to draw connections between their helpful and harmful actions and their understandings of themselves. This capacity may be developmentally significant in both prosocial and transgressive contexts. When adolescents engage in prosocial behavior, a sense of having made a personal contribution mediates observed associations with subsequent helpfulness (Reinders & Youniss, 2006). In turn, self-reflection may also be crucial for reconciling transgressive behavior with a positive self-view by recognizing that a particular experience is discrepant with one’s stable characteristics or sense of self (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007).

Of course, in conversations between parents and children of all ages, children are active participants who contribute their own interpretations and judgments of events, and therefore build on, question, or challenge the meanings suggested by others (e.g.,
Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). Thus, in addition to examining the content of conversations, it is also crucial to consider the processes whereby parents and their children jointly construct meanings in conversations about harm and help. For instance, how much do parents and children challenge each others’ perspectives in each conversation? And to what extent are children’s contributions prompted directly by parents? Alongside age-related changes in the content of discussions, these processes are likely to change with age, as children begin to rely less on their parents to help them structure their experiences and construct meanings about events (Fivush et al., 2011).

The Current Study

We asked mothers and their 7-, 11-, or 16-year-old children to discuss two events nominated by the child: one when the child harmed a friend and another when the child helped a friend. Child gender was also included in analyses as a control, because past research has revealed distinctions between the features of mothers’ conversations with boys and girls (Fivush, 1998). Conversations were coded along multiple dimensions that aimed to capture the verbal contents and processes of mother–child discussions of children’s harmful and helpful actions.

Our analyses focused on two overarching questions. First, we examined differences between the contents and processes of conversations about children’s prosocial and transgressive experiences, with a focus on illuminating mothers’ distinct verbal strategies in each context. Due to the paucity of prior research, analyses were largely exploratory. For instance, although we expected conversations about helping others to include more positive evaluations (e.g., praise) and encouragement (e.g., suggestions to continue engaging in the behavior in the future), in conversations about harm it was unknown whether/how mothers might engage in mitigating strategies (e.g., underscoring legitimate reasons for engaging in harmful behavior) aimed at supporting children’s ability to reconcile their hurtful behaviors with a positive self-view.

Second, we aimed to document age-related changes in the contents and processes of conversations. We expected the contents of conversations with older children to be less concrete and more psychological (Fivush & Nelson, 2006), with an increasing focus on broader insights that could be drawn from experiences in the moral realm (e.g., how helpful behaviors serve to reveal, whereas harmful behaviors are discrepant with, adolescents’ identities). With respect to process, we expected mothers of younger children to largely guide the discussions and prompt children’s contributions, whereas older children and adolescents would play a more active role in making sense of their own harmful and helpful behavior.

Method

Participants

Families were recruited in a mid-sized city in the western United States via flyers posted in the community and at schools, as well as through word of mouth. Participants were 100 mothers and their 7-, 11-, or 16-year-old children. The sample was primarily European American (91% of mothers, 86% of fathers) and educated (62% of mothers and 72% of fathers had completed college). The children were roughly equally divided by gender and age, consisting of thirty-four 7-year-olds (M age = 7.28, range = 6.05–8.14; 20 girls), thirty-three 11-year-olds (M age = 11.10, range = 9.98–12.11; 16 girls), and thirty-three 16-year-olds (M age = 16.12, range = 15.00–17.19; 16 girls). Two additional dyads (male child, aged 7 and 11) were excluded because the children could not think of a time when they hurt or upset a friend, and an additional dyad (male child, aged 16) was excluded because the child could not think of a time when he helped a friend. Written parental consent and child assent were obtained for all mother–child dyads. Families were given movie gift certificates in appreciation for their participation.

Procedure

This study was a part of a larger investigation of children’s moral development; only procedures relevant to the current study are described. Children were first interviewed individually in a private setting at either their family’s home or at a university lab and were asked to nominate (a) “a time when you hurt or upset a friend” and (b) “a time when you helped a friend.” Because research has shown that moral transgressions occur more often in experiences between agemates than between children and their parents (Smetana, 2006), we focused on past experiences with friends rather than with the mothers themselves. In general, children nominated events involving material/concrete types of help (e.g., fixing a bike) and psychological/emotional types of harm (e.g., teasing), as well as, to a lesser extent, physical forms of harm and help (e.g., hitting, assisting with an injury).

Following event nominations, children were brought to a common area (e.g., the family room) and were asked to discuss the events with their mothers. Specifically, dyads were instructed to “talk about what (child) did that time, try to figure out everything that happened around it, and also see if there’s something to be learned from it.” To end the session on a positive note, harm events were discussed first, followed by help events. Conversations were audio- and video-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Nonverbal behaviors relevant to understanding the participants’ tone and content of dialogue were also added to the transcripts (e.g., laughing, leaving the room, nodding). Transcripts were parsed into speech clauses (i.e., one subject-verb unit per line) for coding (see Stein, Folkman, Trabasso, & Richards, 1997). Conversations ranged in length from 20 to 667 clauses; the entire database of conversations consisted of 29,699 clauses.

Coding

Out of the 29,699 total clauses in the database, 6,243 contributions were coded (κ = .81). For an illustrative coded excerpt of a conversation, see Table 1. Not every clause received a discrete code, either because (a) the content of the clause was not relevant to our coding scheme (e.g., Clause 3, Table 1) or because (b) one coded unit continued for multiple clauses (e.g., Clauses 10–12, Table 1). Furthermore, in some cases, the same clause received two distinct codes (e.g., Clause 8, Table 1). Conversations were coded for references to various types of concrete and psychological content (Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, in press; Wainryb et al., 2005) as well as for processes by which dyads constructed
meaning in their conversations (e.g., Fivush et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2012). Interrater reliability was established between two independent coders on 20% of the conversations, with disagreements resolved via discussion and consensus. Cohen’s kappas are reported below.

First, mothers’ and children’s contributions were each coded for seven mutually exclusive types of conversational content (κ for type of content = .89): acts, conflicts, consequences, reasons, evaluations, insights, and strategies. Content types are described in more detail below, including descriptions of specific subcategories for each code. In addition to content, we also coded the function of each conversational contribution by specifying whether it was used for content, to elicit content from the other speaker, or to challenge content provided by the other speaker (κ = .84). Finally, we coded whether the child’s contributions were provided spontaneously (spontaneous) or were elicited or scaffolded by the mother (prompted) (κ = .93).

**Acts.** This code denoted references to children’s behaviors resulting in harm (“I didn’t share”) or help (“I gave her a bandaid”) to their friends.

**Conflicts.** This code denoted the presence of a conflict between the child’s desires and perspectives and his or her friend’s desires and preferences. Conflicts in conversations about helping referenced the ways in which the helping behavior was costly for the child (“Did you realize that if you helped her you wouldn’t be able to go skiing?”). Conflicts in conversations about harm referenced the ways in which the child’s desires and perspectives were in opposition to the friend’s desires and perspectives (“He thought that I was being mean, but I was joking”).

**Reasons.** References to five subcategories of reasons for the harmful or helpful behavior were coded (κ = .89; see Table 3 for examples): (a) the child’s internality (including motivations, cognitions, and emotions), (b) the other’s internality, (c) a response to other’s action (i.e., provocation or reciprocating the other’s previously helpful behavior), (d) extenuating circumstances, and (e) the child’s and friend’s unique relationship.

**Consequences.** References to seven types of consequences of the harmful or helpful behavior were coded (κ = .91; see Table 3 for examples): (a) emotional/psychological consequences for the child, (b) material consequences for the child, (c) emotional/psychological consequences for the other, (d) material consequences for the other, (e) a response from the other (i.e., gratitude or retaliation), (f) a response from a third party, such as a teacher or parent, and (g) consequences to the relationship between the child and his or her friend. The valence of each consequence was also coded as either positive or negative (κ = .98).

**Evaluations.** Positive and negative evaluations of four different aspects of events were coded (κ = .98 for valence and κ = .87 for type; see Table 3 for examples): (a) the harming or helping act or the child in general, (b) one particular aspect of the harming or helping act (e.g., the child’s goal), as distinguished from the act in general, (c) a behavior discussed in the event other than the harming or helping behavior, and (d) who was responsible for the friend ending up hurt or helped.

**Insights.** Four types of insights were coded (κ = .90; see Table 3 for examples): (a) how the child’s enduring self was in contradistinction to the self potentially revealed by the harming or helping behavior, (b) opportunities for self-improvement, (c) how the child’s enduring self was revealed by the harming or helping act, and (d) how the event revealed something unique about the child’s relationship with the other or relationships in general. Additionally, the valence of revealed and contradistinction references was coded (κ = .98).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clause number</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Verbal transcript</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Subcontent</th>
<th>Valence</th>
<th>Spontaneity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Child:</td>
<td>Well, she kind of lost her sled</td>
<td>provide</td>
<td>reason</td>
<td>other’s internality (i.e., other’s needs)</td>
<td>spontaneous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Child:</td>
<td>then I said to look into the lost and found.</td>
<td>provide</td>
<td>act</td>
<td></td>
<td>spontaneous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mother:</td>
<td>It took a couple days but then she found it in the lost and found!</td>
<td>provide</td>
<td>consequence</td>
<td>material for other</td>
<td>positive</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mother:</td>
<td>Oh! So what did she say to you?</td>
<td>elicit</td>
<td>consequence</td>
<td>response from other</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>spontaneous</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mother:</td>
<td>Thanks.</td>
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<td>consequence</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Child:</td>
<td>She did say thanks.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Child:</td>
<td>And then we can sled.</td>
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<td>consequence</td>
<td>material for other</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>spontaneous</td>
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<tr>
<td>8a (double coded)</td>
<td>Child:</td>
<td>Well that’s good.</td>
<td>provide</td>
<td>consequence</td>
<td>material for child</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>spontaneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b (double coded)</td>
<td>Mother:</td>
<td>So . . . you could have just said, “oh, okay that’s too bad,” huh?</td>
<td>provide</td>
<td>evaluation</td>
<td>act/child</td>
<td>positive</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Mother:</td>
<td>But instead you helped her out.</td>
<td>“”</td>
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<td>“”</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mother:</td>
<td>That was awesome.</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Child:</td>
<td>But are there other kids you think you could help out with stuff like that?</td>
<td>provide</td>
<td>strategy</td>
<td>do behavior in more contexts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Child:</td>
<td>Like who’s that mean kid—Tom?</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Quotation marks indicate that the coded unit continued for multiple clauses.

Table 1
Sample Coded Excerpt From a Conversation About Help With a 7-Year-Old Girl

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>Child:</td>
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Strategies. Six strategies for managing similar situations were coded (κ = .87; see Table 3 for examples): (a) doing the behavior in even more contexts, (b) not doing the behavior, (c) continue doing the behavior, (d) making reparations, (e) seeking adult intervention, and (f) substituting the behavior with a different behavior that achieves the same goal.

Results

Plan of Analysis

Our corpus for analyses consisted of the 6,243 coded contributions. We first examined the total frequency of contributions by each speaker. Next, we examined overall types of content discussed, as well as the subcategories of content within these overall types. Finally, we examined the conversational functions of contributions by mothers and children and whether children’s contributions were spontaneous or prompted. For each significant omnibus effect, effect size is reported as partial eta squared (η²). Bonferroni corrections (with a familywise alpha level of p < .05) for each analysis were used for all post hoc pairwise comparisons.

How much do mothers and children contribute to conversations about harm and help? To examine the relative frequencies of mothers’ and children’s contributions to conversations, we conducted a 2 (event type: harm, help) × 2 (speaker: child, mother) × 3 (child age: 7-, 11-, 16-year-old) × 2 (child gender) analysis of variance, with the number of conversational contributions as the dependent variable. For this and all other analyses, event type and speaker were entered as within-family variables, whereas child age and gender were entered as between-family variables. The analysis revealed significant univariate main effects of event type, F(1, 94) = 20.53, η² = .18, and speaker, F(1, 94) = 36.79, η² = .28, as well as two-way interactions between event type and speaker, F(1, 94) = 6.31, η² = .06, and age and speaker, F(2, 94) = 8.70, η² = .16.

Follow-up analyses revealed that children made more contributions than their mothers, but this effect was more pronounced for harm (child M = 21.35, SE = 1.52; mother M = 15.31, SE = 1.07) than for help (child M = 14.84, SE = .78; mother M = 11.24, SE = .70). The age of the child also qualified the difference between speakers within a conversation; consistent with hypotheses, in dyads including 16-year-olds, the difference between speakers was significant (child M = 22.01, SE = 1.73; mother M = 12.50, SE = 1.21), whereas for dyads including 7-year-olds (child M = 15.19, SE = 1.73; mother M = 12.92, SE = 1.21) and 11-year-olds (child M = 17.08, SE = 1.73; mother M = 14.40, SE = 1.21), the difference was not significant.

What types of content do mothers and children focus on when talking about children’s harmful and helpful behavior? The above analyses indicated that contributions varied as a function of speaker, context, and age. Thus, to avoid confounding the total number of contributions with family members’ relative emphasis on each type of content, each category of content was proportionalized by the total number of contributions by a speaker within a conversation (e.g., [child’s references to reasons for harm]/[child’s total number of contributions in the harm conversation]). We conducted a 2 (event type) × 2 (speaker) × 3 (child age) × 2 (child gender) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), examining the seven types of content (i.e., acts, conflicts, reasons, consequences, evaluations, insights, and strategies) as dependent variables. The analysis revealed multivariate main effects of child age (Wilks’s λ = .75, η² = .13), event type (λ = .24, η² = .76), and speaker (λ = .22, η² = .78), as well as a two-way interaction between event type and speaker (λ = .74, η² = .27).

Follow-up analyses revealed univariate effects of child age on families’ emphasis on the acts themselves, F(2, 94) = 6.79, η² = .13, as well as on insights that could be drawn from children’s harmful and helpful behavior, F(2, 94) = 10.17, η² = .18. Pairwise comparisons revealed that dyads including 7-year-olds (M = .15, SE = .01) were proportionately more likely than dyads including 11-year-olds (M = .11, SE = .01) or 16-year-olds (M = .10, SE = .01) to refer to actions. Conversely, and as expected, dyads including 7-year-olds (M = .04, SE = .01) were proportionately less likely than dyads including 11-year-olds (M = .09, SE = .01) or 16-year-olds (M = .10, SE = .01) to refer to insights.

With respect to event type, analyses revealed univariate effects for all types of content, with the exception of references to insights (see Table 2). In conversations about harm, families were more likely to focus on conflicts and strategies. In contrast, in conversations about help, families focused more exclusively on acts, reasons, consequences, and evaluations.

Analyses also revealed differences between the types of content contributed by children versus mothers. Follow-up analyses revealed univariate effects of speaker on all content types except conflicts and consequences (see Table 2). Whereas children focused more on references to acts and reasons, mothers focused more on evaluations, insights, and strategies.

Finally, follow-up tests revealed univariate Event Type × Speaker interactions for reasons, F(1, 94) = 6.24, η² = .06, and evaluations, F(1, 94) = 20.42, η² = .18. The difference in the proportional frequency of references to reasons across harm and help events was greater for children (Ms = .28 and .40, for harm and help, respectively, SEs = .02) than for mothers (Ms = .16 and .22, respectively, SEs = .02). Moreover, children were equally unlikely to focus on evaluations across harm and help (both Ms = .03, SEs = .01), whereas mothers focused more on evaluations in conversations about help (M = .17, SE = .02) than harm (M = .10, SE = .01).

What types of reasons, consequences, evaluations, insights, and strategies are discussed in conversations about children’s harmful and helpful behavior? In addition to examining families’ emphasis on the overall types of conversational content, we also conducted more detailed analyses of subcategories within overall content types. To avoid confounding the overall number of references to a content type (e.g., reasons) with dyads’ proportional use of a particular subcategory (e.g., child’s internality), we computed proportions of references to each subcategory as a function of the total number of references to a type of content in a conversation (e.g., [references to child’s internality]/[total number of references to reasons for harm]). Consequently, if a family failed to refer at least once to an overall type of content within each conversation (e.g., if they never mentioned a reason), they were excluded from the analysis of subcategories. Furthermore, as noted above, mothers and/or children discussed some types of content relatively infrequently; therefore, to maximize degrees of freedom for analysis, we collapsed across speakers (i.e., results are analyzed at the level of the dyad).
**Table 2**

**Differences Between Conversations About Harming and Helping Others and Between Mothers’ and Children’s Contributions to Conversations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Harm (M)</th>
<th>Help (M)</th>
<th>Univariate effect of event type</th>
<th>Child (M)</th>
<th>Mother (M)</th>
<th>Univariate effect of speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Types of contents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts</td>
<td>.10 (.01)</td>
<td>.15 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 19.39, \eta^2 = .17^{***}$</td>
<td>.17 (.01)</td>
<td>.08 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 113.95, \eta^2 = .54^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts</td>
<td>.13 (.01)</td>
<td>.01 (.00)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 110.43, \eta^2 = .54^{***}$</td>
<td>.08 (.01)</td>
<td>.07 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 3.89, \eta^2 = .04$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>.22 (.01)</td>
<td>.31 (.02)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 20.82, \eta^2 = .18^{***}$</td>
<td>.34 (.01)</td>
<td>.19 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 136.15, \eta^2 = .59^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td>.21 (.01)</td>
<td>.27 (.02)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 9.34, \eta^2 = .09^{***}$</td>
<td>.24 (.01)</td>
<td>.24 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 0.00, \eta^2 = .00$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>.07 (.01)</td>
<td>.09 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 5.64, \eta^2 = .04$</td>
<td>.04 (.01)</td>
<td>.11 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 70.23, \eta^2 = .43^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insights</td>
<td>.21 (.02)</td>
<td>.07 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 80.06, \eta^2 = .46^{***}$</td>
<td>.10 (.01)</td>
<td>.18 (.01)</td>
<td>$F(1, 94) = 54.17, \eta^2 = .37^{***}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Types of functions**

| Challenge content  | .12 (.01)| .05 (.01)| $F(1, 94) = 20.68, \eta^2 = .18^{***}$ | .07 (.01) | .10 (.01)  | $F(1, 94) = 14.67, \eta^2 = .14^{***}$ |
| Elicit content     | .19 (.01)| .19 (.01)| $F(1, 94) = 0.02, \eta^2 = .00$    | .00 (.00) | .38 (.02)  | $F(1, 94) = 362.18, \eta^2 = .79^{***}$ |
| Provide content    | .09 (.01)| .76 (.01)| $F(1, 94) = 14.87, \eta^2 = .14^{***}$ | .93 (.01) | .52 (.02)  | $F(1, 94) = 367.18, \eta^2 = .80^{***}$ |

**Types of reasons.** A 2 (event type) × 3 (child age) × 2 (child gender) MANOVA with the five subcategories of reasons (i.e., child’s internality, other’s internality, response to other’s action, extenuating circumstances, unique relationship) as dependent variables revealed only a multivariate effect of event type ($\lambda = .12, \eta^2 = .89$). Follow-up analyses revealed univariate effects of event type on all five subcategories of reasons (see Table 3). Wherein references to the child’s internality, responses to other’s action, and extenuating circumstances were used proportionately more frequently to account for children’s harmful behavior, references to the other’s internality and the child’s unique relationship with his or her friend were more frequent in accounting for children’s helpful behavior.

**Types of consequences.** A 2 (event type) × 3 (child age) × 2 (child gender) MANOVA with the seven subcategories of consequences (i.e., emotional/psychological for child, material for child, emotional/psychological for other, material for other, response from other, response from third party, relationship) as dependent variables revealed multivariate effects of gender ($\lambda = .81, \eta^2 = .19$) and event type ($\lambda = .57, \eta^2 = .43$). Follow-up tests revealed univariate effects of gender on material consequences for the child, $F(1, 92) = 4.67, \eta^2 = .05$, as well as material consequences for the other, $F(1, 92) = 8.83, \eta^2 = .09$. In both cases, dyads including boys ($M$ for child material = .04, $SE = .01$; $M$ for other material = .14, $SE = .02$) referred more to these consequences than dyads including girls ($M$s = .02 and .06, $SE$s = .01 and .02, respectively).

With respect to event type, follow-up tests revealed univariate effects for references to emotional/psychological consequences for both the child and the other, as well as material consequences for both the child and the other (see Table 3). Specifically, emotional consequences for the child, as well as material consequences for both the child and the other, were discussed proportionately more frequently for help, whereas emotional consequences for the other were discussed more frequently for harm.

In addition to examining types of consequences, we also examined the valence of consequences. Overall, in conversations about harm, 97% of consequences were negative, whereas only 7% of consequences discussed for help were negative.

**Types of evaluations.** A 2 (event type) × 3 (child age) × 2 (child gender) MANOVA with the four subcategories of evaluations (act/child, a specific aspect of act, other behavior, responsibility) as dependent variables revealed only a multivariate effect of event type ($\lambda = .49, \eta^2 = .51$). Follow-up tests revealed univariate effects for all four subcategories (see Table 3). Overwhelmingly, evaluations in the context of helping behavior centered around the child/act itself, whereas a substantial proportion of evaluations in the context of harmful behavior also focused on particular aspects of the act, other behavior, or issues of responsibility.

As for consequences, we also noted the valence of evaluative statements. Only 5% of evaluations in help conversations were negative, compared with 46% of evaluations in harm.

**Types of insights.** A 2 (event type) × 3 (child age) × 2 (child gender) MANOVA with the four subcategories of insights (self in contradistinction, self-improvement, self revealed, other/relationship) as dependent variables revealed only a multivariate effect of event type ($\lambda = .56, \eta^2 = .44$). Follow-up tests revealed univariate effects for self revealed and other/relationship (see Table 3). In conversations about help, self revealed insights were used proportionately more often, whereas in conversations about harm, insights focused on others/relationships.

In cases when the event was described as informative about the child’s existing characteristics (either as self revealed or self in contradistinction), we also noted the valence of these references. Whereas 27% of these self-related insights were negative in harm conversations, only 2% were negative in help conversations.

**Types of strategies.** A 2 (event type) × 3 (child age) × 2 (child gender) MANOVA with the six subcategories of strategies (do behavior in more contexts, don’t do behavior, keep doing behavior, repair, seek adult intervention, substitute behavior) as dependent variables revealed multivariate effects of event type ($\lambda = .16, \eta^2 = .85$) and gender ($\lambda = .81, \eta^2 = .19$). With respect to event type, follow-up tests revealed univariate effects for all categories except...
seek adult intervention (see Table 3). In discussions of harm events, dyads focused more on the strategies of don’t do behavior, repair, and substitute behavior; when they discussed help events, dyads focused on the strategies of do behavior in more contexts and keep doing behavior.

For gender, follow-up tests revealed a univariate effect for don’t do behavior, F(1, 57) = 8.22, ηp² = .13. Specifically, discussions of this strategy occurred more frequently in dyads including boys (M = .19) than those including girls (M = .06).

What are the functions of mothers’ and children’s contributions to discussions? To examine the manner in which children and their mothers contributed to conversations about harm and help, we conducted a 2 (event type) × 2 (speaker) × 3 (child age) × 2 (child gender) MANOVA, with the three types of functions (i.e., challenge content, elicit content, provide content) as dependent variables. The analysis revealed multivariate effects of event type (λ = .81, ηp² = .19), speaker (λ = .20, ηp² = .80), and gender (λ = .89, ηp² = .11).

Follow-up analyses revealed univariate event type effects for challenge and provide (see Table 2); as expected, discussions about harm included proportionately more challenges, whereas discussions about help included more neutral provisions of content. In turn, analyses revealed univariate effects of speaker for all three types of functions (see Table 2); mothers more frequently elicited and challenged content, whereas children focused on providing content. Finally, analyses of gender revealed univariate effects for challenge, F(1, 94) = 6.58, ηp² = .07, and provide, F(1, 94) = 10.73, ηp² = .10. Dyads including boys challenged content more than dyads including girls (Ms = .11 and .06, respectively), whereas they were less likely to provide content in a neutral way (Ms = .69 and .76, respectively).

To what extent do mothers prompt children’s contributions? In addition to examining elicitations of information, we also examined more directly the extent to which the child’s contributions to conversations were prompted or spontaneous. We conducted a 2 (event type) × 3 (child age) × 2 (child gender) ANOVA, with the child’s proportion of prompted contributions as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed main effects of age, F(2, 94) = 3.33, ηp² = .07, and gender, F(1, 94) =
11.98, $\eta^2 = .11$, as well as an Age × Event interaction, $F(2, 94) = 3.95, \eta^2 = .08$. Post hoc comparisons revealed that, overall, 16-year-olds’ contributions ($M = .31$) were less prompted than those of 7- or 11-year-olds (both $Ms = .39$). Furthermore, although 7-year-olds’ and 11-year-olds’ contributions were equally prompted across event types (for both age groups, $Ms = .42$ and .37 for harm and help, respectively), 16-year-olds’ contributions were less frequently prompted for harm ($M = .27$) than for help ($M = .35$). Finally, with respect to gender, analyses revealed that boys’ contributions ($M = .42$) were more prompted than those of girls ($M = .31$).

Discussion

This study revealed how the contents and processes of mother–child conversations about children’s experiences in the moral realm vary across experiences of harm and help and as a function of age. Arguably, such findings can illuminate how discussions about harm and help may provide unique opportunities for both children and adolescents to further their moral understandings. Importantly, although our results also revealed a few main effects of gender, these effects did not moderate any of the major findings for age or event type.

How Do Conversations About Harm and Help Serve as Complementary Contexts for the Development of Moral Agency?

Although children’s harmful and helpful behaviors are both morally laden types of action, conversations about these two types of behaviors may nevertheless have distinct implications for children’s views of themselves and others as moral agents. To identify the unique contributions of parent–child conversations, it is helpful to first consider how children make sense of these experiences on their own. With respect to prosocial behavior, children’s individually constructed accounts of helping others (Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne, & Pasupathi, 2012) reveal that, as children reflect on these experiences, they are overwhelmingly focused on others’ needs. Specifically, when discussing both reasons for and consequences of helping others, both school-age children and adolescents emphasize others’ needs and emotions, and they rarely discuss costs to self incurred from helping. This pattern suggests that children’s consideration of times when they have helped others are uniquely conducive to reflecting on other people’s needs and emotions (processes fundamental to empathy for others) but perhaps less illuminating about their own internality. In contrast, children’s individually constructed accounts of hurting others reveal a dual focus on both their own and the others’ internality; specifically, these accounts tend to convey the negative emotional consequences for the other while simultaneously including references to children’s own justifiable reasons and intentions for having engaged in the harmful behavior (Wainryb et al., 2005).

With this in mind, the current study demonstrates that mother–child conversations about children’s helpful behavior may uniquely serve to support children’s understanding of their own agency in help situations. First, in addition to discussing the positive consequences of help for others, conversations focused frequently on positive emotional/psychological consequences for self (e.g., feelings of pride). Results further revealed that these consequences were discussed as frequently by mothers as they were by children. In addition, results revealed that mothers frequently emphasized evaluations and insights that underscored the child’s positive moral characteristics (e.g., I’m so proud of you; you’re such a compassionate person). In sum, mothers’ contributions to conversations about help focused on aspects of experiences that can arguably serve to facilitate, encourage, and reinforce children’s sense of themselves as prosocial moral agents capable of deriving satisfaction and personal fulfillment from their own responsibility to the needs of others (Carlo et al., 2011; Grusec & Redler, 1980).

In contrast to the rather unambiguous patterns characterizing conversations about help, the patterns in conversations about harm were somewhat more complex. Broadly speaking, these conversations appeared to be more demanding and elaborated than those concerning help: not only were they longer (with children’s own efforts to describe and explain their experience contributing disproportionately to this effect), but as expected, they also included more challenges and conflicting viewpoints between speakers. Indeed, in a few respects, maternal socialization goals in this context did appear to be the opposite of those evident in conversations about help, inasmuch as they served to highlight children’s wrongdoing. First, in line with previous research (Smetana, 1999), these conversations included references to the harmful emotional consequences for the other resulting from the child’s behavior (i.e., other-oriented inductions; Hoffman, 2000). Second, discussions also focused on conflicts with the other’s perspective that increased the potential for harm. Third, as compared with conversations about help, a greater proportion of mothers’ evaluations and insights were negative. Finally, not surprisingly, as compared with help events, mothers more often discouraged the child from engaging in similar behavior in the future.

Nevertheless, alongside these findings, the more widespread patterns evident in harm conversations reflected a variety of strategies whereby mothers might help their children reconcile their negative behaviors with a sustainable sense of themselves as moral agents, capable of doing good as well as harm (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Specifically, conversations included references to children’s legitimate perspectives that justified their behavior, as well as references to provocation and extenuating circumstances that served to bracket children’s actions in a particular concrete context. In this sense, the conversations included some strategies that mirror those used independently by children when they make sense of their own hurtful actions on their own (Wainryb et al., 2005). Nevertheless, conversations also included other features that imply a unique role of mothers in scaffolding children’s moral agency. Specifically, mothers’ acknowledgement of children’s legitimate goals was also evident in their encouragement to substitute behavior with alternative (more constructive) ways to achieve the same aims. Mothers also suggested strategies for repairing relationships (e.g., apologizing, making amends), thus underscoring and supporting children’s capacity to move beyond harm in constructive ways. Furthermore, when mothers helped children draw insights from their experiences of harm, they tended to focus on lessons about what other people and relationships are like, rather than lessons about the child’s own stable characteristics. Interestingly, when mothers did refer to insights into the child’s character that emerged from the experience, these insights tended to be largely positive (e.g., you felt badly because you really care
about other people). Similarly, conversations surrounding harm rarely focused on explicit evaluations of the child’s harmful actions. Rather, mothers tended to focus on what children did do well: their legitimate goals (even if their strategies for achieving them were not ideal), as well as other positive actions in the context of the larger event (e.g., attempts at repair).

Given these patterns, conversations about harm appeared to provide opportunities for children to further their understandings of both their own and others’ moral agency, albeit in different ways than those evident in discussions of help. Importantly, although mothers’ strategies in conversations about harm were quite gentle and positive (see Kochanska, Aksan, & Nichols, 2003, and Walker & Taylor, 1991, for evidence regarding the effectiveness of this approach), the vast majority of conversations did not go so far as to condone children’s hurtful behaviors. In this way, our results extend those of Miller et al. (2012) by revealing the compatibility between North American mothers’ emphasis on children’s self-esteem and autonomy and their simultaneous efforts to promote a sense of moral agency in their children.

### How Do Mother–Child Conversations About Morally Laden Experiences Change With Age?

Our results revealed some ways in which distinctions between mothers’ and children’s contributions to conversations about morally laden events were consistent across childhood and adolescence. For example, children of all ages noted their reasons for engaging in such behavior and the consequences that ensued, whereas mothers emphasized evaluations (e.g., praise for helping, judgments of fault or responsibility for harming), strategies that could be used to manage similar situations (e.g., encouragement to continue helping, making reparations for harming), and insights that could be drawn from experiences (e.g., implications of harm and help for understanding the child’s enduring sense of self). Furthermore, at all ages, mothers aimed to build on and contest children’s accounts of events by asking questions, challenging children’s interpretations, and providing their own suggestions. Yet other results suggested that the ways in which meanings were constructed in conversations did shift substantially with age. Most notably, older children played an increasingly active role in discussions. In dyads including 7- and 11-year-olds, mothers and children made equal numbers of contributions to conversations, and thus appeared to act as concomitants of children’s morally laden experiences (see Miller et al., 2012), with mothers playing an integral role in prompting children’s contributions. In contrast, 16-year-olds made almost twice as many conversational contributions as their mothers, and these contributions were offered spontaneously more often than those of younger children, especially in conversations about harm. These results suggest that 16-year-olds were far less reliant than younger children on their mothers’ scaffolding to construct an understanding of events in the moral realm. In this case, mothers served more as a sounding board, asking questions and offering suggestions at critical moments but otherwise acknowledging teens’ ability to construct coherent accounts of their own experiences. Nevertheless, these results should not be taken to imply that parents’ role becomes any less meaningful with older children: As noted above, mothers of children at all ages played a unique role in making evaluative judgments of children’s experiences and suggesting constructive strategies for handling similar situations.

In addition to examining conversational processes, we also investigated age-related changes in the types of content that formed the focus of conversations about morally laden events. We expected that, with age, conversations would focus less on the “facts” of what happened (e.g., children’s harmful and helpful behavior itself) and include more references to psychological facets of experiences, including connections between children’s morally laden experiences and emerging senses of self (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). Our results were partially in line with this expectation; whereas conversations with 7-year-olds focused more on descriptions of harmful and helpful actions themselves, discussions with 11- and 16-year-olds included more references to insights. It is intriguing that conversations with 11- and 16-year-olds were indistinguishable in this respect, inasmuch as research suggests that adolescents become increasingly adept at drawing connections between their morally laden experiences and developing identities (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). This finding suggests that mothers were engaging in age-appropriate strategies that served to scaffold children’s developing moral understandings. Specifically, with 7-year-olds, mothers were less focused on drawing insights that were beyond the developmental capabilities of their children. In turn, although conversations with 11-year-olds and 16-year-olds each included discussion of insights emerging from harm and help, mothers were less likely to prompt 16-year-olds’ contributions to conversations.

### Summary and Conclusions

The results of this study are based on a community sample consisting primarily of middle-class, well-educated European American families. Inasmuch as past research has made clear that moral socialization processes in conversation may vary between socioeconomic (Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998) and cultural groups (Miller et al., 2012), research is needed to examine how the processes observed in this study may manifest themselves in different contexts. Furthermore, although our sample size was adequate for testing the primary associations of interest in this study, the low frequency of some contents (e.g., insights, evaluations) and functions (e.g., challenges) resulted in limited power to investigate more nuanced patterns involving these variables. Finally, because discussions about harm events preceded those about help, we speculate that the latter conversation may have served a redemptive purpose, thus increasing mothers’ enthusiastic praise and references to positive insights; it would be useful for future studies to examine whether the characteristics of harm and help conversations vary, depending on the order in which they are presented.

Despite these limitations, our findings make a number of contributions to the literature on moral development and socialization. More specifically, with children’s increasing age, our results reveal that mothers’ roles in morally laden conversations evolve in ways that are responsive to children’s developing capacities to make sense of their experiences. In this respect, our findings demonstrate that the construction of moral judgments in conversation is interwined with other facets of children’s development, including their understandings of themselves, others, and the psychological world. Furthermore, our research highlights how dis-
cussions of children’s transgressive and prosocial moral experiences may make distinct but complementary contributions to children’s sense of moral agency; our results suggest various strategies whereby mothers may be supporting children’s understandings of themselves as prosocial agents and helping children to reconcile their harmful actions with their positive self views while at the same time gently noting and attempting to help children address the problematic consequences of their hurtful behavior. A useful direction for future research would be to more thoroughly investigate individual, developmental, and contextual differences in such strategies. For example, in conversations about harm, when do mothers most frequently engage in different types of mitigation strategies? Does this depend on the child’s initial construal of the event? On the parent’s overall style? And what are the developmental consequences of each emphasis?

By capitalizing on methodologies drawn from studies of parent-child reminiscing (e.g., Fivush et al., 2011), our study extends previous research examining children’s narrative accounts of their morally laden experiences (Wainryb et al., 2005) and charts new directions for the study of moral development. In particular, our results demonstrate the variety of ways in which mothers can support children’s and adolescents’ constructions of meanings about their morally laden experiences, thus underscoring the utility of examining these conversational processes in action and providing a blueprint for future research in this area. Related to this, our findings also suggest the ways in which mother–child conversations about help and harm may complement one another by jointly serving to further children’s understandings of themselves as imperfect but nevertheless moral agents, capable of doing good as well as harm.

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