Children’s and Adolescents’ Accounts of Helping and Hurting Others:
Lessons About the Development of Moral Agency

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This study examined children’s and adolescents’ narrative accounts of everyday experiences when they harmed and helped a friend. The sample included 100 participants divided into three age groups (7-, 11-, and 16-year-olds). Help narratives focused on the helping acts themselves and reasons for helping, whereas harm narratives included more references to consequences of acts and psychological conflicts. With age, however, youth increasingly described the consequences of helping. Reasons for harming others focused especially on the narrator’s perspective whereas reasons for helping others were centered on others’ perspectives. With age, youth increasingly drew self-related insights from their helpful, but not their harmful, actions. Results illuminate how reflections on prosocial and transgressive experiences may provide distinct opportunities for constructing moral agency.

Fundamentally, the study of morality focuses on distinctions between right versus wrong, do versus do not, and good versus bad; perhaps for this reason, prosocial (e.g., helping) and transgressive (e.g., hurting) behaviors are often conceptualized as two sides of the same coin (e.g., McGinley & Carlo, 2007). Following from this, a substantial body of research on children’s and adolescents’ moral development has delineated the predictors of individual differences in these two types of action, in an effort to identify factors that promote and sustain children’s prosocial behavior and minimize their tendency to transgress against others (see Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo, in press). Nevertheless, in the course of their everyday interactions, all children will occasionally hurt or upset others, in addition to helping others. Although both types of action can be considered to fall within the moral domain inasmuch as they implicate the rights and welfare of others (Turiel, 1983, in press), we argue that they are not simply two sides of the same coin in that they may each make distinct contributions to moral development.

Yet to date, little is known about differences, and perhaps similarities, in how youth make sense of their own harmful and helpful behaviors. To investigate such possibilities, children’s and adolescents’ narratives about past experiences can provide important insights. Such narratives reveal the connections that youth make between their own and others’ morally relevant behaviors, and their thoughts, desires, and feelings. Therefore, the first aim of this study was to document the distinct features of children’s narrative accounts of hurting and helping their peers, with particular emphasis on children’s representations of relations between their own and others’ psychological states, and their own and others’ actions. In effect, in building such relations, children are constructing moral agency: an understanding of themselves and others as agents whose morally laden actions are based in their motivations, cognitions, and emotions (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005).

Importantly, it is also likely that the opportunities afforded by these experiences for the development of moral agency vary with age. Across middle childhood and adolescence, youth’s
constructions of meanings about experiences of helping and hurting others may change substantially, as they develop more sophisticated understandings of themselves and others. More specifically, from the early school-aged to middle adolescent years, children increasingly develop the ability to reflect on psychological facets of experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b), to coordinate distinct perspectives on events (Martin, Sokol, & Elfers, 2008), and to consider morally laden experiences in light of their emerging identities (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Therefore, the current study also examined how age-related changes in children’s and adolescents’ accounts may reflect their evolving conceptions of their own prosocial and transgressive moral experiences, including their tendency to draw broader self-related insights from these events.

Differences Between Youth’s Reasoning About Harm and Help

Research examining children’s and adolescents’ moral reasoning about hypothetical scenarios has focused on how youth of different ages weigh and coordinate different concerns as they make judgments of others’ helpful and harmful actions (Eisenberg et al., in press; Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014). Nevertheless, only a handful of studies have directly compared children’s reasoning about prosocial and transgressive behavior. By the early elementary years, children reason about both harming and helping by drawing on moral concepts such as welfare and justice (Kahn, 1992). However, children also distinguish between these two types of actions, in that they judge engaging in prosocial action to be more discretionary and thus morally laudable and praiseworthy, whereas they judge (refraining from) transgressive behavior to be obligatory, and thus morally required (Kahn, 1992; see also Lourenço, 1994). Adolescents, too, expect to experience more pride if they engage in prosocial actions than if they refrain from engaging in transgressive behavior, whereas the opposite pattern is evident for guilt (Krettenauer & Johnston, 2011). These findings suggest that youth exhibit asymmetries between harmful and helpful actions in terms of both moral judgments and self-conscious emotion expectancies.

Although this work provided a crucial framework for our study, our emphasis on children’s and adolescents’ narrative accounts of their own experiences represents a significant extension of research focusing on third-party reasoning about hypothetical scenarios. Although research contrasting hypothetical and actual sociomoral events implies consistencies in reasoning across different methodological approaches, it also underscores that the meanings that children construct about their own experiences are contextually situated and personally relevant in ways that their responses to hypothetical scenarios are not (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Gasser, & Malti, 2010; Smetana et al., 1999; Turiel, 2008; Walker, 1989). Moreover, narrative methodologies are particularly conducive to identifying the aspects of experiences that children themselves perceive to be most salient. In techniques involving hypothetical vignettes or closed-ended probes, the relevant features of events are selected and made explicit by researchers. In contrast, when narrating their own past experiences, children and adolescents must determine for themselves which aspects of events are relevant, memorable, and meaningful. Therefore, analyses of narratives are uniquely suited to examining how children and adolescents construct meanings about past events, including the connections that they draw (or fail to draw) between their experiences and their broader understandings of self (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a).

Age-Related Changes in Experiences of Harming and Helping

Past work suggests that the tendency to draw self-relevant meanings from morally laden experiences may become more pronounced among adolescents, who are in the midst of actively constructing their identities (Blasi, 1995; Hardy & Carlo, 2011) and are thus beginning to explore connections between particular experiences and their emerging senses of self (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). However, there is reason to believe that these patterns may emerge in adolescence first for accounts of help, rather than harm. When youth harm other people, considering the broader self-related implications of this behavior poses a risk of drawing enduring negative conclusions about their own senses of self. Indeed, self–event connections that imply self-stability are more common than those that imply self-change (McLean & Pasupathi, 2011), and the former may be more common in response to helping others. Thus, since adolescents are only beginning to explore the implications of their experiences for their understandings of self (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008), they may draw more self-related insights from helping than from harming others.
Past research implies the possibility of two additional distinctions between experiences of harm and help, in relation to age-related patterns. First, research examining children’s accounts of their own transgressive behavior suggests that across middle childhood and adolescence, when describing the reasons for their harmful actions, youth focus on their own cognitions, motivations, and emotions, as well as extenuating circumstances and others’ provocations (Wainryb et al., 2005). In contrast, there is no research examining children’s and adolescents’ spontaneous accounts of their own reasons for helping others. Some studies based on hypothetical scenarios and experimental tasks imply that young children’s reasoning about prosocial actions is relatively self-centered (e.g., aimed at meeting their own needs or receiving rewards) and externalized (e.g., prompted by adults), becoming increasingly other-oriented and internalized with age (see Eisenberg et al., in press). Nevertheless, by 4–5 years, at least some children exhibit a considerable degree of other-oriented reasoning (Kochanska & Murray, 2000), and even toddlers’ helpful actions are responsive to others’ needs in the absence of external incentives (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). Thus, we examined similarities and differences in how youth at different ages spontaneously described their reasons for harming and helping others, in an effort to clarify this issue.

Similar to the above pattern for reasons, research on children’s prosocial moral reasoning implies an age-related increase in the emphasis that children place on the positive consequences of prosocial behavior, in terms of gains for both self and other (e.g., Lourenço, 1990). In contrast, the opposite has been argued to be true of young children’s understandings of harm; gains for self may be more salient than costs to other, accounting for the “happy victimizer” pattern whereby young children are particularly likely to ascribe positive emotions to transgressors (see Arsenio, 2014). On the other hand, research demonstrates that the happy victimizer phenomenon is much less common when children are asked to make attributions of their own emotions following hypothetical transgressive acts, as compared to the emotions of others (Keller, Lourenço, Malti, & Saalbach, 2003). Furthermore, when children provide accounts of their own transgressive behavior, even preschoolers refer more frequently to the victims’ emotions than to their own; this suggests that children do not emphasize gains to the self resulting from their own harmful actions (Wainryb et al., 2005). Taken together, these findings imply that young children may be fairly well attuned to the negative consequences of their own hurtful behavior, whereas the extent to which children will focus on positive and negative consequences (for either self or other) of their helping behavior remains unclear.

The Current Study

In sum, the purpose of this study was to examine similarities and differences in children’s and adolescents’ accounts of their own transgressive and prosocial behavior, in an effort to reveal how each type of experience may provide unique opportunities for moral development. To address whether age moderated these differences, we also examined whether distinctions between accounts of harming and helping others varied with increasing age. Specifically, we asked 7-, 11-, and 16-year-olds to describe experiences in which they harmed and helped a friend. We coded these narratives along two sets of dimensions informed by patterns observed in previous research. Gender effects were also included in analyses for descriptive purposes.

First, to identify the aspects of experiences that were most salient to children and adolescents as they reflected on their own transgressive and prosocial behavior, we examined their narrative descriptions of: (a) the harmful and helpful actions themselves, (b) their reasons for engaging in harmful or helpful behavior, (c) any conflicts between their own needs or perspectives and others’ needs or perspectives, and (d) the consequences of their actions. In relation to descriptions of their hurtful and helpful actions, past research suggests that, with age, children increasingly refer to psychological (e.g., trust violation) rather than concrete forms of harm (e.g., property destruction; Wainryb et al., 2005); in contrast, the literature did not provide any guidance about the types of helping behaviors that would be described most frequently. In turn, at all ages, we expected children’s and adolescents’ descriptions of their reasons for engaging in harmful actions to focus on their internality (i.e., their own cognitions, motivations, and emotions), as well as extenuating circumstances (Wainryb et al., 2005); as noted above, it remains unclear from past research whether children’s descriptions of their reasons for engaging in helpful behavior will become less self-centered and externally motivated with age (see Eisenberg et al., in press) or whether even young children will describe their reasons for helping others as based on other-oriented concerns (Kochanska & Murray, 2000; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). Moreover, we expected references to conflicts with
the victim’s needs or perspectives to be salient in accounts of hurting others, although perhaps especially so with increasing age, as youth develop more sophisticated insight into others’ perspectives and become more attuned to psychological aspects of experiences. On the other hand, it is not yet known whether psychological conflicts are also salient in youth’s retrospective accounts of their own helping behavior (i.e., whether children described having to sacrifice their own needs to help others), as past research using hypothetical, experimental, and observational methodologies leads to inconsistent predictions about this issue (e.g., Eisenberg et al., in press; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). Finally, in terms of the consequences of helping and hurting others, we expected children and adolescents of all ages to emphasize the negative consequences for others resulting from their own hurtful behavior (Wainryb et al., 2005). In contrast, it was unknown how children would describe the consequences of helping others, although Lourenço’s work (1990) implies that, with age, children may become more attuned to the benefits (for both self and other) of helping behavior (e.g., receiving praise, making someone happy).

Second, we also examined the extent to which children and adolescents explicitly described self-related insights gained from hurting and helping others. Specifically, we coded the extent to which children of different ages described their experiences of harming and helping as personally meaningful or impactful (e.g., significant or enduring), implicating self-evaluations (e.g., supererogation, pride, guilt), and/or connected to their broader understandings of themselves (e.g., personality traits). Based on past research examining age-related changes in narrative accounts (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012), we expected that these self-relevant meanings would be described more commonly by adolescents than younger children. We also expected adolescents to draw these insights more frequently from their helpful than their harmful actions.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in a mid-sized city in the Western United States via flyers posted in schools, community centers, day cares, and summer camps, as well as through word of mouth. The final sample included 100 participants in three age groups: thirty-four 7-year-olds (M<sub>age</sub> = 7.28 years, range = 6.05–8.14), thirty-three 11-year-olds (M<sub>age</sub> = 11.10 years, range = 9.98–12.11), and thirty-three 16-year-olds (M<sub>age</sub> = 16.12 years, range = 15.00–17.19). An additional two male participants (aged 7 and 11) were excluded because they could not think of a time when they hurt or upset a friend, and an additional male participant (aged 16) was excluded because he could not think of a time when he helped a friend. Each age group included approximately equal numbers of boys and girls (14/34 boys, 17/33 boys, and 17/33 boys, respectively). The sample was primarily European American (83%), with the remaining children representing a variety of ethnicities (African American, Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Native American, and mixed descent). Parents provided written informed consent, and children assented to all procedures. Children were given movie gift certificates in appreciation of their participation.

Procedure

Data were gathered as a part of a larger investigation of children’s moral development (see also Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne, & Pasupathi, 2014; Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013); only procedures relevant to this study are described below.

Children and adolescents were interviewed individually in a private room at either the child’s home or a university laboratory. They were first asked to provide a narrative account of a time when they hurt or upset a friend, and then to provide a narrative account of a time when they helped a friend (“Tell me about a time when you did or said something that ended up hurting or upsetting OR helping one of your good friends”). Help events were elicited after harm events to end the interview on a positive note. Participants were asked to choose events that were important to them and that they remembered well. When they nominated a recurring event, they were asked to narrate an account of one specific episode. The interviewer encouraged elaboration via general prompts (“uh huh . . .?”) and/or repeating the participant’s words verbatim. When the participant appeared to be finished with the narrative, the interviewer asked, “Is there anything else you remember about that time?” The interviewer followed these procedures so as to not lead the participant to elaborate on a specific kind of narrative content (Wainryb et al., 2005).

Coding and Reliability

 Interrater reliability was established between two independent coders on 20% of the narratives.
Disagreements were resolved via discussion and consensus. Cohen’s kappas are reported below.

Narrative Length

Each narrative was divided into clauses, with one subject–verb group per line. The length of each narrative was operationalized as the total number of clauses.

Narrative Elements: Acts, Reasons, Conflicts, and Consequences

The coding of narrative elements was adapted based on similar studies (Recchia et al., 2014; Wainryb et al., 2005) and elaborated based on the coding of 10% of the data. Clauses were coded for references to four narrative elements: harmful or helpful actions (κ = .89), the narrator’s reasons for harming or helping (κ = .83), conflicts between the narrator’s perspective and the other’s perspective (e.g., “He wanted the ball, but I kept playing with it”; “I drove over to comfort her when she was sick, even though I had to pay for my own gas”; κ = .80), and consequences of the harmful or helpful behavior (κ = .89). Our intent was not to code every clause, but rather to capture narrative elements that were of particular theoretical interest for this study. Uncoded features of narratives included contextual details (e.g., “It happened last Friday”), comments on the process of narrating (e.g., “I can’t remember what he said”), and other elements that were not the focus of the study (e.g., the denouement of harm events). Following this initial identification of elements, the specific contents of references to actions, reasons, and consequences were coded.

Types of harmful and helpful actions. Each narrative was coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of three possible types of actions (κ = .91): (a) material or concrete forms of harming or helping (e.g., refusing to share, destroying the other’s belongings, sharing, helping with homework), (b) psychological or emotional forms of harming or helping (e.g., making insulting comments, gossiping, excluding, encouraging, befriending, defending), and (c) physical forms of harming or helping (e.g., hitting, helping with an injury).

Types of reasons for harm or help. Each clause was coded for references to five possible reasons for the harmful or helpful behavior (κ = .90): (a) external constraints (e.g., “The teacher asked me to help”), (b) the narrator’s perspective (e.g., “I wanted to play basketball instead”), (c) the other’s perspective (e.g., “He was cold without his jacket”), (d) response to other’s actions (e.g., “He crashed his sled into me”), and (e) unique relationship (e.g., “I used to be on a soccer team with him”). Categories b and c each included references to cognitions (e.g., prescriptive and factual beliefs), motivations (e.g., needs, intentions, desires), and emotions (e.g., moods, affective reactions).

Types of consequences resulting from harmful and helpful behavior. Each clause was coded for references to three types of consequences (κ = .98): (a) consequences for the self (e.g., “I had to report to the school counselor”), (b) consequences for the other (e.g., “Because I made an effort to include him, he now has a lot of friends”), (c) consequences for the relationship (e.g., “We stopped talking after that”). Each consequence was also coded as either positive or negative. Categories a and b included references to emotional or psychological consequences, material or instrumental gains or losses, and praise or punishment.

Self-Related Insights

Each narrative was coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of self-related insights (κ = .86); the coding of these insights was adapted from narrative research (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b). Insights included self-evaluations (e.g., “I reacted wrong”), instances in which the narrator conveyed the experience was personally significant (e.g., “It was the worse fight that I’d ever had”), and self–event connections. The latter most frequently consisted of references to how the event was explained by or illustrated a preexisting quality of the self (e.g., “I like to make friends with people who are lonely”), but also included a few references to how the event changed or was discrepant with the narrator’s self-view (e.g., “It made me feel like a counselor”; “I usually don’t get so angry”). Due to the low frequencies of each category of self–related insights (i.e., evaluations, significance, and self–event connections), analyses examined the overall presence or absence of self–related meaning in a narrative, rather than the particular pattern of results for each category.

Results

Analyses of narrative content were conducted as a function of event type (harm, help), age (7-, 11-, and 16-year-olds), and gender, with event type as a repeated measure. For each significant omnibus effect, effect size is reported as partial eta-squared.
Bonferroni corrections (with a familywise alpha level of $p < .05$ for each analysis) were used for all post hoc pairwise comparisons.

**Narrative Elements: Acts, Reasons, Conflicts, and Consequences**

Preliminary analyses revealed that harm narratives ($M = 33.84$ clauses) were significantly longer than help narratives ($M = 29.44$), that girls' narratives ($M = 36.93$) were longer than boys' narratives ($M = 26.35$), and that narratives became increasingly elaborated with age (M’s for 7-, 11-, and 16-year-olds = 25.22, 30.64, and 39.06, respectively). There were no statistical interactions between these variables in the prediction of narrative length. To account for these differences in elaboration, the analysis of narrative elements was conducted with data expressed as proportions of the total number of clauses in a given narrative.

An Event Type $\times$ Age $\times$ Gender multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with the four types of narrative content (acts, reasons, conflicts, and consequences) as dependent variables revealed multivariate effects of event type, Wilks’ $\lambda = .49$, $\eta^2 = .51$, $p < .001$, and gender, Wilks’ $\lambda = .89$, $\eta^2 = .11$, $p < .05$, as well as an interaction between event type and age group, Wilks’ $\lambda = .80$, $\eta^2 = .11$, $p < .01$.

Although the omnibus analysis revealed a significant multivariate effect of gender, follow-up analyses of variance (ANOVAs) did not reveal any significant univariate effects, and thus this effect is not discussed further. Follow-up ANOVAs revealed effects of event type on references to acts, $F(1, 94) = 8.08$, $\eta^2 = .08$; reasons, $F(1, 94) = 18.64$, $\eta^2 = .17$; conflicts, $F(1, 94) = 78.31$, $\eta^2 = .45$; and consequences, $F(1, 94) = 16.68$, $\eta^2 = .15$ (all $p$s < .01). Whereas participants were more likely to elaborate on acts and reasons in help narratives than harm narratives, they described more conflicts and consequences in harm narratives than help narratives (see Table 1).

Importantly, the latter two effects were qualified by Event Type $\times$ Age Group interactions: for conflicts, $F(2, 94) = 3.98$, $\eta^2 = .08$, and for consequences, $F(2, 94) = 3.44$, $\eta^2 = .07$ (both $p$s < .05). Mean proportions are presented in Table 3. Although children of all ages referred more to conflicts in harm narratives than in help narratives, these differences were more pronounced among 16-year-olds. Furthermore, although 7- and 11-year-olds referred more to consequences of harm than of help, the effect of event type was nonsignificant for 16-year-olds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative elements$^a$</th>
<th>Act proportion (SE)</th>
<th>Reason proportion (SE)</th>
<th>Conflict proportion (SE)</th>
<th>Consequences proportion (SE)</th>
<th>Self-related insights$^b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts</td>
<td>.11 (.01)$^a$</td>
<td>.12 (.01)$^a$</td>
<td>.08 (.01)$^a$</td>
<td>.10 (.01)$^a$</td>
<td>.22 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>.13 (.01)$^b$</td>
<td>.19 (.01)$^b$</td>
<td>.01 (.00)$^b$</td>
<td>.06 (.01)$^b$</td>
<td>.26 (.04)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means in the same row are labeled with different subscripts when post hoc Bonferroni tests revealed significant differences at $p < .05$.

$^a$Values for references to acts, reasons, conflicts, and consequences are expressed as proportions of the total number of clauses in a given narrative. $^b$Values for self-related insights are expressed as proportions of the total number of narratives.

**Types of Harmful and Helpful Acts**

Analyses of the types of harmful and helpful acts were based on coding the presence or absence of references to material/concrete, psychological/emotional, and physical types of actions in each narrative. Participants could describe multiple categories of actions in the same narrative (e.g., defending someone who had been knocked down by a bully and then getting them a Band-Aid), and thus data were analyzed using an Event Type $\times$ Age $\times$ Gender MANOVA with each of the three types of actions as dependent variables. ANOVA-based procedures were used as this technique has been shown to be acceptable for analyzing this type of data (see Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001), and Bernoulli multilevel models revealed an identical pattern of significant results.

The MANOVA revealed multivariate effects of event type, Wilks’ $\lambda = .88$, $\eta^2 = .12$; age, Wilks’ $\lambda = .82$, $\eta^2 = .09$; and gender, Wilks’ $\lambda = .85$, $\eta^2 = .15$ (all $p$s < .01). Follow-up ANOVAs revealed effects of event type on references to material/concrete actions, $F(1, 94) = 8.28$, $\eta^2 = .08$, and psychological/emotional actions, $F(1, 94) = 10.39$, $\eta^2 = .10$ (both $p$s < .01). Whereas references to material/concrete types of actions were more common for help ($M = 0.52$) than for harm ($M = 0.33$), psychological/emotional types of actions were described more frequently in harm ($M = 0.70$) than help narratives ($M = 0.48$). In turn, references to physical forms of harm ($M = 0.15$) and help ($M = 0.11$) were equally frequent.

Follow-up ANOVAs revealed overall effects of age on references to psychological/emotional
Reasons for Engaging in Harmful and Helpful Behavior

Analyses were conducted to examine participants’ descriptions of five different types of reasons (external constraints, narrator’s perspective, other’s perspective, response to other’s action, unique relationship). To avoid confounding the relative emphasis on each type of reason with the overall number of reasons included in the narrative, each category of reasons was proportionalized by the total number of reasons in a given narrative. Some participants (n = 17) were excluded from this analysis because they failed to refer to at least one reason in each narrative.

An Event Type x Age x Gender MANOVA with the three types of consequences as dependent variables revealed no significant effects. Across both harm and help narratives, participants were largely focused on consequences for others (Ms = 0.72 and 0.80 for harm and help, respectively) rather than themselves (Ms = 0.24 and 0.16, respectively) or relationships (both Ms = 0.04).

Self-Related Insights

In addition to documenting the specific elements of children’s and adolescents’ narratives, we also examined the extent to which participants described gleaning self-related insights from their experiences of harming and helping others (coded dichotomously as present or absent for each narrative). An Event Type x Age x Gender ANOVA revealed main effects of age, F(2, 94) = 6.79, $\eta^2 = .13$, p < .01, and gender, F(1, 94) = 13.18, $\eta^2 = .12$, p < .001, as well as an Event Type x Age interaction, F(2, 94) = 3.36, $\eta^2 = .07$, p < .05. Post hoc tests revealed that, as expected, references to self-related insights were more frequent among 16-year-olds (M = 0.38) than 7-year-olds (M = 0.11), with

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Harm M proportion (SE)</th>
<th>Help M proportion (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External constraints</td>
<td>.12 (.03)</td>
<td>.02 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrator’s perspective</td>
<td>.63 (.04)</td>
<td>.12 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other’s perspective</td>
<td>.04 (.02)</td>
<td>.82 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to other’s action</td>
<td>.20 (.03)</td>
<td>.00 (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique relationship</td>
<td>.02 (.01)</td>
<td>.04 (.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means in the same row are labeled with different subscripts when post hoc Bonferroni tests revealed significant differences at $p < .05$. Values are expressed as proportions of the total number of reasons described in a given narrative.

Types of Consequences Resulting From Harmful and Helpful Behavior

Across all age groups, consequences of harm were described as overwhelmingly negative (> 99%) whereas consequences of help were largely positive (92%). Analyses were conducted to determine whether participants focused on consequences for themselves, others, or relationships. To avoid confounding the relative emphasis on each type of consequence with the total number of consequences included in the narrative, each category of consequences was proportionalized by the total number of consequences in a given narrative. Some participants (n = 36) were excluded from this analysis because they failed to refer to at least one consequence in each narrative. An Event Type x Age x Gender MANOVA with the three types of consequences as dependent variables revealed no significant effects. Across both harm and help narratives, participants were largely focused on consequences for others (Ms = 0.72 and 0.80 for harm and help, respectively) rather than themselves (Ms = 0.24 and 0.16, respectively) or relationships (both Ms = 0.04).
Although research into moral development has long focused on both prosocial and transgressive forms of moral action, recent exceptions (Kahn, 1992; Krettenauer & Johnston, 2011) have only partially contrasted youth’s thinking about these two types of behavior. Our results revealed a number of distinctions between narrators’ accounts of hurting and helping others that suggest meaningful asymmetries in their experiences of these two types of events. Although analyses revealed a few overall effects of gender, differences between narratives of hurting and helping were invariably consistent for boys and girls. In contrast, our findings did reveal unique age-related patterns for each type of event, providing new insights into the distinct ways in which children’s construals of their own helpful and harmful behavior evolve with age. Below, we highlight the novel patterns evident in our data, and elaborate on how these findings contribute to our understanding of how transgressive and prosocial experiences serve as distinctive contexts for the development of moral agency.

### Table 3

Age-Related Changes in the Differences Between Youth’s Accounts of Harming and Helping Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative elements</th>
<th>7-year-olds</th>
<th>11-year-olds</th>
<th>16-year-olds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harm</td>
<td>Help</td>
<td>Harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M proportion (SE)</td>
<td>M proportion (SE)</td>
<td>M proportion (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts</td>
<td>.07 (.01)&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.01 (.01)&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.06 (.01)&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td>.12 (.01)&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.05 (.01)&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.10 (.01)&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-related insights&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.17 (.07)</td>
<td>.05 (.07)</td>
<td>.22 (.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means in the same row are labeled with different subscripts when post hoc Bonferroni tests revealed significant simple effects of event type at p < .05.

<sup>a</sup>Values for references to consequences and conflicts are expressed as proportions of the total number of clauses in a given narrative. <sup>b</sup>Values for self-related insights are expressed as proportions of the total number of narratives.
Our study replicates these results with respect to children’s and adolescents’ experiences of harm; taken as a whole, this consistent pattern of findings suggests that experiences of harm provide opportunities for young people to construct understandings of both themselves and others as moral agents whose cognitions, motivations, and emotions give meaning to their actions (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). More importantly, our study also builds on this research by revealing an intriguing contrast with accounts of helping others. Whereas participants’ harm narratives maintained a dual focus on the internal experience of both self and other, help narratives were almost exclusively other focused. As compared to their accounts of harm, descriptions of reasons for helping others overwhelmingly emphasized others’ needs and perspectives (e.g., “He was trying to pick up his peanuts”; “She was feeling sad”; “She thought no one liked her”), as did references to the positive consequences of helping (e.g., “He felt happy”; “She passed the test”). Furthermore, these patterns were evident at all ages; even 7-year-olds rarely referred to self-focused or external reasons for helping (e.g., expectations of reciprocity, requests from authority figures) or consequences of helpful behavior (e.g., rewards). Notably, this finding stands in contrast to some research suggesting that young children reason about helping others in self-oriented and externalized ways (Eisenberg et al., in press).

What are the implications of these findings? Certainly, our results demonstrate that experiences of helping others are conducive to reflecting on others’ motivations, cognitions, and emotions. However, in contrast to experiences of harm, it is less clear that these events are linked to youth’s emphasis on their own internality. Although it is heartening that participants did not refer to hedonistic or self-centered motivations for helping others, they also largely omitted explicit references to their own other-oriented motivations (e.g., wanting to help their friend), cognitions (e.g., believing that their friend was in trouble), and emotions (e.g., feeling sorrow at seeing their friend’s distress). Similarly, they also rarely mentioned the positive emotional consequences for themselves that might result from helping others (e.g., feeling proud or happy). Thus, although it was clear from participants’ narratives that they experienced their helpful behavior in relatively other-oriented ways, their own roles as prosocial moral agents driven by their own goals, beliefs, and feelings tended to be deemphasized, especially in the younger age groups (we return to this point below).

Participants’ descriptions of conflicts between their own and others’ needs or perspectives were also in line with the dual focus on self and other in the context of harm and a more exclusive other-oriented focus in the context of help. Not surprisingly, these conflicts were quite salient in accounts of harm; narrators appeared to be cognizant of clashes between their own and others’ desires (e.g., “I went to go play basketball but Martin wanted to keep playing soccer with me”) and perspectives (e.g., “He thought I was calling him stupid but I wasn’t”) that increased the potential for their actions to result in others’ hurt feelings. In contrast, references to conflicts between their own needs and the needs of others (e.g., helping a friend to clean while expressing a dislike of cleaning) were almost entirely absent in participants’ accounts of helping others, representing only 1% of narrative clauses. There are at least two possible explanations for this striking finding. It may be that youth chose to narrate low-cost help events, that is, help events that did not implicate personal costs. Alternatively, in their narration of help events, children and adolescents may not have included any references to conflicts or personal costs because these elements were not as salient to how they recollected and made sense of their prosocial experiences. Although these two possibilities cannot be unequivocally disentangled in the present study, it is difficult to imagine why participants would uniformly nominate low-cost events when asked to discuss experiences that were meaningful to them. And indeed, the details they provided about their prosocial experiences suggested that youth did invest time, money, and effort when helping others, and sometimes even engaged in behaviors that could have negatively affected their reputation or caused them trouble with adult authority figures. Nevertheless, explicit references to such costs to self were largely left out of their accounts. Thus, even inasmuch as children and adolescents did make sacrifices to help others, in their recollections of these events, youth seemed to experience their own prosocial actions as largely positive in their outcomes.

This finding highlights a key distinction between the goals of the current study and those of research examining children’s and adolescents’ reasoning about hypothetical instances of helpful and harmful behavior. When young people are presented with hypothetical scenarios, conflicts between self and other are deliberately created and explicitly articulated (e.g., going to a fun party vs. spending time with a lonely friend; Eisenberg et al., in press; Smetana et al., 2014). Although that strategy provides
crucial information about children’s and adolescents’ reasons for endorsing decisions that prioritize their own or others’ needs, it cannot address whether and how they wrestle with such conflicts when asked to reflect back on their own morally laden actions. In contrast, our research is focused on how children and adolescents construct understandings of their own past behavior and the elements that are salient as they make sense of their own enacted deeds.

In sum, our data imply that experiences of help provide young people with unique opportunities to reflect on others’ needs and construct a sense of others’ agency. In contrast, harm experiences may be more conducive to wrestling with conflicts between one’s own and others’ needs or perspectives in the aftermath of the event. In this way, in terms of opportunities for moral development, our findings certainly underscore that experiences of harm and help are not simply “two sides of the same coin.”

Age-Related Changes in Accounts of Harm and Help

With regard to overall age-related trends, our results are in line with past research suggesting that youth’s narrative accounts become increasingly psychological and less concrete with age (e.g., Reese et al., 2011; Wainryb et al., 2005). For example, whereas younger children were more likely to describe physical forms of harm and help such as hitting or getting ice for an injury, with increasing age, both harmful and helpful actions more clearly implicated psychological and emotional factors such as trust (e.g., keeping vs. failing to keep a secret) and companionship (e.g., sharing space vs. seeking distance).

Turning to the novel questions addressed in the present study, our results also revealed two particular instances in which differences between participants’ accounts of harm and help were moderated by age, thus suggesting how transgressive and prosocial experiences may evolve in unique ways over childhood and adolescence. First, our findings revealed that participants’ emphasis on the consequences of harm and help became increasingly similar with age; whereas 7-year-olds referred to the consequences of harm substantially more than the consequences of help, 16-year-olds referred equally frequently to consequences across the two types of events. Bear in mind that at all ages, consequences focused on negative (in the case of harm) and positive (in the case of help) emotional and material implications of one’s actions for the other rather than oneself. Therefore, our findings with respect to age-related change suggest that although negative consequences of harm for the other are emphasized by youth of all ages (see also Wainryb et al., 2005), positive consequences of help for the other are relatively less salient to young children. This latter finding is consistent with Lourenço’s (1990) contention that younger children may not be as focused on the gains associated with prosocial behavior; however, because young children were not simultaneously focused on costs to themselves incurred by helping others, this theoretical account may not be entirely adequate in explaining our observed results. Alternatively, we propose that the behavioral indicators of the negative consequences of harmful behavior for others (e.g., crying, lashing out) may simply be easier to identify (and more consistently manifested) than those indicating positive consequences of helpful behavior for others (e.g., smiling, gratitude). Thus, with age, as young people become increasingly adept at interpreting others’ more subtle social cues, the positive effects of their helpful behavior on others may become more salient.

Our results also revealed an interesting age-related pattern with regard to participants’ tendency to draw broader self-relevant implications from their harmful and helpful actions. Specifically, adolescents were more likely than younger children to make references to self-evaluation, self-event connections, and the personal significance of their helpful actions. However, as predicted, they did not typically explore these self-relevant implications in the context of their harmful actions. This finding for experiences of prosociality is consistent with the literature suggesting that helping others may have particularly salient implications for adolescents, who are in the midst of exploring their moral identities (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). However, this study is the first to demonstrate that these age-related increases in adolescence are more evident for youth’s experiences of help than harm. It would be useful to extend our study by examining these processes in later adolescence and adulthood, when self-related insights (e.g., references to self-discrepancy or self-improvement) might become increasingly frequent in transgression narratives as well (e.g., Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006).

Our findings are especially interesting when considered alongside youth’s references to their own motivations, cognitions, and emotions in the context of the specific event. As noted above, adolescents (similar to younger children) did not typically emphasize their own perspectives when accounting for their helpful behavior. Considered in isolation,
this finding might be taken to mean that youth do not further their understandings of their own internal lives from their experiences of helping others. However, in light of the findings that some adolescents do describe self-relevant implications of their helpful actions, this conclusion does not adequately characterize teenagers’ experiences of prosociality. Consider the following example (edited for length where indicated):

She has depression problems and she didn’t have any friends in seventh grade—well she had friends but then they all like abandoned her or whatever. And I befriended her and . . . um she, she said, she had thoughts of suicide and she was cutting herself and all this crazy stuff and she was like “And now I don’t think I would be here if it wasn’t for you befriending me back then.” . . . And . . . she told me that I was like a really good example to her and stuff. (16-year-old girl)

Although this narrator emphasizes her friend’s needs (both in terms of her reasons for helping and the positive consequences of her helpful behavior), it is evident that she is also drawing self-relevant implications from her actions: that she is capable of making a significant difference in someone’s life and serving as an example to others. Thus, although their discussion of psychological experience might be largely other focused, this example illustrates how adolescents’ helping behavior might nevertheless provide a context for drawing broader or enduring self-related implications (see also Cox & McAdams, 2012; Soucie, Lawford, & Pratt, 2012). In contrast, this appears to be less the case among younger children, at least in the absence of adult support.

In contrast to help events, as noted above, children’s motivations and perspectives that ultimately accounted for their harmful actions constituted a defining feature of their narratives. However, even among adolescents, these references to internality were bracketed in a particular place and time, and not generally expressed in terms of broader lessons that could be learned about the self. Again, consider an example:

Umm . . . my friends, they have a car, and I wanted to go to lunch with them, but they wanted to take other people, but I always go to lunch with them. So I was kind of mad because they wouldn’t let me go and I had no one else to go with because everyone else already left. So they told me I couldn’t and I just kind of forced my way in to going with them and made them mad. (16-year-old boy)

In contrast to the help narrative above, this narrator’s action is described in reference to his goals and needs on a particular day. His own motivations and expectations are clearly expressed and account for his actions that clash with his friends’ desires and ultimately cause their anger. Nevertheless, he refrains from explicitly evaluating his actions or drawing connections between the event and his broader sense of self. Indeed, in this case the circumstances surrounding the event are even described as somewhat unusual (i.e., “I always go to lunch with them”) and not necessarily typical of his interactions with his friends. In this way, his references to his own internal experience serve to give sense to his behavior (in conjunction with an equal recognition of his friends’ desires and emotions), without suggesting that this action is necessarily an indicator of his broader characteristics. Taken together, these patterns across harm and help narratives suggest that adolescents may have opportunities to explore both their own and others’ psychological lives as they reflect on both types of events, albeit in nonparallel ways that have different implications for their understandings of moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a).

Limitations and Conclusions

In this study, participants were asked to select and narrate events in which they harmed and helped a friend. We cannot rule out the possibility that children and adolescents selected events that presented them in a positive light, although social desirability does not seem to provide an adequate explanation for the observed pattern of age and context differences (see also Wainryb et al., 2005). Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether these results will generalize across different types of harm and help experiences and across different relationships. For instance, future studies could examine whether costs to self are more salient in participants’ narratives when they are specifically asked to describe high- versus low-cost help events. It would also be useful to examine whether costs to self are more evident when children and adolescents describe helping in the context of relationships that are less intimate and caring, such as with peers who are not friends. Moreover, for ethical reasons, participants’ accounts of their harmful actions were always elicited first, followed by their
accounts of helping others. It is possible that this elicitation order may partially explain why help narratives were shorter than harm narratives. Nevertheless, when narrating the help event, youth of all ages extensively explored others’ needs and perspectives and adolescents also constructed self-related insights, suggesting that the fixed order did not curtail children’s exploration of the help experience. Finally, it should be noted that this study was based on a community sample of primarily European American children and adolescents; examining how these patterns might differ in other cultural contexts is a direction for future research. It would also be useful to complement this cross-sectional research with longitudinal designs that are conducive to examining trajectories of moral agency development.

In general, the results of the current study demonstrate that there is much to be gained from considering similarities and differences between children’s transgressive and prosocial experiences. Inasmuch as all youth will occasionally both hurt and help others in the course of their everyday lives, this research provides a useful complement to studies examining predictors of individual differences in children’s tendency to hurt or help others. Overall, the findings suggest that both types of morally laden events provide young people with opportunities to develop their understandings of self and other as moral agents with unique desires, perspectives, and characteristics, albeit in substantially different ways. Furthermore, the results suggest some intriguing ways in which accounts of hurting and helping others change differentially with age. These findings also provide some important clues about the role that socialization agents might play in promoting children’s moral understandings of self and others. In this respect, our study has the potential to inform research on developmentally appropriate ways to support children’s and adolescents’ moral development across a wide range of experiences.

References


