

Judging the recipients of social actions

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Abstract

There is substantial research on children's evaluations of transgressors, but less is known about the extent to which children view actions toward recipients as indicative of a recipient's personality or deserved outcomes. We examined the extent to which 3- to 5 year olds, relative to an adult comparison group, judged the recipients of negative behavior as bad people who deserve punishment and recipients of positive behavior as good people who deserve praise. Participants evaluated the recipients of positive and negative acts in both a social conventional domain and a moral domain. Overall, children demonstrated an asymmetrical judgment pattern: they perceived recipients of positive behavior as good people who deserve praise and recipients of negative behavior as not bad nor deserving punishment. Adults made more conservative dispositional judgments than children. These findings suggest an asymmetry in assigning credit or blame to the recipients of others' actions in a manner consistent with an overall positivity bias in person perception. Implications for children's reasoning about disposition and the potential intersection with moral development are discussed.

KEYWORDS

moral judgments, positivity bias, recipients, traits

1 | INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the preschool period, children make inferences about other people based on behavior or trait information (e.g., Heyman & Gelman, 1999; Landrum et al., 2016), but these judgments are not always accurate

(Heyman et al., 2016; Turiel, 2014). In some circumstances, young children view others positively irrespective of whether it is warranted by their behavior (e.g., Boseovski & Lee, 2006). In other contexts, children judge actor culpability based on the outcomes of a situation rather than the actor's intentions (Nelson, 1980; Zelazo et al., 1996). There is a large body of work on children's evaluations of actors in these social contexts (e.g., transgressors and prosocial actors; see Killen & Smetana, 2014), but less is known about the comparison between children's judgments of the recipients of negative versus positive behavior. Specifically, preschoolers may struggle to understand whether the recipient should share in the blame or praise of the actor. We investigated children's (3-, 4-, and 5 year olds) and adults' evaluative judgments of the recipients of positive behavior and the recipients of negative behavior as 'good' or 'bad' people. Further, we examined how the social context in which behavior occurred influenced trait attributions and evaluations of the goodness or badness of the acts themselves.

1.1 | The influence of valence on children's person perception

Children's judgments of recipient blame and praise may be related to global trait attribution tendencies, such as whether the behavior of several actors toward the recipient is positive or negative (i.e., consensus, DiVitto & McArthur, 1978). Indeed, a consensus among actors may be one cue to an observer that the recipient has traits that evoke the actors' behavior (Kelley, 1973). Although both adults and children consider frequency and consensus information in their judgments of others, children's evaluations of actors and recipients are prone to bias, particularly when the valence of behaviors is salient (i.e., positive or negative behavior). For example, 3- to 6 year olds in one study heard about an actor who behaved positively several times or one time toward the same recipient (Boseovski & Lee, 2006). With age, children were more likely to judge that the actor was 'nice' when they heard about several positive behaviors relative to just one instance of positive behavior. In contrast, when children heard about an actor who behaved negatively once or several times, they were less likely to use that information to make a matching trait attribution (i.e., 'mean') but predicted that the actor would behave negatively again. In a separate study, 3- to 6 year olds either witnessed a recipient as the target of several different actors' positive behaviors (e.g., sharing) or several different actors' negative behaviors (e.g., stealing, Boseovski & Lee, 2008). Children judged the recipient of positive behaviors to be 'nice,' but were less likely to generalize from a consensus of negative acts to make a negative recipient trait attribution.

Taken together, these findings indicate that valence may be very salient to children when there is little additional context for behavior. These baseline assumptions about recipients may influence the developmental trajectory of person perception as children and adults encounter a variety of positive and negative interpersonal outcomes (e.g., victims, beneficiaries). Despite the constancy of a single recipient across situations, an early tendency to view others positively (i.e., positivity bias, Boseovski, 2010) may buffer recipients of negative acts against negative judgments. Although children often associate positive acts as indicative of good people and negative acts as reflective of bad people (Arterberry et al., 2015; Surber, 1977), there is reason to suspect that a positivity bias strengthens positive inferences about actors who engage in positive or even neutral behavior. This tendency may explain why children associate moral behavior with other generally positive characteristics (e.g., Doebel & Koenig, 2013; Heyman & Dweck, 1998). Children who encounter a positive outcome (e.g., an individual that benefited from another person's action) may judge the recipient positively, even if the outcome was expected or conventional.

Research on the beneficence of transgressions is informative for understanding how children might view individuals who benefit from prosocial acts. By 4 years of age, children consider lying most acceptable when it benefits others and least acceptable when it harms others (Bussey, 1999; Heyman et al., 2009). This focus on altruism is replicated in studies examining the acceptability of cheating. By 5 years of age, cheating, like lying, increases in permissibility when others can benefit, and continues increasing as the number of beneficiaries increases (Zhao et al., 2019). Moreover, children are more willing to invest time and resources to benefit peers who benefit them

(Vaish et al., 2018), and prefer to maximize rewards for both themselves and others (Liu et al., 2019). These findings suggest that children may extend their positive view of prosocial acts to make global assumptions about recipients of positive behavior (Spielman, 2000). However, young children sometimes view actors who behave negatively altruistically (Jones & Thomson, 2001; Rholes & Ruble, 1984).

In the absence of information that the negative act was deserved (e.g., retaliation, Smetana et al., 1993), children may not hold globally negative views of recipients. In fact, a positivity bias (Boseovski, 2010) may influence baseline assumptions such that children may even view these recipients as undeserving victims. From an early age, children demonstrate concern for a victim's welfare and experience of negative emotions (e.g., Smetana et al., 2003). For example, 4- to 6 year olds provide fewer negative evaluations of victims than of aggressors (Monks et al., 2003). Preschoolers understand what it means to be a 'victim' in the context of peer relationships and can also evaluate how recipients of negative acts feel as a result of their experiences (Smetana et al., 2003; Vlachou et al., 2011). Despite this awareness, young children sometimes perceive victims, or recipients of negative acts, to be undesirable friends because they demonstrate lower levels of cooperativity and other prosocial behaviors (Egan & Perry, 1998). Moreover, adolescents and adults sometimes engage in victim blaming (e.g., Feigenson et al., 1997). These negative perceptions of recipients of negative acts manifest when adults perceive that recipients of negative acts are to blame for their own misfortune because they are irresponsible (e.g., Adams-Price et al., 2004) or have otherwise 'invited' the harm done against them (Cortina et al., 2018). In the absence of either real or perceived negligence (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2020), it is unclear how young children's inferences about the recipients of negative behavior compare to inferences about the recipients of positive behavior. Children may attend selectively to frequency information to evaluate recipients when valence is salient (e.g., Boseovski & Lee, 2008).

1.2 | Context-dependent judgments of behavior

Children also may pay particular attention to information that distinguishes between recipients who experience moral transgressions and those who merely experience violated conventions. Preschoolers recognize the difference between behaviors that violate moral principles and are universally wrong (e.g., physical harm toward another person), and behaviors that concern conventional rules created by authority figures or social consensus (e.g., how to dress; Helwig et al., 1990; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 1978, 1983). Children may use these differences in the type of violating behavior to evaluate the dispositions of recipients as well as the perpetrators of these violations. In a similar manner, children may use rule-following to make differentiated attributions for the recipients and perpetrators of different types of behaviors. It is possible that these attributions differ within social domains and that they are driven by more general developmental changes associated with valence (e.g., positivity bias).

In contrast to negative behaviors that might call for the assignment of punishment, children may not need to employ coordination to evaluate instances of rule-following or prosocial behavior in which a recipient benefits from the circumstance. In general, 3- to 5 year olds expect that a small group of individuals will follow conventional rules even when they have desires that conflict with rules (e.g., desire to store one's artwork elsewhere when the rule is to put it in one's locker), and some children also anticipate that an individual with a conflicting desire will ultimately follow the rules (Bernard et al., 2016). These expected behaviors also may be viewed as prosocial acts for the group in a conventional domain when an alternative would result in reprimand or punishment. In the present study, recipients of prosocial acts or of the outcome of general rule-following may be perceived as unremarkable based on general expectations for positive rather than negative behaviors to occur. Another possibility is that children view these recipients as equally deserving of praise simply because they did not commit a transgression, received a benefit, and therefore, do not challenge children's tendency to view others positively (Boseovski, 2010).

1.3 | Present study

We investigated 3- to 5 year olds' perceptions of recipients of positive and negative acts relative to the perceptions of an adult comparison group. Specifically, we examined perceptions of the recipients of negative acts that resulted in negative outcomes, as well as the recipients of positive acts that resulted in positive outcomes. The preschool period was of particular interest because, on the one hand, it is characterized by improved understanding of intentionality and increased sensitivity to peers' social status among 5 year olds relative to 3- or 4 year olds (Heller & Berndt, 1981; Perren & Alsaker, 2006). On the other hand, this period is characterized by person perception biases and continued difficulty with coordinating information about actors, recipients, and context, which may interfere with accurate person judgments (Bernard et al., 2016; Boseovski, 2010; Boseovski & Lee, 2008).

Participants were asked whether they thought the recipient should receive praise or punishment for being a recipient of a positive or negative act (i.e., recipient outcome judgment) and whether they thought the recipient was a good or bad person as a result of the way others acted toward him or her (i.e., recipient trait attribution). Positive moral behaviors are those that adhere to moral imperatives and result in a direct benefit to the recipient of the act (e.g., receiving a cookie because another child shares with you) whereas negative moral behaviors are those that violate moral imperatives and thereby result in harm or suffering to the victim (e.g., getting hair pulled by another child). Conversely, positive conventional behaviors are conceptualized as those that are generally expected behaviors (i.e., people expect conventions to be followed) resulting in a second-order benefit to others (e.g., getting to read because another child is being quiet) whereas negative conventional behaviors refer to second-order moral violations (i.e., littering, e.g., is a conventional issue but if violating it results in someone stepping in gum, that is physical property damage). We predicted that children would distinguish between the acts and the recipients such that children would make positive trait attributions for both recipients of both types of acts based on evidence of a positivity bias (Boseovski, 2010) and children's difficulty with consensus information (Boseovski & Lee, 2006, 2008), but would accurately judge negative acts negatively and prosocial acts positively (i.e., children would comprehend whether actions were 'good' or 'bad'). We also predicted that children might overgeneralize the praiseworthiness of prosocial acts such that their trait attributions for recipients of positive acts would be more positive than those of recipients of negative acts.

In addition to these comparisons between children's evaluations of recipients of positive versus negative acts, we examined whether the domain of behavior (i.e., a social conventional or moral act) influenced children's trait attributions of recipients of positive and negative acts. Based on children's early distinction between moral and social conventional transgressions, we expected that children would be sensitive to moral principles such that they would judge immoral actions to be more wrong than negative social conventional actions but not necessarily indicative of negative recipient attributes.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

Seventy-two preschool-age children (30 girls) participated in this study. There were 24 3 year olds ($M = 41.61$ months, range 36–47), 24 4 year olds ($M = 51.92$ months, range 48–59), and 24 5 year olds ($M = 63.13$ months, range 60–68). Sixty-one of the children were White, six were Black, and five were 'Other.' Children were recruited from the university's child development center and from local childcare centers. In addition, 42 adults (35 female) participated in this study. Adults ranged in age from 20 years to 49 years ($M = 24$ years). Thirty-nine adults were White, two were Black, and one was 'Other.' Adults were recruited from the university community, including many undergraduate students ($n = 33$). Adult participants or children's parents provided consent and children gave verbal assent for participation. All participants completed a 15-min testing session.

2.2 | Materials

The scenes that made up each trial were created using Adobe Animate (an animation software program) and resembled still shots from a cartoon (see Figure 1, e.g.). The scenes were printed and laminated so that they could be presented live to participants during a face-to-face interaction. Each scene featured two characters, a child actor and recipient, and an experimenter narrated the interaction between them. Gender, skin color, and hair color of characters were randomly selected so that across trials participants were exposed to variety of characters to minimize any influence these factors may have on character and act judgments.

2.3 | Study design

The study had three independent variables: the age of the participant (3 year olds, 4 year olds, 5 year olds, and adults), the valence of the target act (positive or negative), and the social domain of the target act (moral or conventional). Age was a between-subjects variable and valence and domain were within-subjects variables. When crossed, valence and domain resulted in four separate types of trials: positive moral, positive conventional, negative moral, and negative conventional. Each trial consisted of three scenes. Participants completed one of each trial type for a total of four trials. See Figure 1.

2.4 | Procedure

Participants were tested individually, either in a quiet space at their preschool like a research room, library, or hallway (children) or in a room on campus or in their homes (adults). To familiarize participants with the structure of the task and with the experimenter, each testing session began with a brief warm-up trial. The experimenter sat across from the participant at a table and presented an image depicting two characters playing with different toys in a sandbox. The experimenter described the image and asked the participant a question about it (e.g., 'Look, Jeff is playing with a bucket in the sandbox. What is Ellen playing with?').

The warm-up trial was followed by four test trials: a positive moral trial, a positive conventional trial, a negative moral trial, and a negative conventional trial. Trials were presented in a counterbalanced order. Each test trial consisted of three scenes. The order of the scenes within a trial was randomized for each participant. Each scene depicted an actor committing an act toward a recipient. Importantly, each scene within a trial featured the same recipient but a different actor. For example, for the negative moral trial, Scene 1 showed an actor pulling Rachel's hair, Scene 2 showed an actor pushing Rachel down, and Scene 3 showed an actor damaging Rachel's toy. Consequently, in this trial Rachel was the recipient of three separate negative moral acts from three separate actors (as depicted in Figure 1). Negative moral and negative conventional trials featured transgressions such that the recipient was always the victim of the acts. Positive moral and positive conventional trials featured prosocial acts such that the recipient was always the beneficiary of the acts.

Following each scene, participants answered two questions. First, they completed a comprehension check to establish whether they viewed the act depicted in the scene as good or bad (e.g., 'Was it good/bad for Rachel to have her hair pulled? A little good/bad or a lot?'). Second, they made a critical judgment about what outcome the recipient should receive (i.e., the recipient outcome judgment). Specifically, they judged whether the recipient should be praised or punished and whether they deserved a little or a lot of praise/punishment (e.g., 'Should Rachel be praised/punished for having her hair pulled? A little praise/punishment or a lot?'). To ensure understanding, children received a brief description of praise 'like being told good job' or punishment 'like getting in trouble.' Scenes 2 and 3 unfolded similarly.


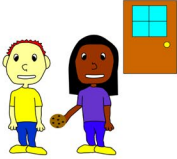
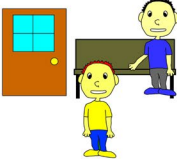
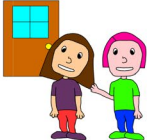
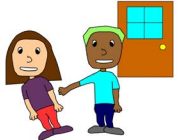
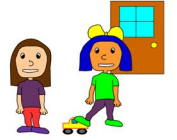

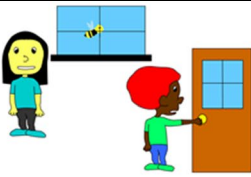

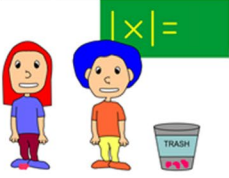
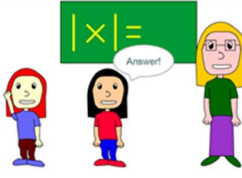

| | Scene 1 | Scene 2 | Scene 3 |
|----------------------------|--|--|---|
| Positive Moral |  <p><u>Helping</u> Ben is able to lift the box of soccer balls because another kid is helping him.</p> |  <p><u>Sharing</u> Ben gets a cookie because another kid shares with him.</p> |  <p><u>Sharing</u> Ben gets to sit on the bench because another kid shares a seat with him.</p> |
| Negative Moral |  <p><u>Pulling hair</u> Bennett is getting her hair pulled by another child.</p> |  <p><u>Pushing</u> Bennett is being pushed by another child.</p> |  <p><u>Property damage</u> Bennett is having her toy broken because another kid is stepping on it.</p> |
| Positive Convention |  <p><u>Being quiet</u> Wendy gets to read her favorite book because another kid is being quiet.</p> |  <p><u>Closing the door</u> Wendy does not get stung by a bee because another kid closed the door.</p> |  <p><u>Washing hands</u> Wendy gets to eat clean cherries because another kid washed his hands.</p> |
| Negative Convention |  <p><u>Littering</u> Sally steps on another kid's gum because they did not put it in the trash can.</p> |  <p><u>Interrupting</u> Sally gets interrupted because another kid doesn't wait their turn to talk.</p> |  <p><u>Cutting in Line</u> Sally has to wait longer to get her ice cream because another kid cut in front of her.</p> |

FIGURE 1 Design schematic with sample scenes. Participants received four trials (each combination of valence and domain). Each trial consisted of three scenes

Following Scene 3, the experimenter showed participants a summary slide with an image of the recipient alongside images of the acts committed in each scene. The experimenter used this slide to remind participants about the things that had happened to the recipient. To conclude the trial, participants were then asked to make a final, overall judgment about the recipient (i.e., the recipient trait attribution). For example, the experimenter would say 'Remember when Rachel had her hair pulled, was pushed, and got her toy stepped on? Is Rachel a good/bad person for having these things done to her? A little good/bad or a lot?' The remaining trials unfolded similarly; participants witnessed acts against a recipient and answered questions about the acts and about the recipient. After completing the final trial, child participants received a colorful sticker and adults were thanked for their participation. Undergraduate students also had the option of receiving a small amount of course credit for participating in the study; older adults did not have an option to receive course credit as they were not enrolled in undergraduate courses at the university, but they were thanked for their participation.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Comprehension check, scoring, and scene-by-scene comparisons

Following each scene, participants made two main judgments. First, they judged whether it was good or bad to be the recipient of such an act. This judgment served as a comprehension check to ensure that participants understood the nature of the act depicted in each scene. Overall, we found that 642 of 684 (94%) positive acts were appropriately judged as good and that 597 of 684 (87%) negative acts were appropriately judged as bad. All participants were included in the primary analyses, no matter their performance on the comprehension check.

Second, participants judged whether the recipient was deserving of praise or punishment for having received the act and, as a follow-up, whether a little or a lot of praise/punishment was deserved. Their responses to these questions were then combined into a single score that could range from 0 to 2. A score of zero indicated the act was judged as 'not' deserving of praise/punishment, a score of one meant the act was judged as deserving 'a little' praise/punishment, and a score of two meant the act was judged deserving 'a lot' of praise/punishment. Note that because the scales for praise and punishment were the same, direct comparisons between the amount of praise versus punishment assigned were possible.

Finally, we assessed whether participants tended to provide similar praise/punishment judgments for each of the scenes within a trial. We found that for each trial type, participants assigned similar amounts of praise or punishment to all three scenes, *ps* ranging from .20 to .84. In fact, each individual age group independently displayed this pattern, *ps* ranging from .20 to .83. For the central analyses, these scene judgments were averaged to create a single, overall trial score. See Table 1 for means and SDs for each scene and overall.

3.2 | Recipient outcome judgment (praise/punishment)

Overall, being the recipient of a positive act was judged as deserving 'a little' or 'a lot' of praise on 65% of scenes (445/684) with an overall, per-trial average of 1.12 (out of 2) whereas being the recipient of a negative act judged as deserving 'a little' or 'a lot' of punishment on only 34% of scenes (235/684) with an overall, per-trial average of .58 (out of 2). To compare these recipient outcome judgments across trial type, we used a 4 (age) by 2 (domain) by 2 (valence) mixed factorial ANOVA. We found a main effect of valence, $F(1, 110) = 94.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .46$, and a main effect of age, $F(3, 110) = 91.77, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .72$. We also found significant two-way interactions between valence and age, $F(3, 110) = 9.33, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .20$, and between valence and domain, $F(3, 110) = 4.76, p = .031, \eta_p^2 = .04$.

TABLE 1 Means and SDs of praise and punishment for each scene by age and trial type

| | | 3's | 4's | 5's | Adults |
|-----------------------|---------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Positive moral | Scene 1 | 1.78 (.52) | 1.64 (.64) | 1.58 (.72) | .26 (.50) |
| | Scene 2 | 1.65 (.65) | 1.72 (.54) | 1.75 (.53) | .17 (.44) |
| | Scene 3 | 1.65 (.57) | 1.64 (.64) | 1.71 (.55) | .31 (.60) |
| | Overall | 1.70 (.47) | 1.67 (.52) | 1.68 (.53) | .25 (.42) |
| Negative moral | Scene 1 | 1.04 (.88) | 1.04 (.89) | .63 (.92) | 0 (0) |
| | Scene 2 | 1.17 (.94) | 1.04 (.89) | .46 (.78) | 0 (0) |
| | Scene 3 | .83 (.83) | 1.12 (.93) | .50 (.78) | 0 (0) |
| | Overall | 1.01 (.70) | 1.07 (.79) | .53 (.64) | 0 (0) |
| Positive conventional | Scene 1 | 1.78 (.52) | 1.48 (.82) | 1.71 (.62) | .26 (.54) |
| | Scene 2 | 1.74 (.45) | 1.44 (.77) | 1.67 (.70) | .14 (.35) |
| | Scene 3 | 1.65 (.49) | 1.32 (.85) | 1.58 (.72) | .24 (.43) |
| | Overall | 1.72 (.37) | 1.41 (.75) | 1.65 (.55) | .21 (.28) |
| Negative conventional | Scene 1 | 1.09 (.85) | 1.12 (.93) | .79 (.93) | 0 (0) |
| | Scene 2 | 1.35 (.83) | .96 (.93) | .63 (.88) | 0 (0) |
| | Scene 3 | 1.17 (.94) | 1.00 (.96) | .50 (.83) | .05 (.31) |
| | Overall | 1.20 (.78) | 1.03 (.83) | .64 (.69) | .02 (.10) |

The main effects of valence and age are best understood through their interaction. For positive acts, adults ($M = .23$, $SD = .35$) assigned recipients of positive acts less praise than did 3-, 4-, or 5 year olds ($M_s > 1.54$, $SD_s > .42$, $ps < .001$). Further, 3-, 4-, and 5 year olds did not differ in their assignment of praise, $ps > .15$. For negative acts, adults ($M = .01$, $SD = .05$) assigned less punishment to recipients of negative acts than did 3-, 4-, or 5 year olds ($ps < .01$). Further, 5 year olds ($M = .59$, $SD = .67$) assigned less punishment to recipients of negative acts compared to 3- ($M = 1.11$, $SD = .74$) and 4 year olds ($M = 1.05$, $SD = .81$). Three- and 4 year olds' assignment of punishment did not differ, $p = .695$. Overall, judgments of whether recipients of negative acts deserved punishment were lower for adults than for children and, among children, were lower for 5 year olds than for 3- and 4 year olds (see Figure 2) whereas judgments of whether recipients of positive acts deserved praise did not differ among 3-, 4-, and 5 year olds but were lower for adults.

For the valence by domain interaction, the difference between responses to positive ($M = 1.15$, $SD = .84$) and negative ($M = .55$, $SD = .73$) moral acts was greater than the difference between responses to positive ($M = 1.08$, $SD = .83$) and negative ($M = .61$, $SD = .78$) conventional acts.

3.3 | Recipient trait attribution

After having seen and judged the acts in each individual scene, participants were asked to make a final, overall trait attribution judgment about the recipient. Scoring for this judgment followed the earlier scoring method of 0, 1, or 2. Overall, recipients of positive acts were judged positively, as being 'a little' or 'a lot' good, on 85% of trials (193/228) whereas recipients of negative acts were judged negatively, as being 'a little' or 'a lot' bad, on only 24% of trials (54/228). To assess the pattern of recipient trait attributions by trial type, we again used a 4 (age) by 2 (domain) by 2 (valence) mixed factorial ANOVA. We found a main effect of valence, $F(1, 110) = 201.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .65$, and a main effect of age, $F(3, 110) = 21.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .37$. We also found significant two-way interactions

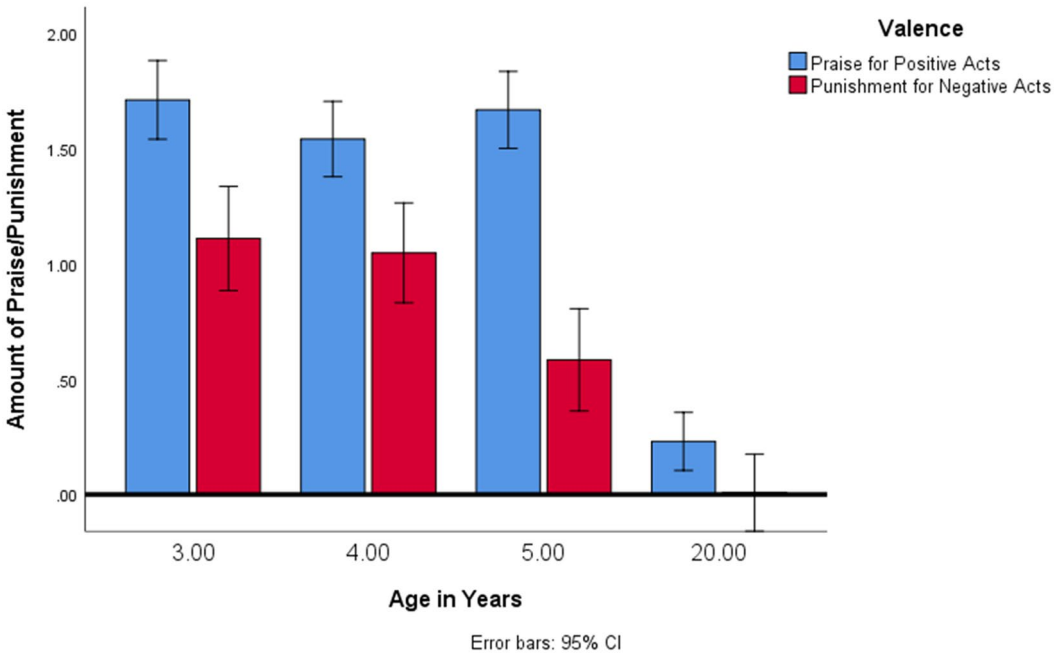


FIGURE 2 The interaction between valence and age when judging how much praise the recipients of positive acts deserve and how much punishment the recipients of negative acts deserve. ‘Yes, a lot’ = 2, ‘Yes, a little’ = 1, and ‘No’ = 0

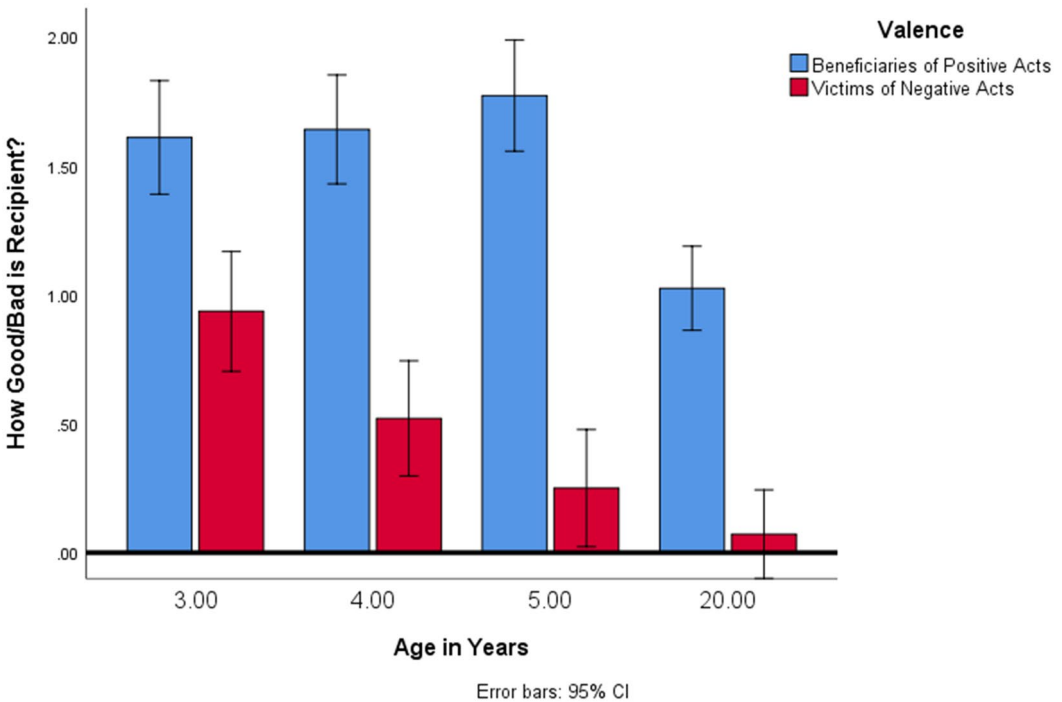


FIGURE 3 The interaction between valence and age when making trait attributions about the recipients of positive acts (i.e., they are ‘a lot’ good) and the recipients of negative acts (they are not bad). ‘Yes, a lot’ = 2, ‘Yes, a little’ = 1, and ‘No’ = 0

between valence and age, $F(3, 110) = 5.01, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .12$, and between valence and domain, $F(3, 110) = 6.82, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .06$.

The main effects of valence and age are again best understood through their interaction. Adults ($M = 1.02, SD = .61$) judged recipients of positive acts less positively than did 3-, 4-, or 5 year olds ($M_s > 1.60, SD_s > .36, ps < .001$). Further, 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds' judgments of recipients of positive acts did not differ. For judgments of recipients of negative acts, 3 year olds ($M = .93, SD = .79$) judged recipients of negative acts more negatively than all other age groups ($ps < .02$) and 4 year olds ($M = .52, SD = .73$) judged recipients of negative acts more negatively than 5 year olds ($M = .25, SD = .53$), $p = .07$, and adults ($M = .07, SD = .21$), $p = .002$. The judgments of 5 year olds and adults' judgments of recipients of negative acts did not differ ($p = .27$). See Figure 3.

For the valence by domain interaction, recipients of positive moral acts ($M = 1.53, SD = .67$) were judged more positively than the recipients of positive conventional acts ($M = 1.34, SD = .81$) ($p = .019$) whereas the recipients of negative moral acts ($M = .34, SD = .69$) were not judged differently compared to the recipients of negative conventional acts ($M = .42, SD = .76$) ($p = .218$). See Figure 3.

4 | DISCUSSION

The focus of the present study was preschoolers' perceptions of the recipients of positive versus negative acts rather than children's perceptions of actors. Children displayed notable asymmetry in assigning credit or blame to the recipients of others' actions in a manner consistent with an overall positivity bias in person perception (Boseovski, 2010, 2012). Despite the lack of context regarding accountability or cause, children believed that the recipients of positive acts should receive at least some praise, but developmental differences were more pronounced with regard to the recipients of negative acts. Three- and 4 year olds were surprisingly likely to indicate that these recipients of negative acts deserved at least a little punishment. This endorsement of punishment decreased with age and 5 year olds demonstrated a particularly distinct difference in rates of praise versus punishment between recipients.

This difference between praise and punishment allocation aligned with children's overall trait attributions of these recipients: recipients of positive acts were judged to be good people, but again a developmental decrease emerged with respect to labeling recipients of negative acts as bad people. In addition, children's and adults' sensitivity to valence was amplified by domain: recipients of moral acts were judged more positively than recipients of conventional acts, but recipients of negative acts were judged equally across domains. These findings may offer new insight into a possible connection between developmental patterns in trait attribution and children's moral reasoning.

Consistent with our predictions, children did not view recipients of negative behavior as 'bad' people who deserve punishment. Preschoolers in this study recognized that these recipients are not necessarily blameworthy or 'bad' for the negative outcomes that they experience. This dissociation between children's trait attributions and children's judgment about the act as a 'bad' act suggests that even in circumstances where children focus on the outcome of a situation, that focus may influence perceptions of the actor more than the recipient. However, 3 year olds (and to some extent 4 year olds) demonstrated more willingness to endorse punishment for recipients of negative behavior and were more likely than older children and adults to judge these recipients to be bad people. We discuss two possible explanations for this developmental pattern of results.

One possibility is that preschoolers used a form of outcome-based reasoning to form impressions of recipients, a focus not altogether captured in previous discussions of intention-outcome reasoning (see Mulvey et al., 2020). Children may have matched the outcome of each scene to the actor rather than to the recipient and used this strategy to conclude that the recipient does not deserve blame. In this study, such a judgment is reasonable given a lack of information that would suggest the recipient was the target of retaliatory aggression or otherwise

'deserved' negative behavior. This finding is somewhat surprising given that it is consistent with developmental trends present in older children rather than preschoolers (e.g., Schleifer et al., 1983).

In fact, older children may be able to rely on more advanced social cognitive abilities associated with reasoning about transgressions, blame, and victims whereas these abilities are undergoing rapid development during the preschool period (e.g., theory of mind, Astington, 2004; Killen et al., 2011; Young et al., 2007). During earlier periods of ToM development, children are more likely to make negative attributions toward accidental transgressors (Killen et al., 2011; Lapan & Boseovski, 2015). Likewise, development in executive function typically correlates with developing moral judgments (Caporaso et al., 2019; Cottone et al., 2007; Vera-Estay et al., 2015, 2016). Although these abilities were not measured in the present study, even preschoolers are capable of the reasoning required to match outcome to agent in a social context (e.g., Cohen et al., 1981; Hickling & Wellman, 2001; Miller & Aloise-Young, 2018). In the present study, children only received information about the acts carried out by each actor against a recipient, which may lend itself to assumptions about the actor as the primary 'responsible' agent.

Notably, there was an age-related decrease in negative perceptions of these recipients: 3- and 4-year olds were more likely than older children to endorse some punishment for them, and 3-year olds held the most negative trait attributions for these individuals. This pattern is consistent with 3-year olds' less sophisticated understanding of appropriate punishment relative to older preschoolers (e.g., Zelazo et al., 1996) as well as evidence that a positivity bias in person perception strengthens across early childhood (Boseovski, 2010). Children's inability to extend actor-outcome reasoning past an initial judgment of blame, in combination with increasingly positive views of other people, may explain why preschoolers endorse victims as more favorable than peer aggressors in other social contexts (e.g., Monks et al., 2003).

Another possible explanation for this developmental pattern of judgment may be related to children's use of frequency information. In the present study, children did not rely on the frequency of negative acts from three separate actors to make a trait inference about the recipient or to support punishment for the recipient. This finding is consistent with previous research in which preschoolers failed to use several instances of negative behavior to make attributions for recipients (Boseovski & Lee, 2008). In fact, even when older preschoolers use consensus information to make appropriate behavioral predictions, they continue to view others as 'nice' people (Boseovski & Lee, 2008). Children in the present study did not receive any trait-related information about actors or recipients that could have supported a positive judgment. However, 5-year olds and, to a lesser degree 4-year olds, notably did not default to the frequency of negative acts available to make an inference about the recipient's character despite the recipient's constancy across several trials. This pattern is consistent with the projected increase in positive views of others as children transition from early to middle childhood (Boseovski, 2010).

Given this evidence that a positivity bias may influence at least two interpretations of these findings, it is important to consider a new connection between children's person perception judgments and moral reasoning. Indeed, the pattern of results from the present study may reflect an early developmental shift in children's baseline expectations regarding other people and their behavior. Whereas infants and toddlers display selective attention toward negative information (see Vaish et al., 2008), the transition to the preschool period may be developmentally characterized by increasingly positive views of others that are bolstered by increasingly sophisticated moral reasoning.

Based on our suggestion that children's reasoning about recipients was influenced by a positivity bias in the present study, it is perhaps unsurprising that they made positive trait attributions for recipients of positive acts. Children's motivation to use outcome information to support positive views of these recipients may be driven by an implicit overgeneralization of positive information. This key difference in children's use of outcome information to judge recipients of positive versus negative acts offers additional support for the influence of a positivity bias on children's judgments of recipients in this study. This pattern also is consistent with growing evidence that a positivity bias is an important influence on children's person perception across a variety of contexts (e.g., Boseovski, 2012; Donohue et al., 2017; Stipek & Daniels, 1990), some with moral implications (e.g., Sato & Wakebe, 2014). Indeed, children sometimes overextend information about an individual's positive traits to infer

additional positive traits (Fusaro et al., 2011; Stipek & Daniels, 1990). Children in the present study provided stronger positive global trait attributions for recipients of positive acts in the moral domain relative to recipients of positive acts in the social conventional domain, consistent with the idea that children may associate morality with general 'goodness' (Heyman & Dweck, 1998). It should be noted that children also judged all acts (i.e., positive and negative) in the moral domain to be more extreme than acts in the social conventional domain, despite the potential for negative conventional acts to involve second-order harm.

The pattern of results with 3 year olds may best illustrate developmental change at the intersection of trends in a positivity bias and in moral reasoning. These children had difficulty understanding whether punishment would be appropriate for the recipients of negative acts. Children are sensitive to the plight of victims from an early age (e.g., Smetana et al., 2003) and by age 3, view both moral and social conventional transgressions to be wrong (Smetana, 1985). However, these young children may have interpreted this recipient as a target of retaliation, which can be more normative at this age (Graham & Hoehn, 1995; Tremblay, 2010). Specifically, young children judge retaliators more favorably than victims (Smetana et al., 2003), particularly if they themselves are aggressive (Gasser et al., 2012). In contrast, 5 year olds presented the least negative judgments for these recipients of negative acts. This age-related change is consistent with increasingly positive views in person perception as well as children's more sophisticated reasoning about the impact of outcomes on recipients (e.g., Paulus et al., 2019) and complexity of judging acts as moral or not (e.g., Jambon & Smetana, 2013).

In addition, adults in the present study did not 'blame' the recipient for the harm done against them, in contrast to some previous research regarding victimization (e.g., Feigenson et al., 1997). These adults also were hesitant to generalize a dispositional attribution for the recipient based on the recipient's negative interpersonal interactions. In fact, adults were more cautious not to overgeneralize or inflate positive views of recipients of positive acts, which casts uncertainty on the developmental trajectory of children's reasoning about these individuals. Overall, adults demonstrate more complexity in their differentiation between various types of positive traits whereas children sometimes treat all positive traits as similar to one another (e.g., Heller & Berndt, 1981). Perhaps adults in the present study perceived information about being a recipient rather than an actor as less helpful in making a dispositional attribution whereas children were less likely to distinguish between these levels of agency.

An additional possibility is that adults may have generated other types of dispositional assumptions about the recipients of positive acts, and particularly in contrast to the recipients of negative acts. For example, information in this study may have encouraged adults to view recipients of negative acts favorably out of pity or think more deeply about their circumstances as a function of the frequency of acts they experienced. In contrast, adults may have felt that there was little context to explain why the recipients of positive acts had been targeted as the recipients. Although results from the current study cannot confirm this strategy in adults' reasoning about these two types of recipients, prior research indicates that adults demonstrate both a negativity and positivity bias depending on the context and whether they are asked to judge themselves or other people (see Mezulis et al., 2006; Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

These various possibilities make it clear that additional work is needed to better understand how adults reason about recipients. For example, participants in our study evaluated scenes that featured child characters. So, whereas child participants made inferences about peers, adults did not. It is possible that adults would reason differently if asked to assess an interaction between adult characters. Further, our adult sample ranged in age from 20 to 49 years old. It is possible that reasoning about trait attributions could vary even among adults. For example, adults who have more experience interacting with children (e.g., parents or teachers) could make different inferences about why an individual was the recipient of another's positive or negative actions and whether that was at all informative about a recipient's traits. Finally, we did not offer participants the option to make a recipient trait attribution in an open-ended format. Indeed, participants were not asked to justify their trait attributions of the recipient or their outcome judgments, which limits the inferences that can be made regarding similarities and differences between the child and adult response patterns. Together, these shortcomings suggest that there is

more to learn about how adults view the recipients of positive and negative actions and that the current results are best interpreted cautiously, as a first step in this process.

Future research is also needed to explore the extent to which young children employ adult-like social reasoning in their judgments of recipients of positive acts in particular. It may be that an early positivity bias in person perception and children's basic understanding of prosocial behavior take precedence in early trait attribution judgments but set the stage for these social considerations to develop during the transition from the preschool period to middle childhood. Further, adults demonstrate a weaker positivity bias than young children on average and may need more evidence than what was available in the current study to make such positive dispositional inferences for a target character (see Mezulis et al., 2006).

These potential attribution patterns also have implications for children's peer relationships. Another future direction for research is to examine whether developmental patterns in attribution inform how young children perceive victims of bullying. The present study suggests that young children perceive recipients of negative behavior differently across development. Specifically, 3- and 4 year olds were likely to indicate that recipients of negative acts deserved at least a little punishment. This endorsement of punishment decreased with age, with 5 year olds demonstrating a distinct difference in rates of praise versus punishment for recipients of negative acts. This information could be important for refining bullying prevention programs that target preschoolers (Perren & Alsaker, 2006) and for which a key principle is to train bystanders to intervene on behalf of victims (e.g., Salmivalli et al., 2009). By focusing either initially or primarily on outcomes, younger children may be susceptible to misinterpreting a social context or dynamic. Training them to consider the social context more fully might increase the chances that they immediately and accurately interpret the events they witness—a first step in knowing whether to intervene. Likewise, it is important to understand how young children perceive the recipients of positive behavior, as children may be prone to overgeneralize the positive qualities of these individuals (Boseovski, 2010) at the expense of realistic or balanced views of their peers. The reasons for receiving another's good will are not always known and may vary (e.g., an agent may act positively for personal gain, because they fear the recipient, or because the recipient deserves it), making it a challenge to use one person's actions to make attributions about someone else. Moreover, attribution of a single positive quality, such as general niceness, may not translate to other positive qualities.

That said, there is evidence suggesting that children may be developing their intuitions in this regard. For example, even young children may already have sufficient social experience to make assumptions about sociometric status and reputation based on how others behave toward peers even at an early age (e.g., Perren & Alsaker, 2006). A similar early understanding of social status may prompt preschoolers to assume that individuals who are targeted with a high frequency of positive behaviors are either exceptionally nice peers who are well liked or with whom other children want to establish positive relationships. Children's sociometric ratings of popular peers tend to be highest for those peers who engage in prosocial behavior (Rubin et al., 2006), and children adjust their own prosocial behavior based on the status of the person with whom they interact (e.g., Guinote et al., 2014). In addition, preschoolers already are aware of public 'face' (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2012) and reputation management (e.g., Engelmann et al., 2013; Silver & Shaw, 2018). Children in the present study may have used this understanding of social dynamics to assume that recipients of positive acts were deserving of praise because these individuals were previously prosocial actors themselves who were targeted as recipients for positive 'repayment.'

Taken together, findings from the current study suggest that children use similar reasoning when they evaluate both actors and the recipients of actors' behavior—children focus on the positive. This pattern creates asymmetry in the way that children use information to reason about disposition and suggests that children's early preference to maintain positive views of others may be leveraged to encourage children to stand up for victims of peer aggression. However, this study also sheds light on one possible way that children might overgeneralize from others' behavior to infer that some peers are particularly good individuals, whether or not that reputation is deserved. Knowledge about preschoolers' perceptions of the recipients of positive or negative acts may help to improve our understanding of children's basic moral reasoning skills in interpersonal contexts.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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