Blame attribution among people with developmental disability*

Imputación de culpa entre personas con desorden del desarrollo

Received: 10 March 2016 | Accepted: 20 June 2016

Guadalupe Elizabeth Morales**
National University of Mexico, Mexico
Bernadette Rogé***
Jean-Jaurès University, France

ABSTRACT
We synthesize the main findings from two studies that examined moral judgement abilities in people with autism, and in people with Down syndrome. In both studies, the way these people mentally combine information about the intent of a harmful act and the severity of its consequences when attributing blame to an offender was compared with that of typically developing controls. Adolescents and adults with autism or with Down syndrome were, practically to the same extent as controls, able to take into account both information pieces for attributing blame. It would be an exaggeration to imply that adolescents and adults with either autism or Down syndrome are severely immature in moral judgement based on the fact that they are usually not able to explain or justify their judgements with sophisticated philosophical arguments. By contrast, children with autism blame attribution appeared to be essentially based on consequence information. The finding that adolescents and adults with autism or Down syndrome are able to make moral judgements in a way that is not very different from adolescents and adults of the same age could influence the way these people are perceived, cared for, and attributed basic rights.

Keywords
Moral Judgments, Autism, Down Syndrome, Offender.

RESUMEN
Sintetizamos las principales conclusiones de dos estudios que examinaron la capacidad de juicio moral en personas con autismo y en personas con síndrome de Down. En ambos estudios, la forma en que estas personas combinan mentalmente la información acerca de la intención que puede haber en un acto perjudicial y la gravedad de sus consecuencias cuando se atribuye la culpa a un delincuente, se comparó con la de un grupo control (con desarrollo normal). Adolescentes y adultos con autismo o con síndrome de Down fueron, prácticamente de la misma medida que los del grupo control, capaces de tener en cuenta ambas piezas de información para atribuir la culpa. Sería una exageración asegurar que los adolescentes y los adultos, ya sea con autismo o síndrome de Down son severamente inmaduros en sus juicios morales basado en el hecho de que por lo general no son capaces de explicar o justificar sus juicios con argumentos filosóficos sofisticados. Por el contrario, los niños con autismo que realizaron atribución de culpa parecían basarse esencialmente en la información sobre la consecuencia. El hallazgo de que los adolescentes y adultos con autismo o síndrome de Down son capaces de hacer juicios morales de una manera que no es muy diferente

**National University of Mexico, Mexico. E-mail: moramar24@yahoo.com.mx
***Jean-Jaurès University, Toulouse, France. E-mail: roge@univ-tlse2.fr

a la de los adolescentes y los adultos de la misma edad podría influir en la forma en que estas personas son perciben, cuidadas, y valoradas en sus derechos básicos.

Palabras clave
Juicios morales, Autismo, Síndrome de Down, delincuente.

Para citar este artículo:

Morales, G.E., & Rogé, B. (2016). Blame attribution among people with developmental disability. *Universitas Psychologica, 15* (3). http ://dx.doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.upsy15-3.baap

Blame attribution among people with Developmental Disability

Since the beginning of empirical developmental psychology (Piaget, 1932), the development, from childhood to adulthood, of moral reasoning and moral judgement has been examined. Moral reasoning refers to the capacity to consciously deliberate about moral situations. As a result, moral reasoning is conceived as an explicit and relatively slow process that corresponds to Kahneman's (2011) System 2. Researchers involved in this field of study usually consider the person as a lay moral philosopher. Conscious deliberation is conceived as the weighing of the pros and cons of moral issues in a way that is supposed to be the one of moral philosophers. Moral dilemmas – the favourite material of moral philosophers – have typically been used to study children and adolescents' reasoning abilities (Kohlberg, 1969). There is consensus among researchers in the field that moral reasoning develops through a series of qualitatively different stages, and Gibbs' (2010) four-stage socio-moral theory is probably the more up to date formulation of this view.

Moral judgement, by contrast, refers to lay people's ability to quickly react in daily life situations involving moral issues; that is, in situations in which time can be an issue, too. Moral judgement is an implicit, fast cognitive process that corresponds to Kahneman's (2011) System 1. Researchers have typically used short stories depicting daily life situations to study moral judgement. For example, Surber (1977) presented young participants with a set of nine stories about a young girl who interfered with her mother in the kitchen. An example of story is the following: "This little girl wanted to help set the table to make her mother happy. She climbed up on the kitchen cupboard and even though she was careful, she slipped and ten dishes fell off the cupboard and broke" (p. 656). The nine stories were created by orthogonally varying levels of intent and levels of severity of consequences. There were three levels of intent: positive (helping), neutral (simple curiosity), and negative (greed). There were combined with three levels of severity of consequences: no consequence, moderately severe consequences (two dishes fell off the cupboard and broke), and severe consequences (as in the example). In each of the resulting nine (3 × 3) situations, participants (from kindergarten to fifth grade) were asked to assess, using a continuous scale (presenting more or less smiling faces), the level of goodness-badness of the characters depicted in the story. Most kindergarten (76%), second-grade (87%), and fifth-grade children (95%) were able to integrate intent and consequences information in their judgments. Also, the data supported the notion that moral judgment, contrary to moral reasoning, changes gradually over the age range. There was no evidence for a stage-like progression.

These findings were replicated by Leon (1980, 1982) and Surber (1982). The only difference that was systematically found between age groups was about the relative impact of each factor. Intent information had a stronger impact and consequence information had a weaker impact in older participants than in younger participants (for a complete review of research on moral judgement, see Anderson, 2013).

In the present chapter we present the main findings from two studies that used the methodological framework created by Surber (1977) to examine moral judgement abilities in people with Down syndrome (Morales et al., 2015), and in people with autism (Rogé & Mullet, 2011). In both studies, the way people with developmental disability mentally combine information about the intent of a harmful act and

the severity of its consequences when attributing blame to the offender and that of typically developing controls were compared.

Early studies on moral development among people with Developmental Disability

A limited number of authors have examined moral reasoning among people with intellectual disability. In their review, Langdon, Clare, and Murphy (2010) suggested that these people's progression through the different stages of moral reasoning was slower than the progression of typically developing controls. However, when cognitive ability was taken into account, differences between people with intellectual disability and controls vanished. According to Langdon, Murphy, Clare, Steverson, and Palmer (2011), adults with intellectual disability were able reach Gibbs' (2010) Stage 2, which means that their reasoning is essentially immature, instrumental, and based on future exchanges of services. In addition, van Vugt et al. (2011) showed that verbal justifications for immoral acts produced by people with intellectual disability were essentially instrumental and pragmatic.

An equally limited number of authors have examined the development of moral reasoning among people with autism. Blair (1996) showed that children with autism have the ability to distinguish conventional transgressions (e.g., talking in class) from moral transgressions (e.g., hitting others). He suggested that high-functioning children with autism show sensitivity to other's distress.

Grant, Boucher, Riggs & Grayson (2005) presented children with autism with pairs of stories that were constructed in a way that was similar to Surber's (1977) one; that is, they were constructed by crossing the levels of two factors: intent of the harmful act (accidental versus deliberate), and severity of the harmful act (damage to property versus injury to a person). When presented with pairs of stories with similar outcomes in terms of severity but different motives, children with autism were able to use intent information to indicate who of the two characters in the stories was most culpable. When presented with pairs of stories with similar motives but different outcomes, children with autism were able to use severity information to indicate who was most culpable. The justifications of children with autism for their choices were, however, of poor formal quality.

D'Entremont and Yazbeck (2007) have shown that people with autism have trouble at understanding and interpreting the intents of other people. They suggested that they have reduced 'theory of mind' abilities.

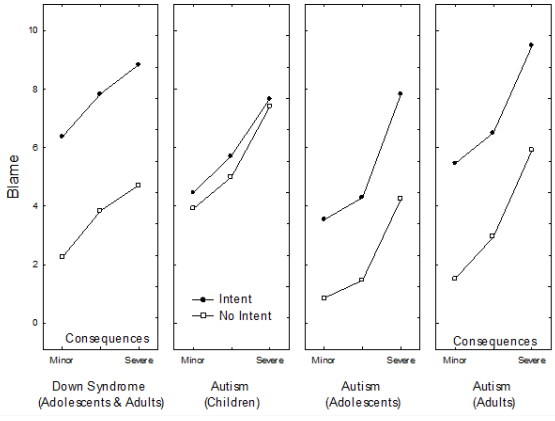
Blame attribution among people with Down syndrome and people with autism

Moral judgement among people with developmental disability has only been recently investigated in two studies conducted on adolescents and adults with Down syndrome (Morales et al., 2015) and on children, adolescents, and adults with autism (Rogé & Mullet, 2011). Similar material was used in both studies. It comprised six stories in which deliberate or accidental transgressions that varied in severity of consequences were committed. An example of a story where clear intention is associated with minor consequences was as follows: "Jim is listening to music on his iPod. Peter, a classmate, is jealous of Jim for having an iPod and borrows the iPod from Jim. Peter intentionally drops the iPod. Jim lifts the iPod from the floor. The iPod is not broken. It is still working perfectly. In your opinion, how badly did Peter behave? What level of blame does Peter deserve?" The stories were presented on a card drawing and simultaneously read to the participant. The response scale was adapted to the participant's cognitive characteristics. The procedure followed Surber's (1977) and Leon's (1982) recommendations for this kind of study.

Figure 1 (left-hand panel) shows the results observed among adolescents and adults with Down syndrome. The curves are ascending: Blame was higher when consequence was

severe than when consequence was minor. The curves are clearly separated: Blame was higher when there was intent than when there was no intent. The curves are roughly parallel: Consequence and Intent did not interact. In addition, this pattern of responses was very similar to the one obtained from typically developing participants of the same ages. There were, however, two differences: (a) the effect of consequence was stronger in people with Down syndrome than in controls, and (b) the effect of intent was weaker in people with Down syndrome than in controls. These differences were consistent with (a) Langdon et al. (2010) who suggested that moral development is delayed among people with intellectual disability, and (b) Morales et al. (2015) who suggested that information integration abilities were relatively well preserved among people with Down syndrome.

Figure 1
Blame attribution as a function of intent and consequence information in people with Down syndrome and people with autism. In each panel, mean blame judgments are on the y-axis, the three consequence levels are on the x-axis, and the two lines correspond to the two intent levels.



Source: own work

Figure 1 (second panel) shows the results observed among children with autism. The curves are ascending but not clearly separated. This pattern of responses was different from the one obtained from typically developing children. Although even very young typically developing children are able to integrate intent and consequence information in their blame judgments (e.g., Surber, 1977), children with autism are not. They are, however, able to use the consequence information more or less to the same extent as controls, which is consistent with Blair's (1996) findings.

Figure 1 (right-hand panels) shows the results observed among adolescents and adults with autism. As in the case of adolescents and adults with Down syndrome (left-hand panel), the curves are ascending and clearly separated, which means that these participants were able to integrate intent and consequence information in their blame judgments. There was, however, one difference with typically developing adolescents and adults: The effect of intent was stronger among them than among adolescents and adults with autism.

Conclusions

Adolescents and adults with autism or with Down syndrome were, practically to the same extent as controls, able to take into account intent and consequence information for attributing blame. It would be an exaggeration to imply that adolescents and adults with either autism or Down syndrome are severely immature in moral judgement based on the small differences in effects sizes that were found. From educational and societal viewpoints this is a remarkable finding: Adolescents and adults with either autism or Down syndrome are able to make moral judgements in a way that is not very different from adolescents and adults of the same age, even though they were not able to explain or justify their judgements with sophisticated philosophical arguments (e.g., van Vugt et al., 2011). This finding could influence the way these people are perceived, cared for, and attributed basic rights.

By contrast, the blame attribution of children with autism appeared to be essentially based on consequence information. This result was consistent with previous findings suggesting that

people with autism have trouble at interpreting others' intents (D'Entremont and Yazbeck, 2007) or at using intent information (Grant et al., 2005). One may wonder whether cognitive feedback techniques allowing people to improve their judgments abilities that have proved successful in various daily life contexts (Mullet, 2011) could be implemented among children with autism in order to facilitate the development of their moral judgment abilities (Bonnin-Scaon, Lafon, Chasseigne, Mullet, & Sorum, 2003).

Future directions

Future studies on moral judgment among people with developmental disability should use a broader range of moral situations. In addition to blame attribution, the ability of people with developmental disability to judge deservingness, unfairness, unkindness, honesty, envy, duty, atonement, and willingness to forgive could be investigated. It is only when researchers will have explored a full range of moral situations that they will be in a position to state anything truly consistent regarding the moral development of - and, hence, the moral status to be attributed to - people with developmental disability.

References

Anderson, N. H. (2013). *Moral science* . Retrieved from http://functionalmeasurement.vub.ac.be/publications/Moral_Science.pdf

Blair, R. J. R. (1996). Morality in the autistic child. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 26* , 571-579.

Bonnin-Scaon, S., Lafon, P., Chasseigne, G., Mullet, E., & Sorum, P. C. (2002). Learning the relationship between smoking, drinking alcohol, and the risk of esophagal cancer. *Health Education Research, 17* , 415-424.

D'Entremont, B., & Yazbeck, A. (2007). Imitation of intentional and accidental actions by children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 37* , 1665-1678.

Gibbs, J. C. (2010). *Moral development and reality: Beyond the theories of Kohlberg and Hoffman* . Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Grant, C. M., Boucher, J., Riggs, K. J., & Grayson, A. (2005). Moral understanding in children with autism. *Autism, 9* , 317-331.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow* . New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kohlberg, L. (1969). Stage and sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. In D. A. Goslin (Ed.), *Handbook of socialization theory and research* (pp. 347–480). Chicago, MI: Rand & McNally.

Langdon, P. E., Clare, I. C. H., & Murphy, G. H. (2010). Developing an understanding of the literature relating to the moral development of people with intellectual disabilities. *Developmental Review, 30* , 273–293. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2010.01.001

Langdon, P. E., Murphy, G. H., Clare, I. C. H., Steverson, T., & Palmer, E. J. (2011). Relationships among moral reasoning, empathy, and distorted cognitions in men with intellectual disabilities and a history of criminal offending. *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 116* , 438–456. http://dx.doi.org/10.1352/1944-7558-116.6.438

Leon, M. (1980). Integration of intent and consequence information in children's moral judgments. In F. Wilkening, J. Becker, & T. Trabasso (Eds.), *Information integration by children* (pp. 71–97). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Leon, M. (1982). Rules in children's moral judgments: Integration of intent, damage, and rationale information. *Developmental Psychology, 18* , 835–842. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.18.6.835

Morales, G. E., Lopez, E. O., Castro, C., Charles, D. J., Mezquita, Y. N., & Mullet, E. (2015). Conceptualization of romantic love among adults with Down's syndrome. *Sexuality*

and Disability, 33 , 339–348. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11195-014-9368-2

Mullet, E. (2011). Functional learning. In N. Seel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the science of learning* . New York: Springer.

Piaget, J. (1932). *The moral judgment of the child* . New York, NY: Free Press.

Rogé, B., & Mullet, E. (2011). Blame and forgiveness judgements among children, adolescents and adults with autism. *Autism, 15* , 702–712. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1362361310394219

Surber, C. F. (1977). Developmental processes in social inference: Averaging of intentions and consequences in moral judgment. *Developmental Psychology, 13* , 654–665. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.13.6.654

Surber, C. F. (1982). Separable effects of motives, consequences, and presentation order on children's moral judgments. *Developmental Psychology, 18* , 257–266. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.18.2.257

van Vugt, E., Asscher, J., Stams, G. J., Hendriks, J., Stams, G. J. J. M., Bijleveld, C., & van der Laan, P. (2011). Moral judgment of young sex offenders with and without intellectual disabilities. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 32* , 2841–2846. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2011.05.022

Notes

***** Research article.