Victimizers and Their Victims: Children’s Conceptions of the Mixed Emotional Consequences of Moral Transgressions

William F. Arsenio and Rivka Kramer
Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, Yeshiva University

A growing literature on children’s conceptions of the emotional consequences of social events (see, e.g., Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, & Ridgeway, 1986; Harris, 1989; Masters & Carlson, 1984) begins with the view that emotions are “important internal monitoring and guidance systems, designed to appraise events and motivate human action” (Bretherton et al., 1986, p. 530 [emphasis added]). The underlying logic is that if children know something about the routine emotional consequences of social events (appraisal), then this scriptlike knowledge should help them to anticipate the likely outcomes of various actions and influence (motivate) their subsequent behavior (e.g., Harris, 1985).

This focus on affect-event links has recently been extended to children’s socio-moral development (Arsenio & Ford, 1985), that is, knowledge and behavior regarding interpersonal limits, in large part due to one influential study (Barden, Zelko, Duncan, & Masters, 1980). Among other results, young children (4- and 5-year-olds) judged that victimizers would feel happy after committing undetected acts of dishonesty. Subsequent research has confirmed that children have such a “happy victimizer” expectancy for various acts, including threats and overt physical harm, as well as for acts of undetected theft. More than half of the 5-year-olds in one study (Arsenio, 1988), for example, judged that pushing another child off a play structure would make the victimizer happy. Furthermore, follow-up research on the Barden et al. study (Zelko, Duncan, Barden, Garber, & Masters, 1986) indicates that most adults do not predict that young children will have this emotional expectancy.

These findings are potentially important for several reasons. If young children really do expect positive emotional consequences for victimizers, then such an expectancy might promote a continued pattern of victimization in children’s subsequent social interactions (see Boldizar, Perry, & Perry, 1989; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). In turn, adults’ relative lack of awareness regarding this expec-
tancy (Zelko et al., 1986) could undermine the effectiveness of their socialization efforts with children. This “happy victimizer” conception also seems at odds with several major sociomoral theories (e.g., Hoffman, 1987; Turiel, 1983 [see p. 43]; Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1990) in which an awareness of victim harm, a sense of empathic distress, and a fear of external sanctions should all lead children to expect that victimizers will feel negative emotions, for example, sadness, fear, and guilt.

Nunner-Winkler and Sodian (1988) recently conducted the first study explicitly designed to examine this “happy victimizer” finding in greater detail (previous studies assessed a broad range of different social and moral conceptions). The authors proposed that “moral events are likely to produce intensive and potentially conflicting feelings.” For example, “joy at the success of his or her [the victimizer’s] forbidden action, and/or shame, guilt, and remorse at his or her immoral behavior” (1988, p. 1323). Given these potentially mixed emotional experiences, a key question was why young children would then expect victimizers to feel happy.

A three-part study including 4-, 6-, and 8-year-olds confirmed that younger children, in particular, expect victimizers to feel happy. Children’s justifications for their emotion judgments suggested that 4- and 6-year-olds were focusing on the outcomes of victimization, that is, the material rewards, whereas 8-year-olds were focusing on more moral dimensions involving the theft and evaluative statements (“nasty”). However, attempts to manipulate the salience of moral victimization and alter this “outcome orientation” in Experiments 2 and 3 were unsuccessful: younger children (4-6-year-olds) continued to expect that victimizers would be happy.

Overall, results were summarized in terms of an age-related attributional shift from younger children’s outcome orientation—victimizers are happy if they get what they want—to older children’s seemingly more moral orientation—victimizers’ negative emotions are influenced by external standards and the victim’s pain. The authors, however, rejected an earlier “conflicting emotions” hypothesis. Namely, they rejected the idea that young children might associate both positive and negative emotions with victimization (e.g., happiness at the outcome and empathic sadness for the victim) but be unable to produce both types of consequences, perhaps due to underlying cognitive constraints (e.g., Harter & Buddin, 1987). If this were the case, Nunner-Winkler and Sodian reasoned, then salience manipulations that emphasized the harm to the victim (Experiments 2 and 3) should have shifted children’s focus from victimizer happiness to conceptions involving more negative victimizer emotions.

Despite the obvious contributions of the Nunner-Winkler and Sodian study, it is unclear whether young children really believe that victimizers are as exclusively happy and as free from conflicting or mixed emotions as has been suggested. The major hypothesis of the present study was that even 4- and 6-year-olds will expect the act of victimization to produce mixed emotional consequences, once several substantive and methodological limitations of previous studies have been addressed. A related goal was to examine the attributional shift (Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988) in which 80% of 4-year-olds expected victimizers to be happy because they had obtained a desirable outcome, whereas 90% of 8-year-olds expected victimizers to feel negative emotions because of victim harm.

Studies with a less exclusive focus on victimization (Arsenio, 1988; Arsenio, O’Desky, & Berlin, 1991), however, have found few age-related differences in children’s moral attributions. Given this conflict, it is unclear whether accounts of a major developmental shift in children’s moral attributions (Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988) are accurate or are the result of limitations discussed below.

Two experiments were designed to address these two issues and, in general, to examine the underlying meaning of the “happy victimizer” finding. One goal was to address a basic research limitation in that other studies have either excluded children’s conceptions of victims (e.g., Barden et al., 1980) or have provided subjects with adult-derived victim information (Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), even though adults are not always accurate at inferring young children’s moral emotions (Zelko et al., 1986). This oversight is especially problematic because children’s understanding of victimization may involve both recognizing and integrating the victim’s pain and loss (Hoffman, 1987; Turiel, 1983) with the victimizer’s potential gain.

Experiment 1 provided an initial assessment of both children’s conceptions of victims and victimizers and whether such joint
ratings influenced children's tendency to attribute positive emotions to victimizers. In general, it was expected that children would clearly distinguish between the emotional consequences of victimization for victims and victimizers, with victims expected to feel negative emotions and victimizers feeling a mix of positive and negative emotions. The conflicting evidence on the attributional shift (e.g., Arsenio, 1988, vs. Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988) makes it difficult to predict whether the age groups will differ in the emotions they attribute to moral participants.

Experiment 2 included several additional assessments that were expected to contradict Nunner-Winkler and Sodian's claim that young children's conceptions of victimization do not include mixed or conflicting emotions. For one, the salience of victim harm was varied in a number of ways not used in previous studies. Overall, it was expected that these manipulations would lead young children to attribute mixed emotions to victimizers. Second, a series of probe questions were used to elicit a more exhaustive account of victimizers' emotions. It was expected that even minimal probes would lead most children to select additional opposite-valence emotions, that is, if children initially say victimizers are happy, they will subsequently attribute negative emotions—sadness, distress, etc.—to these victimizers.

Experiment 1

METHOD

Subjects

Forty-eight children participated, with 16 children, eight males and eight females, from each of three age levels (4-0 to 4-11, M = 4-6; 6-0 to 6-11, M = 6-4; and 8-0 to 8-11, M = 8-7) used in related studies (e.g., Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988). Children attended a Jewish-affiliated school serving a middle-class population in a major Northeastern city.

Materials

A moral transgression was depicted in a three-frame sequence of line drawings (15 x 48 cm) with brief accompanying text. In story frame 1, two children were at their coat lockers in school, and one child showed the other child some candies that he or she had received. In frame 2, the child who had been shown the candies saw that the locker room was empty, and in frame 3 that child (victimizer) took the candies out of the victim's coat and put them into his or her own pocket. All characters were drawn with affectively neutral expressions, with no mention or depiction of affect in any of the stories. Two sets of stories were created for both tasks, one with all male characters, and one with all female characters.

Procedure

Interviews were individually administered, and the sessions were audio-recorded. Children were initially shown how to use the 3-point scale to rate emotion intensity. They were then read the story sequence, and a subsequent comprehension check revealed that all children were able to retell the story after a single correction. Next, subjects were asked, "How do you think the children felt at the end of the story?" (discrete emotion judgments), and they described these emotions while pointing to the respective story character. It was expected that if young children find victimizers' gains more salient they would be more likely to assess victimizers first, whereas if older children find the victim's loss more salient they would assess victims first. Subjects were then asked about the emotions of the remaining character (no subject spontaneously described emotions for both characters).

Subsequently, children were presented with a series of schematically drawn faces depicting either three increasingly positive- or increasingly negative-valence emotions (quantitative emotion judgments). Subjects were reminded of their emotion judgments and asked to use the faces to "show me how [happy, sad, etc.] the [victim/victimizer] felt at the end of the story," for example, "a little happy, happy, or very happy." Characters were assessed in the order in which children had originally described their emotions.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects for subject gender or for

\footnote{An extensive number of studies, including Nunner-Winkler and Sodian, 1988 (see Turiel, 1983, for an earlier review), have found that even 4-year-olds are routinely aware that there are rules prohibiting basic moral transgressions involving lying, stealing, and physical harm. Pilot interviews confirmed these results, and consequently this question was not included in Experiments 1 or 2 because it was considered unnecessary.}
whether subjects needed assistance in re-telling story gists in any of the following findings.

Discrete emotions.—All but one 4- or 6-year-old judged that victimizers would feel either "happy" or "good." However, 8-year-olds selected significantly more nonpositive emotions (5 of 16, 3 "negative" and 2 "mixed," e.g., happy and sad) than younger children, $\chi^2(2, N = 48) = 7.99, p < .02$. All children attributed negative emotions, particularly "bad" or "sad," to victims. There were also no age-related differences in whether subjects chose to assess victims or victimizers first.

Quantitative emotion ratings.—Children's judgments regarding the degree to which story participants felt positive or negative emotions were assessed with a repeated-measures ANOVA involving a 2 (order, i.e., whether victim or victimizer was mentioned first) $\times$ 3 (age) $\times$ 2 (participant role, i.e., victim or victimizer) design, with order and age as between-subjects factors and participant role as a within-subjects factor. Overall, the assessments of moral participants' emotions changed with age, $F(2,40) = 5.56, p < .01$ (see Fig. 1), but this was qualified by interaction effects, which are discussed below. A highly significant main effect for participant role, $F(1,40) = 605.00, p < .0001$, indicated that subjects sharply distinguished between the emotional consequences of moral transgressions for victims and victimizers. (Every subject rated victims as feeling more negatively than victimizers.)

A seemingly complex series of interactions (age $\times$ order, $F(2,40) = 5.99, p < .01$; age $\times$ participant role, $F(2,40) = 10.07, p < .001$; order $\times$ participant role, $F(1,40) = 4.80, p < .05$, and an age $\times$ order $\times$ participant trend, $F(2,40) = 3.07, p = .058$) is most easily clarified by examining Figure 1. In general, there was little change in subjects' ratings of victims' emotional intensity, but older subjects, particularly 8-year-olds, assessed victimizers as feeling less positively if they first assessed victims' emotional intensity.

DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, children expected the act of victimization to produce strongly mixed emotional consequences. Victimizers

![Fig. 1](image-url)
were generally seen as feeling positive emotions, and victims were exclusively seen as feeling negative emotions. Children did not, however, attribute mixed emotions to victimizers. Contrary to expectations, all but one 4- or 6-year-old and most 8-year-olds judged that victimizers would feel “happy” or “good.”

It seems that regardless of whether victims or victimizers are assessed first, children are quite aware of the negative consequences of victimization for victims. Furthermore, the intensity of the negative victim emotions suggests that the “happy victimizer” effect is not the result of any obvious attempt to deny or minimize the victim’s loss, for example, “he’s a little sad someone took his candies, but his mom could always get him some more.” But if children are not minimizing the victim’s loss, why would they attribute happiness to victimizers?

A result involving an age-related order effect suggests that, in fact, children may not be completely uninfluenced by the victim’s perceived plight. Eight-year-olds who assessed victimizers first were as likely as young children to judge that victimizers would be quite happy. But, as Figure 1 shows, 8-year-olds who assessed victims first subsequently judged that victimizers would be much less happy than did younger children. Consequently, it is possible that rating victims first alerted children to the costs of victimization, which then moderated older children’s judgments of victimizer happiness. This would mean that children’s victimizer attributions are sometimes influenced by the salience of the victim’s loss. However, order was not experimentally manipulated in Experiment 1, and it is just as possible that children who rated victims first were more oriented to the costs of victimization to begin with, so that order, per se, did not alert them to the victim’s loss. This issue clearly needs further attention in Experiment 2.

Experiment 1 provided little support for a fundamental shift (Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988; see also Barden et al., 1980) in children’s moral attributions between ages 4 and 8: the great majority of all age groups in the present study judged that victimizers would be happy. Children’s choice of whether to assess victims or victimizers first also did not support an attributional shift. It was expected that if 4-year-olds found victimizers’ gains more salient, they would assess victimizers first, and if older children found victims’ loss more salient they would rate victims first. There were, however, no age-related order effects for whether children assessed victims or victimizers first. All three groups were fairly split in who they judged first.

**Experiment 2**

Although children in Experiment 1 expected the act of victimization to produce strongly mixed consequences—positive emotions for victimizers and negative emotions for victims—they seemed to attribute few mixed emotions to just victimizers. The primary goals of Experiment 2 were to examine several potential explanations for these results, particularly the “happy victimizer” finding, and to examine any subtle age-related shifts in children’s patterns of moral attributions that may have been missed in the first experiment.

It is possible that the victimizer’s tangible gain in Experiment 1 was much more salient than the negative consequences for the victim, particularly since the victim was not depicted as present during or after the theft. The observed order effect in Experiment 1 suggests, for example, that rating victims first could potentially alert children to costs of victimization and reduce their expectations of victimizer happiness. Consequently, efforts were made to highlight the pain and/or loss of the victim in Experiment 2 to see if this influenced children’s moral attributions. Given the strength of children’s happy victimizer expectancies in Experiment 1 and the ineffectiveness of salience manipulation in previous studies, a decision was made to use multiple salience manipulations.

Two major manipulations were varied in Experiment 2: (a) victims and victimizers were described as friends, since children may be more sensitive to moral considerations within ongoing affective relationships (e.g., Killen, 1990; and Youniss, 1980); and (b) in one story, the subject him- or herself was described as the victim and a known friend was described as the victimizer in an effort to direct children to their own potential loss as victims (see Hughes, Tingle, & Sawin, 1981). It was expected that as a result of these salience manipulations even 4- and 6-year-olds would begin to attribute negative emotions to victimizers, and that the self-and-known friend condition, in particu-
lar, would result in more negative victimizer attributions.

Another goal was to examine whether the happy victimizer effect might result, in part, from the greater availability of positive emotions combined with certain methodological limitations. A number of studies (e.g., Glasberg & Aboud, 1982; Harter & Buddin, 1987; Harter & Pike, 1984) have shown that younger children are more likely to select positive emotions and deny negative emotions in various social cognitive tasks than are older children. Similarly, in Experiment 1 (and Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), younger children could have attributed both positive and negative emotions to victimizers but found that positive emotions were more available and therefore easier to report. Because young children frequently do not exhaustively search their memories (Flavell, 1985), even a slight positive memory bias might lead to exaggerated assessments of victimizer happiness. Consequently, in previous studies, children may not have revealed their underlying belief in multiple victimizer emotions because they were sometimes forced to select single emotion outcomes (e.g., Arsenio, 1988; and Barden et al., 1980), and because at other times (Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988) they were not probed further once they provided their initial, more available positive emotion judgments.

This issue was addressed in Experiment 2 using a series of probe questions to examine whether children judged that victimizers could feel any emotions in addition to those originally selected. Initial, less direct probes were expected to facilitate a more exhaustive account of any emotions attributed to victimizers, whereas subsequent, more direct probes were expected to reveal if children would respond to direct information regarding victim harm. Specifically, it was expected that when children were given even minimal probes they would attribute additional negative emotions to victimizers, that is, their initial victimizer attributions would be positive, but their probe-related attributions would be negative.

In summary, Experiment 2 included manipulations of the salience of victim harm, and probe questions regarding victimizers' emotions. In contrast to Nunner-Winkler and Sodian (1988), it was expected that the salience manipulations and probe questions would reveal that young children do expect victimization to have mixed emotional consequences for victimizers.

METHOD

Subjects
The same 48 children who participated in Experiment 1 were reinterviewed 2–3 months later for Experiment 2. The extensive time gap between interviews was expected to reduce the likelihood of any systematic effects based on prior participation (see Arsenio, 1988). An additional 18 children (six 4-, 6-, and 8-year-olds) were interviewed to address a potential methodological concern described below.

Materials
Two moral transgressions were portrayed using three-frame sequences of line drawings (15 x 48) and accompanying text, which included no depiction or mention of emotions. In one story (physical harm), a child pushed another child off a swing because all the swings were occupied. In the final story frame, the victimizer was shown on the swing and the victim was still on the ground where he or she had been pushed. In the other story (theft), one child seized part of another child’s lunch and ran away with it. In the final frame, the victimizer was shown eating the lunch and the victim was visible across the playground.

Procedure and Design
Young children's extensive selection of extreme emotions (i.e., very happy or very sad) in Experiment 1 could reflect a problem in applying the scale to a larger task (Harris, Guz, Lipian, & Man-Shu, 1985). Consequently, in Experiment 2 the rating scale was simplified from three to two faces. Children were initially familiarized with the idea of feeling “a little bit” or “a whole lot” of an emotion, and all subjects were accurate in using the two-point rating scale in two training stories.

Children were then interviewed regarding the emotional consequences of both transgressions (physical harm and theft). Before one story the interviewer said, “This is a story about two friends who like to play together” (the hypothetical-friends condi-

2 Although Nunner-Winkler and Sodian (1988) assessed and rejected this “positive bias” in children’s conceptions of victimizers’ emotions (Experiment 1), they did so based on a complex comparison involving conceptions of those who resisted temptation versus those who victimized rather than on a direct in-depth assessment of victimizers’ emotions.
tion). Before the other story, subjects were asked to name a friend at school who they liked to play with. They were then informed, "This is a story about you and your friend," and in the subsequent story the friend was described as the victimizer, and the subject was described as the victim (the self-and-known-friend condition). In both stories, then, the victim was a friend of the victimizer, but in one story the participants were hypothetical and in the other story the subject was victimized by a known friend.3

One-half of all children heard the physical harm story first, and one-half heard the theft story first. Story order was also counterbalanced with type of friend (e.g., of children hearing the theft story first, one-half heard the hypothetical-friends and the other half heard the self-and-known-friend conditions). Within each age level and gender, children were randomly assigned to one of these four conditions (2 order x 2 friend types).

After the training period, subjects were informed that they would hear some stories and would be asked to judge how the characters felt at the end of the story. Parallel interview questions were asked after each story. As in Experiment 1, children's story comprehension was assessed, and inaccurate or incomplete understandings were corrected. Subsequently, children were asked to describe how the victim would be feeling, followed by the victimizer (discrete emotions assessment).

Children were then presented with the two-point rating scale and were asked to rate the intensity of victims' emotions followed by the intensity of victimizers' emotions (continuous emotion ratings). These ratings were followed by subjects' rationales for their judgments: "Why do you think [the victim/victimizer] would feel [happy, sad, etc.].?" (emotion rationales).

Rationales were subsequently coded into three categories: (a) outcome orientation—actors' or victims' emotions justified in terms of possessing/not possessing a desirable object ("she got the grapes she likes"); (b) moral concerns—overt references to fairness, taking without permission, etc. ("It wasn't right to just take the swing without waiting her turn"); and, (c) implied victimization—references to ownership or possible harm without explicit mention of moral concerns ("the other boy knocked him down"). Overall interrater reliability based on a subsample of 25% of all rationales was 90%.

Children were then asked a sequence of probe questions to examine whether the victimizer could be feeling any other emotions besides the one originally selected. The initial probe (1) began, "Do you think [the actor] could be feeling anything else? What?" If the subject said no, he or she was then (2) asked, "Do you think maybe [the actor] could feel [an opposite-valence emotion] to one the child previously selected? Why?" If the child again answered no, a final probe (3) was provided, which is best illustrated with an example: "You said your friend would be happy when he got your swing. What if he looked at you on the ground and saw that you were very sad, could he feel anything besides happy? Why?" (Details varied depending on the story condition and the emotion selected by the subject.) Probes were administered in the above sequence either until a child answered "yes" for a particular level of probe, or until he or she answered "no" for all three probes. Scoring of answers was based on a 4-point scale, where a score of 1 meant a subject answered "yes" for the initial probe, 2 meant a "yes" for the second probe, 3 a "yes" for the third probe, and 4 meant the subjects said "no" for all three probes. Lower scores (1 and 2) indicated that subjects were more likely to acknowledge alternative emotions than higher scores.

Assessment of Alternative Emotions in Victims

It could be argued that children might provide alternative-valence emotions for victimizers due to the demand characteristics of the probe methodology (e.g., "when someone asks you something twice or more, it must mean your first answer was wrong") rather than due to any conceptions of victimizers’ "conflicting emotions." This concern was addressed by using the identical probe methodology to interview additional chil-

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3 A number of other conditions could have been included, e.g., the subject victimizing a known friend or two friends of the subject victimizing each other. The goal, however, was not to assess all possible known/unknown friends and victim/victimizer combinations, but to include a "weak" friendship condition involving hypothetical characters and a "strong" condition, which seem especially likely to direct subjects to the victim's loss, i.e., the subject being victimized by a known friend.
children regarding alternative emotions in victims. Unlike victimizers, victims were not theoretically expected to elicit alternative-valence emotions from children. Therefore, it was predicted that children would not provide alternative emotions for victims (here) but would do so for victimizers (above). However, if children do provide alternative-valence emotions for both victims and victimizers, then the present probe methodology might be flawed and/or conceptions of “conflicting emotions” may not be unique to victimizers.

An additional 18 children (six 4-, 6-, and 8-year-olds) were administered an interview that was identical to the one described except that (a) the entire probe sequence focused on the victim, so that on probe-level 3, for example, the subject might be asked whether a sad victim could be feeling anything else when he or she looked at the happy victimizer; and (b) children were only given a single story.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses indicated that subjects’ gender and initial accuracy of story recall did not affect other judgments, and, consequently, these factors are not included below.

Victims’ and Victimizers’ Emotions

Discrete emotions.—All but one 4- or 6-year-old judged that victimizers would feel either “good” or “happy” after their act of victimization, whereas 8-year-olds provided more varied emotional consequences (19 positive, 7 mixed, i.e., positive and negative, and 6 negative, \(\chi^2(2,96) = 26.26, p < .001\)). In contrast, all subjects judged that victims would feel negative emotions (mostly “sad” or “bad”), although 8-year-olds were more likely to select “anger” (19% of all choices, \(\chi^2(1,96) = 4.97, p < .05\)). Any differences resulting from salience manipulations are discussed as part of the more statistically sensitive quantitative findings.

Quantitative emotion ratings.—Preliminary analyses indicated that, contrary to expectations, there were no simple effects or even two- or three-way interactions involving type of friend (hypothetical-friends vs. self-and-known-friend conditions). Consequently, no further mention will be made of the “friendship” factor.

Ratings of the intensity of victims’ and victimizers’ emotional reactions were assessed in a 3 (age) \(\times\) 2 (story type, i.e., physical harm or theft) \(\times\) 2 (participant role, i.e., victim or victimizer) \(\times\) 2 (story order, i.e., harm or theft story first) repeated-measures ANOVA, with age and story order as between-subjects factors and story type and participant role as within-subject factors. A main effect emerged for age, \(F(2,36) = 16.15, p < .001\): the age groups differed in the intensity of their overall ratings. This was qualified, however, by an age \(\times\) participant role interaction, \(F(2,36) = 22.66, p < .001\); differences in the intensity ratings for the age groups depended on the participant being assessed (see Table 1). Follow-up analyses revealed age differences in victimizer but not victim ratings: \(F'(2,36) = 30.42, p < .001\), and 1.60, N.S., respectively. Eight-year-olds, in particular, judged that victimizers felt less positively, 4-year-olds = 1.94, 6-year-olds = 1.66, and 8-year-olds = .83 (\(p < .01\), Newman-Keuls multiple-range test).

There was also a main effect for participant type, \(F(1,36) = 762.36, p < .001\). Once again, children always rated victimizers as feeling more emotionally positive than victims. There was also a much less pronounced story type (grape vs. swing) \(\times\) participant role interaction, \(F(1,36) = 5.43, p < .05\). Follow-up analyses indicated that subjects rated “swing” victims, –1.87 (physical harm), as feeling more negatively than “grape” victims, –1.67 (stolen property), \(F(1,45) = 6.76, p < .02\), whereas ratings of the two story victimizers did not differ, \(F(1,45) = 1.12, N.S.\).

Children’s rationales for actors’ and victims’ emotions.—Ninety-two percent of children’s rationales for discrete emotion judgments could be coded into one of the three mutually exclusive rationale categories.

| TABLE 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| CHILDREN’S JUDGMENTS OF THE MEAN POSITIVE-TO-NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF MORAL VICTIMIZERS AND VICTIMS IN EXPERIMENT 2 |
| **Victimizers** | **Victims** |
| **AGE** | **THEFT** | **HARM** | **THEFT** | **HARM** |
| 4 | 1.94<sup>a</sup> | 1.94 | -1.69 | -1.93 |
| 6 | 1.57 | 1.76 | -1.75 | -1.93 |
| 8 | .75 | .90 | -1.56 | -1.75 |
| **Mean** | 1.42 | 1.53 | -1.67 | -1.87 |

<sup>a</sup> Theft = victimizer takes part of victim’s lunch; Harm = victimizer pushes victim off a swing.

<sup>b</sup> A 5-point scale, ranging from -2 (very negative emotions) to +2 (very positive emotions), with 0 as neutral affect.
Children's rationales for the emotional consequences selected for moral victimizers and victims

| AGE | Victimizers | | Victims | | |
|-----|-------------|---------|---------|---------|
|     | Outcome | Implied Vic. | Moral | Outcome | Implied Vic. | Moral |
| 4   | 19 | 11 | 0 | 8 | 20 | 0 |
| 6   | 25 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 20 | 3 |
| 8   | 18 | 5 | 8 | 10 | 8 | 10 |

Note.—Outcome = outcome oriented; Implied Vic. = implied victimization; Moral = moral concerns. Each subject made judgments for two stories.

Children's rationales for victimizers' and victims' moral emotions differed. Children's judgments about whether victimizers could feel other than the initially selected emotions were assessed using a 4-point scale (see Method above). These probe scores were then analyzed in a 3 (age) × 2 (story order, i.e., grape or swing) × 2 (victim order, i.e., friend or self as first victim) × 2 (story, i.e., grape or swing) repeated-measures ANOVA, with age, story order, and victim order as between-group factors and story as a within-groups factor. A highly significant main effect was found for age, F(2,32) = 57.63, p < .001, and follow-up analyses (Newman-Keuls multiple-range test) indicated that 6- and 8-year-olds (mean probe scores = 1.13 and 1.44, respectively) were much more likely than 4-year-olds to provide additional victimizer emotions (mean probe score = 3.53), p < .01.

Overall, 6- and 8-year-olds provided additional victimizer emotions for the initial, least directive probe in 66% and 88% of their judgments, and all probe level 1 responses were of the opposite valence from the emotion originally selected. In other words, as expected, the majority of older children initially judged (discrete emotions) that victimizers would be "happy," "glad," etc., and when asked about additional victimizer emotions (probes), they selected "sad," "bad," "angry," etc. rather than any poten-
tial synonym for the positive emotion. Contrary to predictions, however, most 4-year-olds continued to expect that victimizers would feel happy even after being explicitly directed to the sadness and loss of the victim (probe level 4). No other significant findings emerged, that is, probe scores did not vary significantly with story type or friendship condition.

**Probe Results: Assessment of Alternative Emotions in Victims**

The additional interviews revealed that none of the six 4-year-olds changed their original judgment that victims would feel negative emotions in response to the probes. Four-year-olds also rarely judged that victimizers could be feeling anything other than the original emotion, so they appear to be uninfluenced by the probes in general. In contrast, 6- and 8-year-olds often selected alternative-valence emotions for victimizers, and it is important to know whether this was a general tendency to respond to probes, or whether it reflected a unique conception of actors’ emotions.

Results indicated that for the first and least directive probe ("could X be feeling anything else?") only two of 12 6- and 8-year-olds judged that the victim’s initial emotion could change valence (negative to positive), whereas 24 of 32 6- and 8-year-olds judged that the actor’s emotion could change valence (positive to negative), \( \chi^2(1,44) = 12.29, p < .001 \). Consequently, older children’s tendency to provide alternative-valence emotions for moral actors does not appear to be the result of the probe methodology per se.

**General Discussion**

The present study extended existing research by examining children’s conceptions of the emotional reactions of both moral victims and victimizers. The results indicate that, contrary to previous claims (Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), mixed or conflicting emotions do play a major, although complex, role in children’s understanding of victimization. Children attributed very different emotions to victims and victimizers in both experiments. Nearly all 4- and 6-year-olds and most 8-year-olds expected victimizers to feel positive emotions, “happy” or “good,” and they typically justified these emotions in terms of the material gains produced by victimization. In contrast, all children expected victims to feel negative emotions, “sad,” “bad,” “mad,” and these emotions were frequently justified with references to moral concerns, for example, claims about rightful ownership and the unfairness of the act. The high emotional costs and moral dimensions of victimization were further reflected in the fact that, overall, children attributed more extreme negative emotions to victims than extreme positive emotions to victimizers: \( \chi^2(1, N = 192) = 8.83, p < .01 \).

Clearly, children see victimization as having powerfully mixed emotional consequences depending on one’s role, that is, victim or victimizer, in the event. Previous studies that assessed only the victimizer side of this dyad (e.g., Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988) have missed this conflict and have incorrectly suggested that young children suffer from a pervasive neglect of moral factors in their emotion attributions. In these experiments, even young children did not appear to ignore or minimize the costs of victimization.

Although the act of victimization was expected to produce mixed emotional consequences, children initially attributed few mixed emotions to victimizers. Nearly all 4- and 6-year-olds and most 8-year-olds expected victimizers to feel positive emotions, which is consistent with previous “happy victimizer” findings (Barden et al., 1980; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), especially studies reporting that this expectancy extends beyond younger children (Arsenio, 1988; Arsenio et al., 1991). But how can children expect victimizers to feel happy at the same time that victims feel so negatively?

In Experiment 2, victimizers were still expected to be happy even though subjects rated victims first, and victimizers and victims were described as friends. Eight-year-olds, however, attributed less happiness to victimizers than the other age groups. This age-related decline is similar to the pattern observed in Experiment 1 for 8-year-olds who rated victims first, suggesting that Experiment 2 manipulations of the victim’s loss did moderate older children’s “happy victimizer” attributions. Children were also sensitive to one other manipulation: type of moral transgression. Consistent with previous studies (Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1993; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), children judged that physical harm was a more severe transgression than theft, but in this case it only affected their ratings of victims.

The probe results provide more extensive evidence that, contrary to earlier stud-
ies, children do expect victimizers to feel mixed emotions. As expected, most 6-year-olds and almost all 8-year-olds responded to the least directive probe question by attributing additional opposite-valence moral emotions to victimizers. In other words, most children initially judged that victimizers felt “happy” or “good,” but when asked “could [the victimizer] be feeling anything else?” they replied, “sad,” “bad,” or “angry.” And this finding emerged even though it is easier to attribute two similarly different-valence emotions to a single target (Harter & Buddin, 1987). In contrast, children rarely provided opposite-valence emotions for victims in the supplemental interviews, which suggests that the changes for victimizers are not primarily due to the demand characteristics of the probe methodology.

Taken together, the probe results expand and modify what is known about children’s conceptions of victimizers. Certainly, children do expect victimizers to feel happy: the strength and consistency of their initial attributions are unlikely to result entirely from a bias to report positive emotions. But 6- and 8-year-olds also routinely expected victimizers but not victims to feel additional conflicting emotions. This emotional conflict may have been obscured in previous studies by specific methodological limitations, for example, forcing children to select single emotion outcomes (Arsenio, 1988; Barden et al., 1980; Zelko et al., 1986) and emphasizing initial attributions exclusively (Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988).

Collectively, these results do not support an age-related reversal in victimizer conceptions (i.e., positive to negative emotions; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), but they do reveal a more subtle, potentially important shift. All 4-year-olds expected victimizers to be happy, and this was largely unaffected by salience manipulations or any probes. Six-year-olds were a transitional group. Although they always initially judged that victimizers would feel happy or good, they attributed additional negative victimizer emotions for the least directive probe question. Finally, 8-year-olds in Experiment 2 spontaneously attributed mixed emotions to victimizers in one-quarter of their initial (i.e., before probing) attributions, almost always responded to the least directive probes, and seemed to be influenced by some of the salience manipulations. There is an overall shift, then, from 4-year-olds’ view that victimizers are simply happy to 8-year-olds’ tendency to view victimizers as feeling more mixed or conflicting emotions.

Children’s conceptions of victimization in this study imply a basic moral conflict: to victimize is to gain desirable outcomes and feel happy, and to be victimized is to lose what is yours and feel sad, angry, etc. Four-year-olds seem to view victims and victimizers as having two fundamentally different sets of noninteracting emotional reactions to a single event. In contrast, it appears that 6- and 8-year-olds expect that the positive emotions of victimizers will be altered or modified by the negative emotions of victims, that is, moral emotions are being coordinated into a larger understanding of victimization.

One possible explanation for these findings is that “at approximately six years of age . . . children come to recognize many of the complexities in social interactions, such as that people experience simultaneous conflicting emotions” (Fischer, Shaver, & Cornochan, 1990, p. 113). In other words, children’s ability to attribute mixed emotions to victimizers may be part of a much larger ability to understand mixed emotions in any situation (see, e.g., Harris, 1983; Harter & Buddin, 1987). Similarly, some studies on children’s theory of mind suggest that understanding how the intentional mental states of a social dyad can interact (e.g., victimizers’ positive emotions and victims’ negative emotions) requires second-order recursive abilities that only emerge by age 5 or 6 (see esp. Astington, Harris, & Olson, 1988, p. 10). It seems that, overall, children’s understanding of victimization may require both relevant emotional experiences and the cognitive abilities to combine these experiences into an integrated moral perspective.

One potential limitation of the present study needs to be mentioned at this point: the same subjects participated in both experiments. This was not originally seen as a problem due to the 2–3-month gap between studies and because younger children are resistant to modifying their experimental responses even after explicit attempts to teach them new response patterns (Flavell, 1985). Although it seems unlikely that the Experiment 1 assessment induced a fundamental change in children’s Experiment 2 judgments, this possibility cannot be entirely eliminated.

In concluding, it should be noted that children may experience mixed emotions as victimizers long before they can articulate
these experiences (see Harris, 1989). At a behavioral level, for example, young victimizers may not need to “keep track” of their own emotions, and as a result they can focus more fully on the victim’s reactions. Unfortunately, there is little available research on the actual emotions children express during moral conflicts, and consequently it is difficult to assess the accuracy of children’s conceptions. Yet some emerging evidence suggests that, in fact, preschool-aged children do express happiness as victimizers and sadness and anger as victims (Arsenio, 1991; Dunn, 1988). More research is needed to provide definitive answers about the links between children’s expressed moral emotions and their conceptions of these emotions.

References


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