Preschool Children's Environmental Moral Reasoning

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Research Questions

* Do preschool children judge environmentally harmful actions as:
    * Wrong
    * Prescriptive
    * Generalizable
    * Not contingent upon rules or social conventions?
* How do preschool children justify their environmental judgments?
* Do children attending a nature-focused preschool differ from children attending a non-nature-focused preschool in their judgments or justifications?

Children's Beliefs about the Moral Standing of Nature

* Knowledge about nature & natural processes
  * "Does X cause harm?"
* Judgments of specific actions that can harm nature
  * "Is X ok or not ok?"
* Reasoning about those judgments
  * "Why or why not?" coded anthropocentric, biocentric, welfare, social convention
* Action orientation
  * Spontaneous expressions

The Domain Perspective on Moral Development

Personal	Conventional	Moral
Legitimate claims of personal interests; outside of moral or conventional purview	General consensus; maintains order; relativity; rule contingency	Generalizable, not contingent upon rules, laws, or conventions, Appeal to justice, human welfare

(Kahn, 2001; Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2008)

Foundations of the Moral Domain

* Understanding of <u>welfare</u> (the well-being of individuals, groups, or nature) is the foundation for understanding <u>justice</u> (how to coordinate competing claims for welfare)

* In order to reason about justice, need knowledge about the context, consequences of various decisions, needs and rights of each entity involved

    * Knowledge about nature & environmental issues

    * Knowledge about human issues

Summary of Research on Children's Environmental Moral Reasoning, ages 6 – Young Adult

* Majority of children judged throwing trash in the water as wrong; evidence of obligatory morality
* Justifications included harm to nature, anthropocentric & biocentric concerns
* Increase in anthropocentric & biocentric justifications with age; decrease in generalized harm justifications
* Sentient/non-sentient contrast in concern for welfare
* Welfare is the foundation for increasingly complex understanding of obligation, morality

(Kahn & Friedman, 1995; Kahn, 2001; Severson & Kahn, 2010)

Prince William Sound Oil Spill
2nd, 5th, & 8th-graders (Kahn, 2001)

* Harm not all right even if law allowed – 97% (shore) & 98% (marine life)

* Not all right even if in a far off place where people thought it was ok (89% & 82%)

* Majority of children viewed the act of polluting the shoreline (86%) and marine life (75%) as a violation of moral obligation

Developmental Changes (Kahn, 2001)

* Younger children: emphasized welfare concerns
* Older children: emphasized justice
* Many children gave responses reflecting both
* Justice concepts build on concepts of welfare; this is an example of **transformation in thinking**

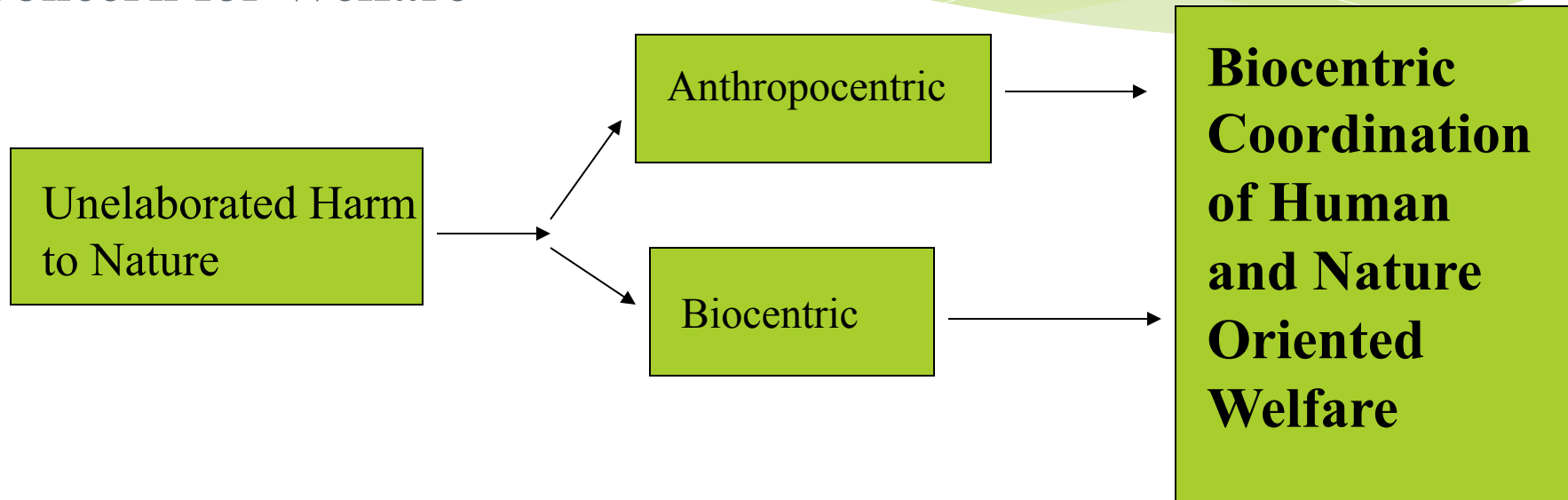# Comparison of Death Resulting From Human Activity vs. Predation

* 90% of children differentiated between the two (with human activity in moral domain)

* Justifications based on an understanding of dependent relationships & natural balance

Proposed Developmental Progression

Concern for Welfare

Concern for Justice

Unelaborated Harm to Nature → Anthropocentric → **Biocentric Coordination of Human and Nature Oriented Welfare**

Unelaborated Harm to Nature → Biocentric → **Biocentric Coordination of Human and Nature Oriented Welfare**

Which comes first – concern for nature or humans?

* Kahn proposes dialectical:

Moral Relationships with People $\longrightarrow$ Moral Relationship with Nature $\longleftarrow$
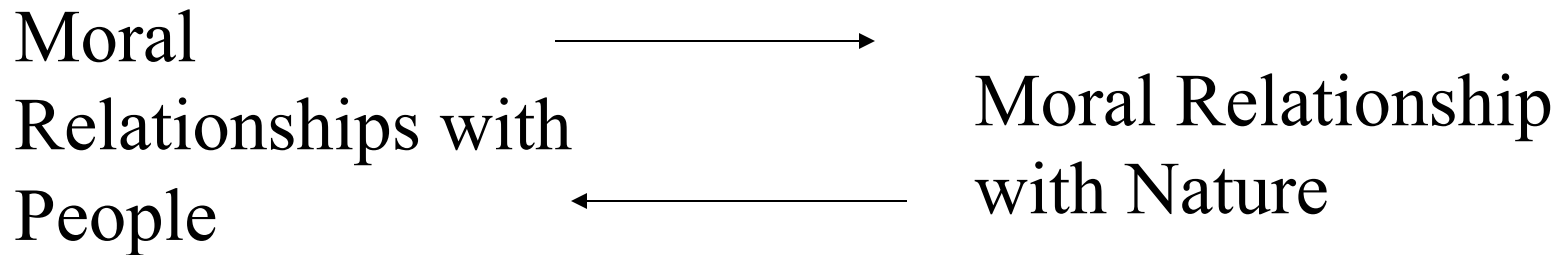
Sample

* 53 children attending nature-focused preschool
* 97 children attending non-nature-focused preschool programs

Methods & Measures

* Adapted Kahn's (2001) interview
* Audio-recorded & transcribed
* Adapted Kahn's (2001) coding system
* 2 coders, differences resolved via consensus

Ok for One Person to Throw trash in the Lake?

89.5% of total sample = no	Nature % No (n=50)	Non-nature % No (n=93)
	92.0%	88.2%
Why not?	**(n=36)**	**(n=63)**
Harm	63.9%	46.0%
Anthropocentric	25.0%	20.6%
Biocentric	2.8%	4.8%
Social Convention	8.3%	28.6%

OK for Everyone to Throw Trash in the Lake?

	Nature % No (n=40)	Non-nature % No (n=88)
	92.5%	93.2%
Why not?	(n=22)	(n=57)
Harm	54.5%	43.9%
Anthropocentric	22.7%	29.8%
Biocentric	--	7%
Social Convention	22.7%	49.3%

Trash in the Lake: Knowledge, Caring, Reasoning about Fish

	Nature (n=50)	Non-nature (n=92)
Harm Fish?	82.0%	73.9%
Would you care?	55.9%	48.3%

Why would you care?	Nature (n=16)	Non-Nature (n=19)
Harm	14	14
Anthropocentric	1	3
Biocentric	1	2
Convention	--	--

Trash in the Lake: Knowledge, Caring, Reasoning about Birds

	Nature (n=51)	Non-nature (n=90)
Harm Birds?	56.9%	55.6%
Would you care?	52.2%	47.1%

Why would you care?	Nature (n=12)	Non-nature (n=11)
Harm	12	7
Anthropocentric	0	3
Biocentric	0	1
Convention	0	0

Trash in the Lake: Knowledge, Caring, Reasoning about Water

	Nature (n=48)	**Non-nature (n=91)**
Harm Water?	43.8%	57.1%
Would you care?	n=8/15	n=22/42

Why would you care?	**Nature (n=6)**	**Non-nature (n=13)**
Harm	5	5
Anthropocentric	1	6
Biocentric	0	1
Convention	0	1

Trash in the Lake: Knowledge, Caring, Reasoning about People

	Nature (n=48)	Non-nature (n=89)
Harm People?	45.8%	52.8%
Would you care?	n=7/13	n=25/39

Why would you care?	Nature (n=11)	Non-Nature (n=15)
Harm	0	1
Anthropocentric	10	13
Biocentric	0	0
Convention	1	1

Far Away City, with a Rule

Ok to litter here!

	Nature (n=50)	Non-nature (n=90)
Not ok	84.0%	74.4%

Why not ok?	Nature (n=36)	Non-Nature (n=60)
Harm	44.4%	43.3%
Anthropocentric	27.8%	20.0%
Biocentric	8.3%	3.3%
Social Convention	19.4%	33.3%

Action Orientation

* I: "So even if it was a rule, you would say it's not okay?"
* C: "yeah"
* I: "Now what if everybody threw trash in Lake Michigan, would that be ok or not ok?"
* C: "Totally not. Do you know what I would do?
* I: "What would you do?"
* C: "I would maybe call someone that's important… maybe like a person that makes laws and call them and say, "Can you please make a law that no one can throw trash in the oceans and the lakes?"
* I: "You'll be happy to know that there really is a law that you can't throw trash in the lake."
* C: "Awesome."

Action Orientation

* "I would put those things over your eyes that help you see under water and get all of the trash out"

* "because if I was in that land, I would just change the rules"
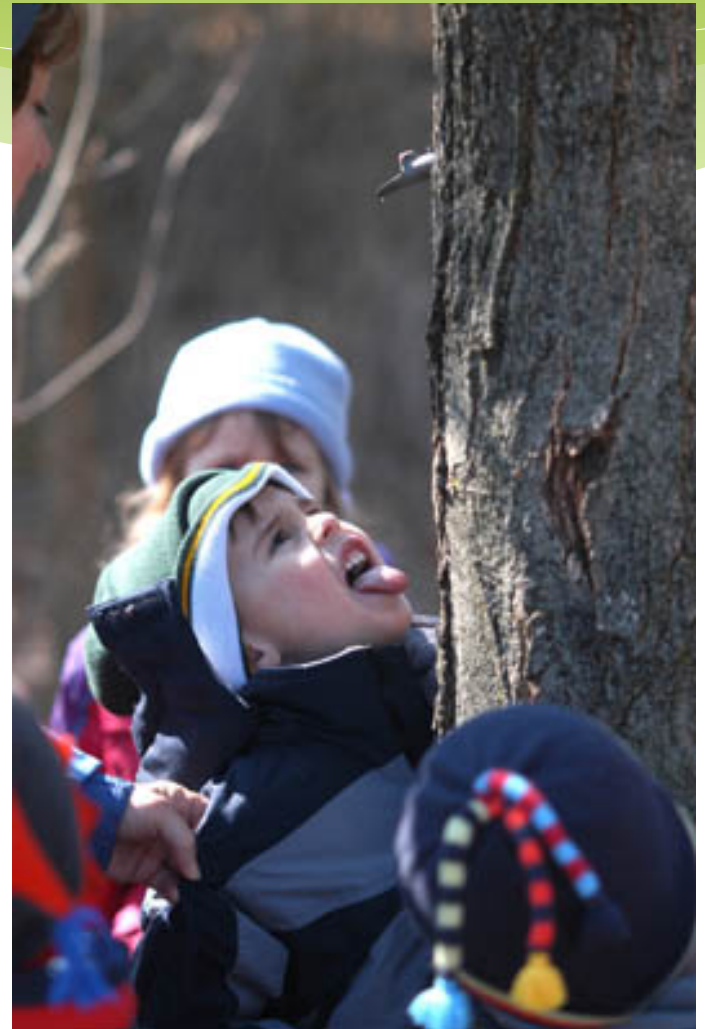
Universal Truth?

I: "Let's say there was another city next to a different lake that was very much like Lake Michigan, and there was a law that said it was ok to throw trash into the lake. Would that be all right or not all right?

C: "Not all right."

I: "Why?"

C: "'Cause the law would lie."

I: "The law?"

C: "The law would lie, if the law said it."

Conclusions

* A majority of preschool children judge environmentally harmful actions as wrong, prescriptive, generalizable, and not contingent upon rules or social conventions = moral domain
* Overall, a majority of children understood that trash would harm birds and fish; about half of children understood harm to water and people
* "harm to nature" was the most frequent justification, except when considering people; anthropocentric reasoning was most frequent in this case
* Children attending a nature-focused preschool did not differ from other children in their judgments or reasoning

Conclusions

* Some children spontaneously described actions they would take to mitigate harm to nature. All instances were from children enrolled in the nature-focused preschool.