

Moral judgment and cooperation in children with high-functioning autism

With the support by the National Natural Science Foundation of China and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Dr. Li Jing and Prof. Zhu Liqi at the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, reported the relationship between moral judgment and cooperation in children with high-functioning autism, which was published in *Scientific Reports* (2014, 4: 4314. doi: 10.1038/srep04314).

Autism is a neurobiological disorder that is characterized by deficits in social interaction, impairments in communication and language, as well as restricted/repetitive behaviors and/or interests. Lack of response to social emotional cues or reciprocal engagement is commonly seen as a main characteristic of individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Lots of studies have found that children with autism have deficits in the theory of mind (ToM) and empathy. Moral judgment is considered to be closely related to ToM. In addition, empathy is typically considered as a necessary component of developing moral agents. However, as an important aspect of social functioning, moral judgment has rarely been explored in the study of autism. Do children with high-functioning autism (HFA) judge others' morality correctly? Do they exhibit different moral behaviors towards people they judge as morally nice versus those they judge as morally naughty?

To answer these questions, children with HFA and matched typically developing (TD) children aged between 6 and 12 years were recruited. There was no significant difference between these two groups of children in terms of IQ. The researchers tested the children with HFA on both antisocial and pro-social acts to determine whether they could make both kinds of moral judgments correctly compared with the TD children. After making moral judgments properly, the participants were asked to interact with protagonists, whom they judged as either nice or naughty before, in the prisoner's dilemma game.

It was found that both HFA children and TD ones could make correct moral judgments, and HFA children might have even more rigid criteria for what constitutes a 'naughty' act than TD ones. HFA children's cooperation was similar when they played with partners of different moralities, while TD children showed higher cooperation when they played with a morally nice child than that when they interacted with a naughty child. Therefore, HFA children's cooperation was not influenced by the partner's morality, while TD children's cooperation might be prompted by the partner's nice morality. This study gave an important insight into HFA children's moral judgment and moral behavior.

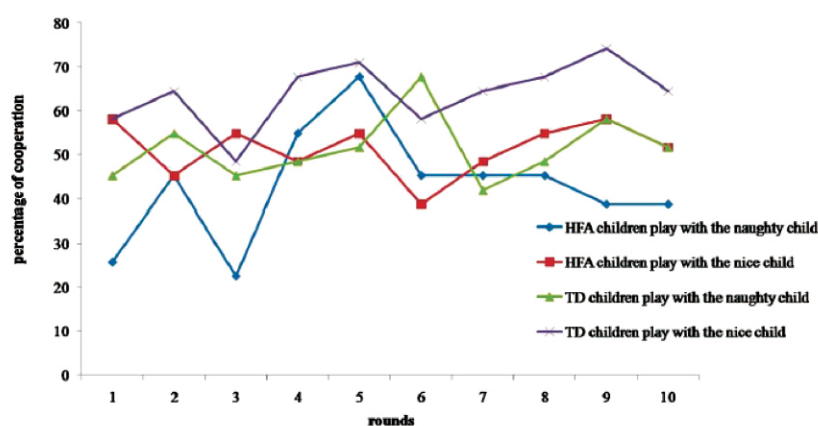


Figure Percentage of choosing cooperative responses when HFA and TD children played with a nice child and a naughty child across the 10 rounds of the PDG.