Reply to Scarf et al.: Nuanced social evaluation: Association doesn’t compute

Hamlin et al. (1) presented evidence that 8-mo-olds show “nuanced social judgments,” preferring individuals who (i) help those who have themselves previously helped others and (ii) harm those who have harmed others.

Scarf et al. (2) suggest that our findings can be explained in terms of a more primitive desire on the part of the infant to match the valence of the events: Perhaps infants have an overall tendency to choose a positive-acting character after seeing a positive event and to choose a negative-acting character after seeing a negative event. There is no evidence that such a matching tendency exists; nonetheless, we tested this possibility by exploring infants’ preferences for those who either help or harm the victim (rather than the perpetrator) of a previous negative act. The valence-matching account predicts that infants should prefer the harmer, but they prefer the helper. This suggests they are sensitive to, and responding based on, the roles of the characters as agent (harming another) vs. patient (being harmed).

Scarf et al. (2) point out that in our control, the victim first attempts some act (e.g., struggling to open a box), which is then hindered by an antisocial individual (e.g., slamming the box shut). They then state that “the [victim] is unlikely to attract any valence because its actions...began long before each outcome, hindering the association. Therefore, [the victim] attracts neither positive nor negative valence and fails to rule out the valence-matching hypothesis.”

This concern betrays a misunderstanding of the experimental procedure. The victim is the one struggling toward an unfulfilled goal; it is the victim’s goal that is thwarted; and, critically, it is the victim lying onstage with its head down that infants attend to for (on average) 7 s after the antisocial individual runs offstage. By any reasonable standard, the victim is far more associated with the negative act than the antisocial character is. Nonetheless, infants do not later prefer characters who act negatively toward the victim, but do prefer characters who act negatively toward the perpetrator, suggesting that they are responding to the characters’ individual roles as agent and patient, rather than the overall valence of the scene. Note further that in our other experiments, toddlers showed the same distinction: They themselves will punish antisocial characters but almost never victims of such characters.

We also wish to clarify a theoretical point. Scarf et al. (2) frame their response as an argument against the view that infants have an early expectation that individuals will follow the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” However, this was never our position; the Golden Rule accounts for none of our findings. Rather, we see our findings as reflecting nuanced systems of third-person evaluation. One alternative is that the infants believe that good behavior should be rewarded and bad behavior should be punished; another is that infants themselves affiliate with prosocial but not antisocial individuals. As we note, further research is needed to distinguish between these possibilities.

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