Are Good Boys Happy Victimizers?
Children’s Attributions of Emotion to Good- vs. Bad-Boys Following an Immoral Behavior
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Abstract
In the happy victimizer effect, children who know that it is wrong to break moral rules predict that a victimizer who does so will be happy with the outcome. The current study investigated whether this effect is due to children’s implicit assumption that the victimizer was a bad boy who enjoyed his bad behavior. Children (N=80, 5-7 years) heard two stories: one about a good boy (who suffered a momentary lapse of judgment), and one about a bad boy; in each story the boy broke a moral rule. Results suggest that the happy victimizer effect may have two contributing factors: Whether the victimizer is a good or bad in nature and whether children focus on the victimizer’s behavior or the final outcome of the story.

Introduction
In the happy victimizer effect, young children (5-6 years) identify stealing and hurting another as wrong but predict that the wrong-doer will nonetheless be happy with the outcome of his behavior (e.g., Arsenio & Kramer, 1992; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988).

* 5-year-olds focus on the outcome of the story and predict that the victimizer will feel good.
* 7-8-year-olds focus on the emotional consequence of breaking a moral rule and predict that he will feel bad.

Perhaps children attribute positive emotions to victimizers because they assume that the victimizer is a bad child who enjoys his own bad behavior.

The Study
Do children (N=80, 5-7 years) attribute different emotions to two different victimizers: a good boy who suffered a momentary lapse of judgment vs. a bad boy who was a known bully?

* Children heard two stories. Each story featured an amoral act (pushing another child off a swing; stealing another child’s favorite toy); one story’s protagonist was a good boy, the other, a bad boy (Figure 1).

After each story, the child was asked:
1. If the victimizer’s behavior was okay? Why or why not?
2. How each of boys in the story was feeling?
3. Why the victimizer felt the way he did?

It was predicted that:
1. Children would attribute more positive emotions to the bad boy than to the good boy
2. Children who attributed positive emotions would focus on the outcome of the story whereas those who attributed negative emotions would focus on the victimizer’s specific amoral behavior.

Results
For both stories, 97% of children agreed that the victimizer’s behavior was wrong and suggested that he should have asked the other boy to play with the swing or toy.

Discussion
These results suggest that the happy victimizer effect may not follow the maturational pattern traditionally assumed. Instead, two factors contribute to this effect.

* Children’s perception of the victimizer as “bad” determines whether the victimizer is indeed happy with the outcome of an amoral act.
* A second factor that may contribute to the happy victimizer effect is whether children focus on the outcome of the story or the victimizer’s amoral behavior.

With both of these factors, there were no age differences observed in the current sample of 5- to 7-year-olds.

References