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Young Children's Morally Relevant Theory of Mind: Relation of Understanding of Inner States of Others to Moral Judgments

KUSUMOTO, Chisato

Okayama Prefectural University, Faculty of Health and Welfare Science

SHUTO, Toshimoto

Saitama University, Faculty of Education

TONEGAWA, Tomoko

Tohoku Fukushi University, Faculty of Education

UEOKA, Kimi

Joint Graduate School in Science of School Education, Hyogo University of Teacher Education

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between understanding the inner state of others and moral judgment using the morally relevant false belief task. Forty-eight 5-year-olds with different developmental levels of standard false belief understanding were presented with one of the following two hypothetical stories; Person A put the Lego blocks in a box without knowing that those belonged to person B, or person A maliciously puts the blocks in a box even though he or she knows person B is using them. Participants answered the following four questions; Whether person A knew that the Lego blocks belonged to person B (predictability of the result), whether person B knew where the Lego blocks were (false belief), and whether person B knew who put the blocks away (understanding the another's perspective) and how bad you think person A's behavior was (judgment of wrongness). As a result, participants with a high level of understanding in the standard false-belief task understood more accurately the presence or absence of malicious intent in moral situations, another's perspectives and morally relevant false beliefs than those who were in a low level of understanding. It was also shown that the standard theory of mind is not related to moral judgment. These results suggest that in early childhood, being able to infer the state of mind of others does not directly lead to moral judgment based on the person's internal state. Necessary to identify factors that coordinate or mediate the relationship between the development of a theory of mind and moral judgments from early childhood to middle childhood were considered.

Keywords : moral judgment, theory of mind, morally relevant false belief task, young children