Considering Characters' Character: Preschoolers' Consideration of Character Traits in Their Moral Reasoning

Corrie Vendetti[1], Sarah Gardiner, Ellen Doucet[2], Thaadsha Santhiralingam[2], & Deepthi Kamawar[2]

Introduction

Preschoolers' **moral reasoning** is typically studied by telling them stories about characters who bring about some outcome exploring whether their moral judgments are influenced by:

- the **valence** of the outcome - **positive** or **negative**
- the **intention** of the characters **on purpose** or **by accident**

These stories frequently **lack context** about the characters. When we make moral judgments in our daily lives, we usually have background information about the people we are judging – including their **character traits**.

Purpose

We explored whether **trait information** influenced preschoolers' **moral judgments** of characters who brought about **positive and negative outcomes**.

Method

Participants

4- to 5-year-old children ($N = 61$; 31 female; Mage = 57 months)

Procedure

Children heard 6 stories about **nice** or **mean** or **trait-absent** characters who brought about outcomes that either made a bystander feel **happy** or **sad.** The outcomes were always unintentional and unforeseen.

- **Trait** (between-subjects): **nice** vs. **mean** vs. **trait-absent**
- **Outcome** (within-subjects): **Positive** (bystander happy) vs. **Negative** (bystander sad)

Dependent Measures

Intention

- **Physical Outcome**: Did Karli get water on Sam on purpose or by accident?
- **Emotional Outcome**: Did Karli make Sam happy/sad on purpose or by accident?

Moral Judgment: Was Karli being good/bad? How good/bad – a little or a lot?

Punishment: Should Karli get in trouble? How much trouble – a little or a lot?

Example

Mean: This is Karli. Karli is mean. She doesn't share her toys, she calls her friends mean names and she takes other children's snacks. Karli is mean.

Nice: This is Karli. Karli is nice. She shares her toys, she helps to clean up messes and shares snacks with her friends. Karli is nice.

Trait-absent: This is Karli. She has blonde hair, brown eyes and a little brother. This is Karli.

Karli is playing with a hose in her backyard.

Karli does not see Sam. Karli is using the hose to splash water all over her backyard.

Look, some of the water went over the fence and splashed Sam.
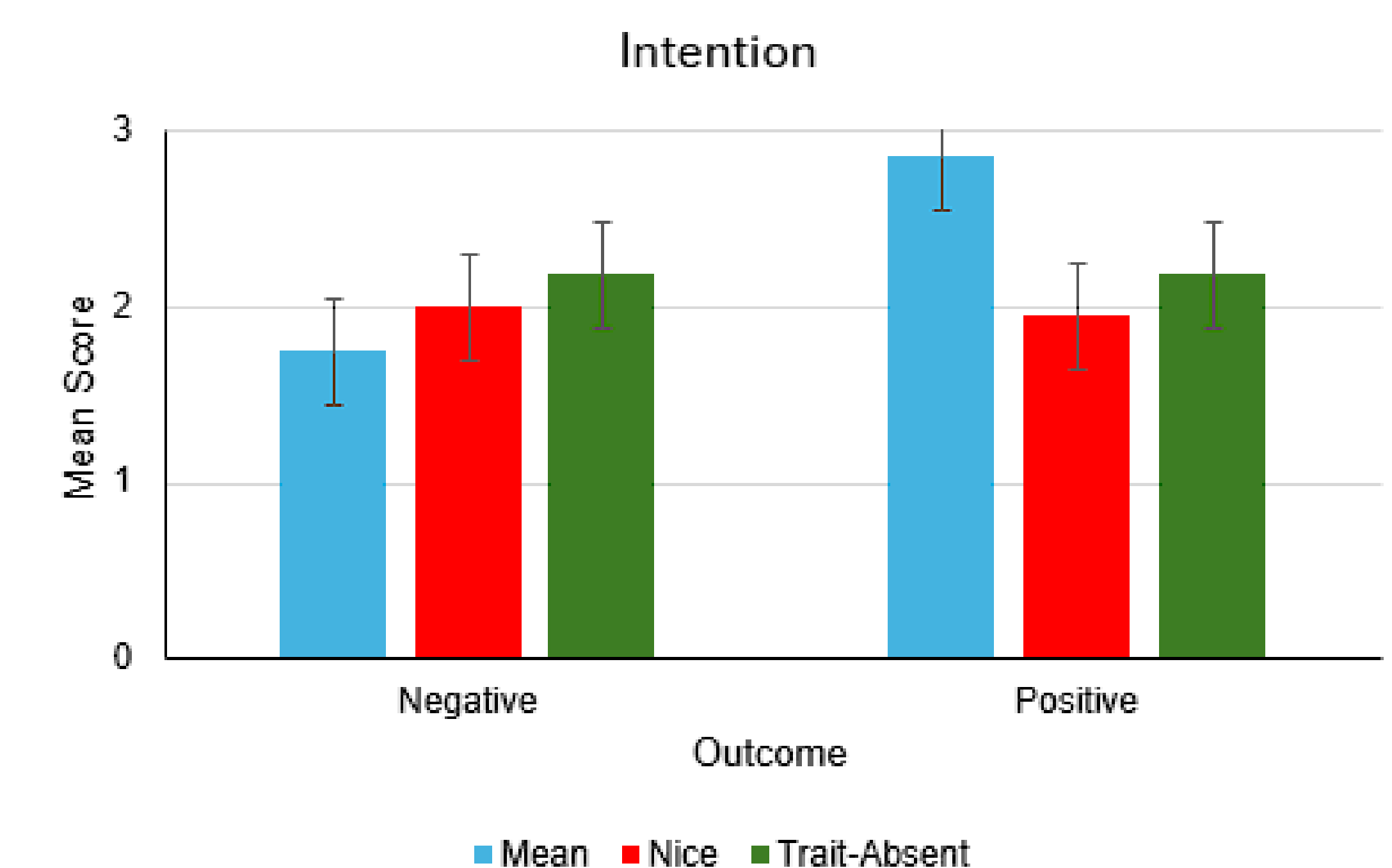

Positive Outcome: Sam is **happy**, she was hot and the water cooled her off.

Negative Outcome: Sam is **sad**, now she has to get dry clothes.

Results

Moral Judgments & Punishments

- **Trait** (nice, mean, or trait-absent) and **Outcome** (negative or positive) interacted to influence children's moral judgements and punishments.
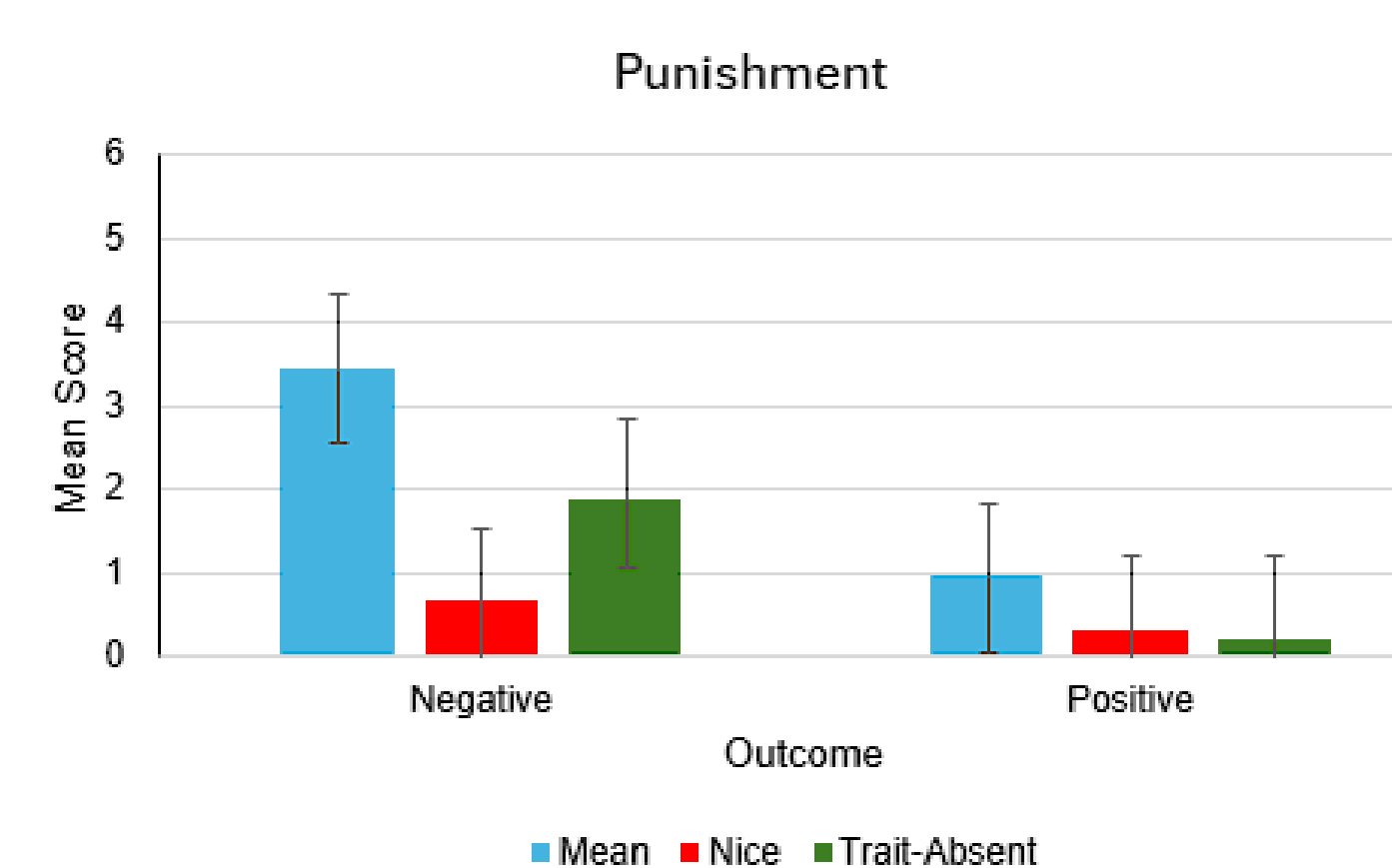
- **Negative outcomes** led to **mean** characters being judged **more negatively** and assigned **more punishment**
- **Positive outcomes** led to **nice** characters being rated **more positively**

Intentions

- Children were able to accurately indicate that physical outcomes were accidental **72% of the time**
- When actions led to **positive emotions**, children more accurately indicated **that mean characters' actions were accidental** compared to nice and trait-absent characters

Discussion

Preschoolers consider both **traits** and **outcomes** when reasoning about the **moral** and **intentional ramifications** of a character's actions.

Children seem to make different kinds of considerations depending on the **correspondence** between a characters' **traits** and the valence of the **outcome.**

- When outcomes and traits were **aligned**, these factors **compounded** to impact children's moral judgments and punishments
- When outcomes and traits were **misaligned**, they seemed to **highlight** the **unintentional nature** of their actions

These findings demonstrate that children are engaging in fairly complex reasoning in weighing these different factors in their moral judgments and ascriptions of intention.

Scan for Supplementary Materials