Emotions shape our social lives. They play an influential role in how young people evaluate morally relevant situations such as conflicts about fairness, justice, and social inclusion and exclusion. Feelings of empathy or guilt can help adolescents understand the difference between moral concerns, such as fairness, and amoral concerns, such as personal gains or peer group functioning. Such feelings can also serve as motives for prosocial behavior and can inhibit antisocial behavior. Still, young people’s emotional experiences in morally relevant situations are complex and do not necessarily lead to moral choices or adaptive social behavior.

This volume examines the question of how emotions relate to adolescents’ decision making, reasoning, and behavior in morally relevant situations. It provides a summary of current research on emotions, morality, and adaptive behaviors. Furthermore, it discusses new approaches to research on emotions, morality, and socially adaptive behavior in adolescence. By doing so, the articles provide new insights into adolescents’ emotional and moral development and show how emotions contribute to the way adolescents negotiate, resolve, and adapt to the moral and social conflicts that inevitably occur in their everyday lives.

By integrating innovative perspectives from developmental, educational, and clinical research, this volume has much to offer for researchers, youth practitioners, and educators.
Adolescent Emotions
Development, Morality, and Adaptation

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True morality, like beauty, needs more than intellect. It includes a feeling of good will for others that is warmed by an inner fire.


Emotions shape the landscape of our social and moral lives.\(^1\) What we feel is likely to influence how we think about situations involving fairness, justice, or social inclusion. Our emotions about morally relevant events strongly depend on our experiences and evaluations of the social world.\(^2\) For example, experiencing exclusion from a peer group may evoke a variety of negative, challenging emotions in a young person, which may influence his or her future thinking about these situations. Conversely, making decisions about moral issues, such as including a child who has a mental disability into a group activity for reasons of fairness and empathy, may cause positive feelings in the self. In turn, these feelings may influence one’s evaluations of future situations.\(^3\) These examples show that emotional experiences are necessarily intertwined with evaluations of morally relevant situations in multifaceted ways.\(^4\)

Emotions may also help adolescents adapt to challenges that are inherent in everyday moral conflicts. For example, the anticipation of guilt feelings after one’s own wrongdoing may restrict amoral or aggressive behavior and motivate reparative behavior, such as an apology.\(^5\) Vice versa, the absence of such emotions may hinder fair decision making or limit moral behavior.\(^6\) For instance, focusing exclusively on the positive feelings associated with personal benefit may contribute to amoral decision making and lead an individual
to weigh strategic considerations and self-interest over moral concerns. The anticipation of moral emotions, such as guilt feelings over wrongdoing or empathy for an individual who is suffering from the consequences of a transgression, is likely to relate to morally relevant behaviors. Still, this does not imply that such anticipation always leads to adaptive or positive outcomes. For example, an individual who feels intense guilt about real or imagined wrongdoing might be more prone to maladaptation, such as depression or social anxiety.

Examining the complex interplay between emotions and reasoning in the context of moral conflict is important if we are to understand how young people resolve and adapt to the social and moral conflicts that inevitably occur in their everyday lives.

The articles in this volume aim to explain how emotional experiences influence young people’s decision making, reasoning, and morally relevant behaviors.

What are the gaps in current research and thinking about adolescents’ emotions and moral development? Recent models of adolescent development have acknowledged the role of emotions in adolescents’ thoughts about fairness and morally relevant behavior. However, integrative research is still scarce, and we know little about the subtleties involved in the relation between various emotional experiences and decision making regarding moral issues.

This volume brings together perspectives from developmental science, education, and clinical science to discuss new approaches to emotions, morality, and socially adaptive behavior in adolescence. The main aims are twofold. The first is to summarize the recent developmental science literature on moral emotions and moral reasoning, and emerge with a more complete picture of how these two parts of moral development may be integrated into a holistic view of adolescents’ developing morality. The second is to identify novel approaches to the study of adolescents’ emotions in morally-relevant contexts. In addition, this volume highlights the implications for educating moral and emotional development.

The first three articles focus on the role of emotions in adolescents’ decision making and reasoning about morally relevant situ-
ations. They also show how adolescents integrate affect and cognition in these situations. Wainryb and Recchia begin this exploration by discussing a framework for capturing adolescents’ emotional experiences in the context of morality and understanding how these sometimes turbulent or bewildering experiences inform, enrich, and change their thinking about what is right and wrong. In the second article, Malti, Ongley, Dys, and Colasante describe the variety of emotions that adolescents experience in situations involving moral transgressions and social exclusion. Using empirical data from Canada, they show that empathy helps adolescents anticipate other morally relevant emotions, such as guilt feelings. Cooley, Elenbaas, and Killen emphasize in the third article the relevance of group dynamics for adolescents’ moral and emotional development. They argue that, with the increasing salience of group membership in adolescence, weighing the consequences of resisting group norms becomes more important.

Taking the topic of emotions and morality one step further, the next three articles discuss emotions in relation to morally relevant behavior and adaptation. In the fourth article, Krettenauer describes links between moral emotion attributions and children’s and adolescents’ social behavior. The links exemplify different forms of adolescents’ ability to make moral judgments and take responsibility for their actions. Carlo, McGinley, Davis, and Streit summarize research in the fifth article on the roles of guilt, shame, and sympathy in adolescents’ morally relevant behaviors. Using data from the United States, they provide support for the role of guilt and sympathy in adolescents’ prosocial behavior. In the sixth article, Arsenio, Preziosi, Silberstein, and Hamburger shift the focus to low-income, urban adolescents’ perceptions regarding the fairness of American society and how these perceptions relate to their emotional experiences and actual behavior.

In the final article, Broderick and Jennings provide an approach to support emotion regulation and reduce maladaptive behavior in adolescents by focusing on emotional awareness and mindfulness. They conclude that mindfulness, as taught in universal prevention
programs, is a promising tool to promote adolescents’ emotional development and adaptive behavior.

Taken together, these articles provide new ways of thinking about the development of adolescents’ emotions in situations involving fairness, social inclusion, and caring. They summarize links between emotions and morally relevant behaviors, such as prosocial behavior and antisocial behavior, while also providing discussion of how to educate adolescents’ moral and emotional development. Understanding the complexities in the relationship of adolescents’ emotions, evaluations, and behavior in morally relevant situations is an exciting area for future research and practice.

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