Early and Middle Adolescents' Reasoning About Moral and Personal Concerns in Opposite-sex Interactions

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Abstract

This study examined how adolescents coordinate personal and moral concerns in reasoning about opposite-sex interactions. Sixty-four early and middle adolescents (Ms = 12.74, 16.05 years) were individually interviewed about two hypothetical situations involving opposite-sex interactions (commenting on appearance, initiating a date), presented in four conditions that varied the salience of personal vs. moral concerns. Overall, participants viewed opposite-sex interactions as harmless and acceptable in personal conditions, but as moral concerns became more salient, they were viewed more negatively, as less contingent on the target's response, and as entailing humiliation, coercion, and victimization. Age differences occurred primarily in reasoning about conditions entailing mixed-personal and moral concerns. Implications for adolescents' understanding of harassment and victimization are discussed.

Keywords: adolescence; moral development; reasoning; romantic relationships

Introduction

Interactions with opposite-sex peers become increasingly common and important in adolescence. Although exciting, these interactions are fraught with ambiguity due to adolescents' relative lack of romantic experience and lack of clarity about the norms regulating opposite-sex interactions (Darling, Dowdy, Van Horn, & Caldwell, 1999). Although the focus here is on the experience of heterosexual adolescents, similar concerns may arise for sexual minority youth (Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, 1999). Regardless of their sexual orientation, adolescents need to discern how to express themselves so that their partners do not feel harassed or victimized. Social domain research (Nucci, 1996; Smetana, 2006) has established that conflicts arise

when statements of personal preferences (of expression, association) infringe on moral conceptions of others' welfare and rights. This study examined how early and middle adolescents coordinate these personal and moral concerns in their reasoning about opposite-sex interactions.

Opposite-sex Interactions in Adolescence

Adolescents are preoccupied with developing and maintaining intimate relationships. Interactions with same-sex peers in the context of cliques persist until early to mid-adolescence, when youth spend increasingly more time in opposite-sex interactions in crowds. Researchers suggest that large mixed-sex crowds facilitate adolescents' heterosexual development by providing opportunities for dating (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000) and allowing teens to develop relational skills (e.g., collaboration, conflict resolution) to carry into romantic relationships (Feiring, 1999).

Despite their importance, interactions with opposite-sex peers are also ambiguous, especially in early adolescence. Some of this ambiguity derives from early adolescents' limited experience with opposite-sex peers and with the role of 'romantic partner' (Darling et al., 1999; Feiring, 1999). Whereas only a minority of early adolescents report having had a past or current romantic partner, nearly half of middle adolescents and the majority of older adolescents do (Brown, 2004; Connolly et al., 2000). Younger adolescents also report fewer opposite-sex peers among their close friends than do older adolescents (Darling et al., 1999). Opposite-sex interactions also may be challenging because they entail ambiguous norms (Darling et al., 1999). Adolescents report uncertainty about how to express romantic interest, comment on others' appearance, initiate dating, and be a romantic partner (Grover, Nangle, Serwik, & Zeff, 2007).

Adolescents' increasing participation in opposite-sex interactions also provides opportunities for sexual harassment (Craig, Pepler, Connolly, & Henderson, 2001; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002), typically defined as unwanted sexual attention (Chiodo, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, & Jaffe, 2009), or physical (e.g., grabbing/ pinching) or verbal (e.g., sexual comments or rumors) behaviors. Sexual harassment begins in early adolescence and increases with age (McMaster et al., 2002). Most adolescents have experienced some form of sexual harassment (Chiodo et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2010).

Although teasing and other harassing behaviors may be seen as victimizing and hurtful, these same behaviors are commonly used to initiate opposite-sex interactions (Pellegrini, 2001), and are construed as playful and affectionate and as enabling adolescents to negotiate social identities (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). Hence, these behaviors are inherently ambiguous because their intent is not readily apparent and depends on the recipient's interpretation (Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). They also potentially entail conflicting concerns with self-expression and others' welfare. The findings of one survey (AAUW, 2001, as cited in Petersen & Hyde, 2009) reflect this ambiguity: over half of the behaviors construed to be sexual harassment were perpetrated 'to attract or express affection toward the victim' (p. 1176), specifically to express romantic interest or because they thought the target liked the behavior. Thus, some harassing behaviors may be crude attempts at learning socially appropriate ways to express romantic interest (McMaster et al., 2002). How do adolescents learn to assert their personal prerogatives by commenting on an opposite-sex peer's appearance and initiating dating so that the peer does not feel harassed or

victimized? This study examined adolescents' judgments and reasoning about whether these types of situations entail harmless assertions of personal prerogative or harmful intrusions on others' welfare.

Social Domain Theory and Opposite-sex Interactions in Adolescence

The present study was guided by social domain theory and research (Smetana, 2006, 2011; Turiel, 1983, 2006) suggesting that adolescents judge it morally wrong to hurt others physically or emotionally, but also recognize that some activities (e.g., choice of friends, recreational activities) are outside the realm of moral or societal regulation (e.g., are personal) because they only affect the self (Nucci, 1996). The boundaries and contents of the personal domain are actively negotiated with others, and this takes on new meanings and intensity as adolescents confront the developmental task of identity construction (Nucci, 1996). Smetana (for a review, see Smetana, 2011) has established that parent–adolescent conflict results from differences in how parents and adolescents understand and define the boundaries of adolescent autonomy and personal jurisdiction. This research shows that individuals may attempt to coordinate personal and moral concerns when they overlap in multifaceted issues. Other research (Daddis, 2008, 2011; Komolova & Wainryb, 2011) highlights that adolescents' personal domain is constructed in opposition to parental regulation and guided by their peers' personal claims. The boundaries of the personal domain delineate the self from the group, and harmless assertions of personal prerogative from acts that harass or victimize others.

This study examined adolescents' reasoning about moral and personal concerns in the context of opposite-sex interactions. We focused on early vs. middle adolescence because an intense preoccupation with opposite-sex interactions is established by early adolescence (Darling et al., 1999). With age, adolescents gain experience with opposite-sex interactions, their social reasoning becomes more sensitive to contextual features, such as the relative salience of moral and personal concerns, and their concepts of fairness become more broadly applied (Smetana, 2011). We examined reasoning about situations in which adolescents comment on an opposite-sex peer's appearance or ask an opposite-sex peer on a date. These situations represent the types of new and potentially problematic interpersonal situations that adolescents face, and involve personal concerns with self-expression and moral concerns with others' welfare. Four conditions varying in the salience of personal vs. moral concerns were contrasted. Two prototypical conditions highlighted straightforward personal or moral concerns whereas two multifaceted conditions highlighted mixed-personal and moral concerns.

Targets' emotions are a salient feature of moral reasoning that often are inferred from their behaviors (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006; Smetana, 2006). Thus, we elicited adolescents' act evaluations and attributions of emotions to the targets of the comment/request. We also examined whether act evaluations were contingent on targets' behaviors (i.e., looking pleased/displeased). Although research has shown that adolescents do not take targets' behaviors at face value and appreciate that compliance may reflect consent or apprehension (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006), we examined adolescents' use of targets' behaviors to infer targets' emotions and evaluate whether the acts involve victimization.

Reasoning about opposite-sex interactions was expected to vary by condition and situation. In the personal condition, we expected participants to attribute happiness to targets, and judge the act as harmless and acceptable but as contingent on targets'

behaviors (i.e., unacceptable if targets looked displeased). We hypothesized that participants would attribute more negative emotions (e.g., angry, sad, apprehensive) to targets in the two multifaceted conditions, and to evaluate the act more negatively than in the personal condition but more positively than in the moral condition. In the multifaceted conditions, participants were also expected to view information about targets' behaviors as relevant and hence to make act evaluations contingent on those behaviors. In the moral condition, we hypothesized that participants would attribute negative emotions to targets, evaluate the act as harmful and unacceptable, and judge this evaluation as non-contingent on targets' behaviors (i.e., unacceptable even if targets looked pleased). Finally, because the dating situation raises distinct moral concerns with targets' consent, we expected participants would construe it as more coercive, and would be more concerned with targets' apprehension and consent, judge the act more negatively, and make more contingent act evaluations than the commenting situation.

Age differences were not expected in the prototypical conditions because they depict personal or moral concerns in unambiguous ways (Smetana, 2006). However, we expected that personal concerns would be prioritized over moral concerns and that opposite-sex interactions in the multifaceted conditions would be construed more positively by early than middle adolescents. This was based on early adolescents' limited experience with opposite-sex interactions, and because early as compared with older adolescents tend to overextend the boundaries of the personal domain and give more weight to personal than moral and other social concerns (Nucci & Turiel, 2007, as cited in Nucci, 2008).

Finally, previous research suggested competing hypotheses about gender differences in reasoning about opposite-sex interactions. Although sexual harassment is equally prevalent among teen boys and girls, girls are the most common targets of opposite-sex harassment (Chiodo et al., 2009), suggesting that they would construe opposite-sex interactions in the multifaceted conditions more negatively than boys. By contrast, the dearth of gender differences in previous moral reasoning research (Smetana, 2006) suggests that we, too, might find few gender differences.

Method

Participants

The sample included 64 participants, 16 males and 16 females in early ($M = 12.74$, range 11.83–14) and middle adolescence ($M = 16.05$, range 14.83–16.75). Participants attended public schools in a midsized city in western USA. School records revealed that participants were primarily White (73 percent; 19 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Black/Not Hispanic, 3 percent Other) and from middle-class families. Parents had a high school diploma (45 percent), a college degree (32 percent), or a graduate degree (23 percent). Sample characteristics were consistent with the demographics of the geographic area.

Procedure

Participants were individually interviewed in 20–30 minutes sessions in their schools; interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The presentation order of the two situations was counterbalanced within each age and gender in a Latin-square design. Because we sought to ascertain how adolescents drew boundaries between

opposite-sex interactions that are personal or morally coercive, the presentation order of the four conditions was fixed such that moral concerns became increasingly salient as the interview proceeded (i.e., personal, mixed-personal, mixed-moral, moral).

Interviews

Two hypothetical situations in which an actor comments on an opposite-sex teen's appearance (commenting), or asks an opposite-sex teen for a date (dating), were presented in four conditions that varied the salience of personal and moral concerns (see Appendix). Two prototypical conditions highlighted straightforward concerns bearing on either the personal or moral domain. The personal condition underscored actors' prerogatives to act in ways that do not harm others whereas the moral condition underscored the act's harmful consequences for targets. Two multifaceted conditions highlighted mixed-personal and moral concerns. The mixed-personal condition was weighted toward the actors' prerogatives whereas the mixed-moral condition was weighted toward the harmful consequences for targets. Extensive pilot work was conducted to ensure that adolescents understood prototypical and multi-faceted conditions as such. Situation and condition were varied within subjects. The actor's gender was varied between subjects, with half of the males and females in each age group telling that the actor in each situation was a male teenager. The characters in the hypothetical stories were described as classmates (i.e., 'The teen-agers in these stories are not strangers: they all go to the same school but they do not hang out together').

We assessed the target's emotions ['How do you think (target) feels inside when (actor) does this?'] and the act's acceptability ['Is it okay or not okay for (actor) to do this? Why?']. To examine whether act evaluations were contingent on the target's behavior, participants who evaluated the act positively were asked: 'What if you knew that (target) looked displeased when (actor) did this. Do you still think it is okay, or is it not okay?' Participants who evaluated the act negatively were asked whether the act would be okay or not if the target looked pleased.

Scoring and Reliability

The emotions attributed to targets were scored using five categories adapted from previous research (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006), and further clarified by scoring pilot data and 20 percent of the study protocols. Emotion categories included happy ('She feels good because somebody noticed her new glasses and complimented her'), embarrassed ('He feels embarrassed because the other kids are right there and she keeps doing it'), angry ('He feels angry because she won't leave him alone'), sad ('She feels sad because she doesn't want that to happen and she doesn't want to go out with him either'), and apprehensive ('She feels nervous because he's asking her out and she doesn't know what to say'). Multiple categories were scored in terms of the propor-tional use of each category.

Act evaluations were scored on a 3-point scale, with 1 = 'negative', 2 = 'mixed', and 3 = 'positive'. Justifications for the act evaluations were scored using previously derived categories (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006), and scoring pilot data and 20 percent of the protocols. Categories referred to whether the act was harmless ('It's okay because he's just commenting on her new glasses'), harmful ('It's not okay to say that because

it's insulting and makes him feel bad'), embarrassing ('She's embarrassed that he keeps asking her in front of everybody'), non-consensual ('She's pressuring him and you shouldn't do that'), contingent on its consensual status ('If he doesn't think it's offensive, then it's okay, but if he took offense, it isn't'), or contingent on the actor's intent ('It depends if she liked his shoes, that's okay, but if she's saying it to be abusive, that's not okay'). Multiple categories were scored in terms of the proportional use of each category.

The contingency of the act evaluation was scored as 1 = 'non-contingent' (i.e., the manipulation of targets' behaviors did not change the act evaluation) or 2 = 'contingent' [i.e., the manipulation of targets' behaviors changed the act evaluation; see Wainryb (1991)].

Scoring reliability between two coders (Cohen's κ), assessed on 20 percent of the interviews, was .91 for the emotions attributions and .84 for the justifications for the act evaluations.

Results

Preliminary analyses indicated that fewer than 8 percent of the effects or interactions involving the participants' or actors' gender were significant, with no discernible pattern; both were, therefore, dropped from subsequent analyses. For all analyses, significant interactions were examined using tests of simple effects, and where appropriate Bonferroni-corrected t tests. To facilitate comprehension of interactions and because our central hypotheses focused on the effects of condition and age, significant interactions involving situation were analyzed with tests of the simple effects of condition or age within each level of situation.

Targets' Emotions

Emotion attributions, scored as proportions (see Table 1), were analyzed with a 2 (age) × 2 (situation) × 4 (condition) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The MANOVA (Wilks' lambda) yielded significant effects for situation, condition, situation × condition, and situation × condition × age (all $ps < .01$). These significant effects were followed by analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with situation and condition as repeated measures, on the proportional use of each emotion category. Overall, findings confirmed our central hypotheses: participants attributed happiness to targets in the personal condition, and anger, sadness, or apprehension (especially in the dating situation), as moral concerns became increasingly salient across the multifaceted and moral conditions. Findings from these analyses are presented for each emotion attribution category in turn.

Happy. As hypothesized, participants attributed happiness to targets more in the personal than in the other conditions ($ps < .001$). A situation × condition interaction, $F(3, 186) = 6.10$, $p < .001$ $\eta_p^2 = .09$, was qualified by a significant situation × condition × age interaction, $F(3, 186) = 4.00$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. As expected, early adolescents in the dating situation and middle adolescents in the commenting situation attributed happiness in the mixed-personal more than in the mixed-moral or moral conditions ($ps < .01$), and for the latter more in the mixed-moral than in the moral condition ($ps < .001$).

Table 1. Emotions Attributed to Targets (in Proportions) and Mean Act Evaluations by Situation, Condition, and Age

	Commenting situation								Dating situation							
Condition	Personal		Mixed-personal		Mixed-moral		Moral		Personal		Mixed-personal		Mixed-moral		Moral	
Age	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid
Emotions																
Happy	.89	.88	.14	.36	.02	.09	.00	.00	.70	.72	.17	.03	.03	.06	.00	.00
Embarrassed	.08	.00	.72	.48	.34	.41	.17	.18	.03	.05	.05	.00	.52	.28	.17	.03
Angry	.00	.05	.05	.05	.09	.14	.16	.15	.03	.02	.58	.69	.33	.38	.36	.37
Sad	.02	.08	.05	.09	.52	.33	.64	.67	.00	.02	.02	.13	.05	.09	.19	.23
Apprehensive	.02	.00	.05	.02	.00	.00	.00	.00	.23	.20	.13	.16	.07	.19	.25	.38
Other	.00	.00	.00	.00	.03	.03	.03	.00	.00	.00	.06	.00	.00	.00	.03	.00
Act evaluations																
Mean	2.94	2.91	1.22	1.63	1.09	1.28	1.00	1.00	2.50	2.72	1.50	1.19	1.19	1.13	1.00	1.00
SD	.35	.30	.61	.79	.39	.52	.00	.00	.84	.63	.84	.59	.54	.49	.00	.00

Notes: Early and mid = early and middle adolescents. Numbers in each column may not add up to 1.00 due to rounding. Evaluations were scored on a 3-point scale, with 3 = positive.

Embarrassed. A significant main effect of age was qualified by significant situation × condition, $F(3, 186) = 23.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$, and situation × condition × age, $F(3, 186) = 4.12$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, interactions. In the commenting situation, early adolescents attributed embarrassment to targets more in the mixed-personal than in all other conditions, and in the mixed-moral more than in the prototypical conditions ($ps < .05$). By contrast, middle adolescents said targets felt embarrassed more in the multifaceted than the prototypical conditions, and more in the moral than in the personal condition ($ps < .01$). In the dating situation, all teens reported embarrassment more in the mixed-moral than in any other condition, but only early adolescents viewed targets as more embarrassed in the moral than the personal or mixed-personal conditions ($ps < .05$). Targets were said to feel embarrassed more by early than middle adolescents in the mixed-personal condition of the commenting situation and in the mixed-moral condition of the dating situation ($ps < .05$).

Angry. As hypothesized, a significant situation × condition interaction, $F(3, 186) = 21.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$, showed that in the commenting situation, targets were seen as angry more in the moral than in the personal and mixed-personal conditions, and more in the mixed-moral than in the personal condition ($ps < .01$). In the dating situation, anger was attributed to targets more in the mixed-personal than in all other conditions, and in the mixed-moral and moral more than in the personal condition ($ps < .001$).

Sad. The main effects for situation and condition were qualified by a significant situation × condition interaction, $F(3, 186) = 23.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$. As hypothesized, in both situations, targets were seen as sad more in the moral than in all other conditions. Furthermore, targets in the commenting situation were seen as sad more in the mixed-moral than in the personal and mixed-personal conditions ($ps < .001$) whereas targets in the dating situation were seen as sad more in the mixed-personal and mixed-moral than in the personal condition ($ps < .05$).

Apprehensive. A main effect for situation was qualified by a significant situation × condition interaction, $F(3, 186) = 3.85$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. As hypothesized, targets were seen as apprehensive only in regard to dating, and more in the moral than in the mixed-personal and mixed-moral conditions ($ps < .05$).

Act Evaluations

Mean act evaluations (see Table 1) were examined using a 2 (age) × 2 (situation) × 4 (condition) ANOVA, with situation and condition as repeated measures. Our hypotheses that participants would evaluate the act more positively in the commenting than the dating situation, and would evaluate acts as most positive in the personal condition, and progressively more negatively in the multifaceted and moral conditions, were confirmed, although unexpectedly the findings were moderated by age. Act evaluations varied by situation, $F(1, 62) = 5.30$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, and condition, $F(3, 186) = 306.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .83$, but these effects were also qualified by a significant situation × condition × age interaction, $F(3, 186) = 5.26$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. Whereas in both situations participants judged acts in the personal condition more positively than in all other conditions ($ps < .001$), middle adolescents also

judged the act in the multifaceted conditions of the commenting situation more positively than the moral condition ($ps < .001$), and early adolescents also judged the act in the mixed-personal of the dating situation more positively than the moral condition ($ps < .001$).

Justifications for Act Evaluations

Justifications, scored as proportions (see Table 2), were analyzed with a 2 (age) × 2 (situation) × 4 (condition) MANOVA. Unelaborated responses and categories with low (<5 percent) overall frequency were not included in the MANOVA and subsequent analyses. The MANOVA (Wilks' lambda) yielded significant main effects for situation, condition, and age, and significant situation × condition, situation × age, condition × age, and situation × condition × age interactions (all $ps < .01$). These significant effects were followed by ANOVAs, with situation and condition as repeated measures, on the proportional use of each justification category. Significant effects for each variable were qualified by significant interactions, including significant situation × condition interactions, which were found for each justification category. Overall, findings confirmed our hypotheses: participants referred to the act's harmlessness in the personal condition and the act's harmfulness in the moral condition, and referred to moral concerns with targets' consent more in the dating than in the commenting situation. Findings from these analyses are presented for each justification category in turn.

Harmless. As hypothesized, the majority of justifications in the personal condition (85 percent) referred to the act's harmlessness. A main effect for condition was qualified by significant situation × condition, $F(3, 186) = 3.97$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and situation × condition × age interactions, $F(3, 186) = 3.51$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Early adolescents justified the dating situation as harmless in the mixed-personal more than in the mixed-moral and moral conditions ($ps < .05$) whereas middle adolescents justified the commenting situation as harmless in the mixed-personal more than in the mixed-moral and moral conditions ($ps < .001$).

Harmful. As hypothesized, the majority of justifications in the moral condition (87.5 percent) referred to the act's harmfulness. The main effects for situation and condition were qualified by a significant situation × condition interaction, $F(3, 186) = 36.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .37$. In both situations, references to the act's harmfulness were made more in the moral than in all other conditions, and in the mixed-moral more than in the mixed-personal and personal conditions ($ps < .05$). References to harm were rare in the personal and mixed-personal conditions. In the mixed-moral and moral conditions, references to harm were made more in the commenting than in the dating situation ($ps < .01$).

Embarrassing. Significant main effects for situation, condition, and age were qualified by significant condition × age, $F(3, 186) = 6.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, situation × condition, $F(3, 186) = 64.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .51$, and situation × condition × age, $F(3, 186) = 9.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, interactions. In the commenting situation, teens reasoned that the act was embarrassing in the mixed-personal more than in all other conditions ($ps < .05$). Early adolescents also reasoned about embarrassment in the mixed-moral more than in the personal and moral conditions ($ps < .05$). In the dating situation, teens focused on embarrassment more in the mixed-moral than in all other conditions ($ps < .05$). Early

Table 2. Justifications for Act Evaluation by Situation, Condition, and Age (in Proportions)

| | Commenting situation | | | | | | | | Dating situation | | | | | | | |
| | Personal | | Mixed-personal | | Mixed-moral | | Moral | | Personal | | Mixed-personal | | Mixed-moral | | Moral | |
Condition	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid
Harmless	.97	.91	.09	.22	.05	.03	.00	.00	.70	.83	.20	.09	.05	.06	.00	.00
Harmful	.03	.00	.00	.09	.75	.69	.95	.95	.00	.00	.00	.06	.13	.13	.86	.73
Embarrassing	.00	.00	.84	.41	.17	.06	.05	.05	.00	.00	.00	.00	.47	.22	.09	.00
Non-consensual	.00	.00	.00	.05	.00	.00	.00	.00	.22	.08	.73	.84	.33	.59	.05	.27
Contingent on consent	.00	.03	.03	.20	.00	.09	.00	.00	.06	.03	.03	.00	.03	.00	.00	.00
Contingent on intent	.00	.06	.00	.00	.03	.13	.00	.00	.00	.03	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Other	.00	.00	.03	.03	.00	.00	.00	.00	.02	.03	.03	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00

Notes: Early and mid = early and middle adolescents. Numbers in each column may not add up to 1.00 due to rounding.

adolescents also reasoned more about embarrassment in the moral than in the personal and the mixed-personal conditions ($ps < .01$). Early more than middle adolescents saw the act as embarrassing in the mixed-personal condition of the commenting situation and in the mixed-moral condition of the dating situation ($ps < .05$).

Non-consensual. The main effects for situation, condition, and age were qualified by significant condition × age, $F(3, 186) = 3.25, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$, situation × condition, $F(3, 186) = 35.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .37$, and situation × condition × age, $F(3, 186) = 2.90, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$, interactions. As hypothesized, references to non-consensual interactions were made only in regard to dating. Somewhat unexpectedly, this justification was used more by middle than early adolescents in the mixed-moral and moral conditions ($ps < .05$). Furthermore, all teens referred to the act as non-consensual in the mixed-personal more than in all other conditions, and in the mixed-moral more than in the moral condition ($ps < .01$) and (for middle adolescents only) the personal condition ($p < .01$).

Contingency of Act Evaluations

The mean contingency of act evaluations (see Table 3) was examined using a 2 (age) × 2 (situation) × 4 (condition) ANOVA, with situation and condition as repeated measures. Findings were consistent with the hypotheses that participants would make non-contingent evaluations more in the commenting than in the dating situation, and more in the moral than in the other conditions. Overall, when told the target's behavior was inconsistent with their act evaluation, 64 percent of participants did not change their judgment (non-contingent evaluation). As hypothesized, this varied by situation, condition, and age, but somewhat unexpectedly this was qualified by significant situation × age, $F(1, 59) = 4.39, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .07$, and situation × condition, $F(3, 177) = 2.78, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$, interactions. The former revealed that in the commenting situation, middle adolescents made more non-contingent evaluations than did early adolescents, $M = 1.20, 1.43, p < .001$. Middle adolescents also made more non-contingent evaluations in the commenting ($M = 1.20$) than in the dating ($M = 1.38$) situation ($ps < .01$). As expected, non-contingent evaluations were more common in the commenting ($M = 1.41$) than in the dating ($M = 1.61$) situation, but only in the mixed-personal condition ($p < .05$). As hypothesized in both situations, non-contingent evaluations were more common in the moral ($Ms = 1.08$ and 1.16, respectively) than in the personal, mixed-personal, and mixed-moral ($Ms = 1.42, 1.41, 1.34$, and $Ms = 1.36, 1.61, 1.47$, respectively) conditions ($ps < .05$). Also in the dating situation, non-contingent evaluations were more common in the personal than in the mixed-personal condition ($p < .01$).

A closer examination of contingent evaluations revealed that the direction of change was tied to the particular condition. In the personal condition, 39 percent of participants made contingent evaluations, and the majority entailed a positive-to-negative change. In the multifaceted conditions, nearly half (47 percent) of participants made contingent evaluations, and the majority entailed a negative-to-positive change. Finally, in the moral condition, few participants (12 percent) made contingent evaluations that entailed negative-to-positive change.

Discussion

As adolescents commence dating, they traverse unfamiliar terrain while learning how to interact with opposite-sex peers. Based on social domain theory, we examined how

Table 3. Mean Contingency of Act Evaluation by Situation, Condition, and Age

	Commenting situation								Dating situation							
	Personal		Mixed-personal		Mixed-moral		Moral		Personal		Mixed-personal		Mixed-moral		Moral	
Condition	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid	Early	Mid
Age																
Mean	1.61	1.23	1.52	1.30	1.45	1.23	1.13	1.03	1.45	1.27	1.52	1.70	1.55	1.40	1.19	1.13
SD	.50	.43	.51	.47	.51	.43	.34	.18	.51	.45	.51	.47	.51	.50	.40	.35

Notes: Early and mid = early and middle adolescents. Non-contingent evaluations were scored as 1; contingent evaluations were scored as 2.

early and middle adolescents coordinate personal and moral concerns in their reasoning about opposite-sex interactions that entail ambiguous norms: commenting on others' appearance and initiating dating (Darling et al., 1999; Grover et al., 2007). A novel contribution of the present study was that we examined adolescents' act evaluations and emotion attributions regarding these two types of typical opposite-sex interactions, revealing how they negotiate the boundaries between the personal and permitted vs. the coercive and harassing.

Salience of Personal and Moral Concerns

Overall, and as hypothesized, adolescents' thinking about opposite-sex interactions varied according to the salience of personal vs. moral concerns, the type of interpersonal situation, and age. As expected, when personal concerns were salient, adolescents viewed opposite-sex interactions as acceptable and harmless assertions of personal prerogative ('It's okay because he's just commenting on her new glasses'; 'It's okay because she just wants to go out with him'). These findings are consistent with previous research (Nucci, 1996) suggesting that North American adolescents consider matters of expression and association to be personal. Most US adolescents also have considerable control over their choice of romantic partners, as compared with adolescents from more traditional societies (Miller & Benson, 1999).

Adolescents construed commenting on an opposite-sex peer's appearance and asking an opposite-sex peer out on a date to be acceptable matters of personal discretion as long as the behaviors did not suggest direct harm to the interaction partners. However, they reasoned that opposite-sex interactions were wrong and harmful for targets, who were thought to feel badly, when the behaviors highlighted moral concerns ('It's wrong to make fun of her, it's abusive and hurts her feelings'). The specific emotions varied according to the interpersonal situation: targets of insulting comments were thought to feel sad whereas targets of dating harassment were thought to feel angry or apprehensive. As expected, adolescents also made more non-contingent act evaluations in the moral condition than in conditions highlighting personal concerns. When personal concerns were emphasized, either alone or with moral considerations, adolescents were guided by the target's behavior to ensure that the act was consensual and did not violate the target's welfare. Nevertheless, adolescents did not take all targets' behaviors at face value; even if the target was described as looking pleased, moral concerns were not sufficiently diminished to render the act acceptable. This finding echoes research (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006) suggesting that adolescents realize that a victim's apparent compliance may not reflect genuine consent. As expected, adolescents reasoned that hypothetical situations depicting prototypical moral violations were unacceptable due to their harmful consequences for others.

The incidence of sexual harassment in adolescence confirms that boundaries between asserting one's personal discretion and infringing on others' welfare in opposite-sex interactions are not always straightforward (Chiodo et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2010; McMaster et al., 2002). As expected, adolescents' reasoning was less consistent about the multifaceted than the prototypical conditions. Adolescents evaluated opposite-sex interactions in multifaceted conditions fairly negatively. These evaluations were more negative than in the personal condition, as expected. However, contrary to expectations, these evaluations were not consistently more

positive than in the moral condition. When early adolescents evaluated commenting and middle adolescents evaluated dating, negative judgments did not differ significantly in conditions entailing moral concerns, even when those concerns varied in salience. By contrast, early teens evaluated dating more positively in the mixed-personal condition, and middle teens evaluated commenting more positively in both mixed conditions than in the prototypical moral condition.

Adolescents' justifications and emotion attributions revealed similar patterns in the multifaceted and moral conditions. Overall, adolescents viewed targets in the multifaceted and moral conditions as suffering negative emotions and consequences, although the specific responses varied with the salience of the competing concerns and with age. When moral concerns were predominant, opposite-sex interactions were viewed as harmful and eliciting sadness, anger, and apprehension. In multifaceted conditions, adolescents referred more to embarrassing consequences and humiliation. Specifically, early adolescents thought that commenting in the mixed-personal condition and dating in the mixed-moral condition embarrassed the target ('It's not okay because now everyone else will laugh at her and make fun of her too'). They were sensitive to the fact that these specific acts occurred in the presence of others. Concerns with targets' embarrassment may have figured more prominently in early adolescents' reasoning because young teens are increasingly oriented and susceptible to the influence of the peer group (Darling et al., 1999). Additionally, sexual harassment often occurs in the presence of peers, and for diverse reasons many students do nothing about it (AAUW Educational Foundation, 2011). Our findings suggest that concerns with humiliation may be additional barriers to intervening in harassing situations, particularly for early adolescents.

Whereas early adolescents viewed dating in the mixed-moral condition as humiliating, older adolescents viewed it as non-consensual and coercive ('It's not okay to force her to do something she doesn't want to do'). Middle adolescents focused less on the audience and more on the increasingly salient moral concerns, reasoning that persistent requests for a date were coercive and intimidating. These moral concerns may be related to middle adolescents' greater experience with both romantic interactions and sexual harassment (Petersen & Hyde, 2009), and their greater sensitivity to the pragmatics of interpersonal coercion (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006). Finally, no age differences emerged in reasoning about dating in the mixed-personal condition, which was thought to be non-consensual and resulted in anger, and commenting in the mixed-moral condition, which was thought to have harmful consequences for targets, who felt sad. These acts were relatively private. Without the audience, adolescents seemingly were less concerned with targets' humiliation and instead focused on moral concerns with coercion, harassment, and victimization.

Salience of Situation Type

Adolescents' thinking about opposite-sex interactions varied according to the type of interpersonal situation, as qualified by the salience of personal vs. moral concerns or age. Act evaluations were generally negative and not contingent on targets' behaviors, yet as expected more so in the dating than in the commenting situation. Adolescents used the target's behavior in the dating situation to make inferences regarding the target's relative romantic interest and consent. Adolescents also thought that acts highlighting moral concerns in the commenting situation were harmful or humiliating for targets whereas acts highlighting moral concerns in the dating situation uniquely

elicited distinct moral concerns with coercion and targets' anger and apprehension. Sexual harassment comes in different forms and is experienced differently by adolescent boys and girls over time (Chiodo et al., 2009; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). Our findings suggest that adolescents think that different forms of harassment have distinct impacts: some forms are humiliating whereas others are coercive and intimidating. Future research examining adolescents' reasoning about peer teasing and harassment must carefully attend to the particular form of harassment, as well as the salience of personal and moral concerns.

Salience of Age and Gender

Age-related patterns also emerged in adolescents' reasoning about opposite-sex interactions, but primarily in the multifaceted conditions and not as hypothesized. Contrary to expectations and despite increasing claims for personal choice and greater control over their own behaviors (Nucci, 2008; Smetana, 2011), early adolescents in our sample did not construe these interactions more positively nor prioritize personal concerns. Instead, like middle adolescents, they considered moral concerns in their negative evaluations of multifaceted events. Their justifications and emotion attributions did, however, vary by age. Early adolescents, who have limited experience in opposite-sex interactions, focused on the presence of an audience in the multifaceted conditions (especially the mixed-personal condition of the commenting situation and the mixed-moral condition of the dating situation), which made prominent their concerns with targets' humiliation. By contrast, middle adolescents, who generally have more experience with the opposite sex and with sexual harassment (Petersen & Hyde, 2009), were more concerned with targets' consent (or lack thereof) in the dating situation when moral concerns were made salient.

It was also noteworthy that act evaluations were contingent on the target's behavior more for early than middle adolescents, especially in the commenting situation. Although the majority of adolescents at both ages made non-contingent act evaluations, nearly half of early adolescents' act evaluations were contingent. Early adolescents based their evaluations of opposite-sex interactions more on targets' behaviors than did middle adolescents, who took targets' behaviors at face value and changed their act evaluations less. Early adolescents may be more easily swayed by targets' behaviors, perhaps because their limited experience with opposite-sex peers left them uncertain regarding the boundaries between personal and moral concerns. With greater age and experience, adolescents may become more convinced of these boundaries and less likely to change their act evaluations based on targets' behaviors.

Reasoning about opposite-sex interactions did not vary by gender. This finding is notable because girls are the most common targets of opposite-sex harassment, and therefore could be expected to more readily perceive harm in ambiguous interactions (Chiodo et al., 2009). However, there may have been a floor effect inasmuch as act evaluations were quite negative in the three conditions entailing moral concerns. Furthermore, our results are consistent with past research revealing few gender differences in the ability to distinguish moral and personal concerns (Smetana, 2006), and in research demonstrating that both girls and boys find harassment emotionally distressing (Chiodo et al., 2009).

Our findings cast new light on how adolescents think about peer harassment. A recent survey (AAUW Educational Foundation, 2011) reveals that only a minority of teens admit to harassing others—a puzzling finding given the relative prevalence

of sexual harassment. This gap may be due, in part, to adolescents' lack of awareness of how their behavior is perceived. Teens who admit perpetration often depict their behavior as inconsequential ('no big deal') or as an attempt at humor. This suggests that perpetrators may overlook or minimize moral concerns and targets' negative experiences. Yet our findings reveal that when moral concerns became salient, adolescents deemed the behaviors to be unacceptable and humiliating, coercive, and harmful. Similarly, other moral development research (Smetana, Schlagman, & Adams, 1993; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005) has shown that children and adolescents are able to recognize competing concerns more easily when reasoning about hypothetical than real-life events. Our findings are consistent with calls for prevention efforts to explicitly let harassers know they have crossed the line and engaged in morally coercive behavior. The present results suggest that it would be worthwhile to discuss with adolescents how healthy dating relationships maintain appropriate boundaries between personal discretion and others' welfare (AAUW Educational Foundation, 2011).

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Several study limitations suggest caution in generalizing our results. First, consistent with the demographics of the area in which our study was conducted, our sample was primarily White. Although harassment is detrimental for adolescents regardless of race or ethnicity, African-Americans report more frequent victimization than European Americans (Goldstein, Malanchuk, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2007). Boys also are more commonly the targets of same-sex harassment than are girls (Craig et al., 2001; McMaster et al., 2002). Further, whereas our focus was on heterosexual interactions, the same issues may be relevant to sexual minority youth, who may face even greater ambiguity in the norms regulating romantic interactions (Diamond et al., 1999) and experience more victimization (Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Further research must examine how sexual majority and minority youth from diverse backgrounds balance personal and moral concerns in potentially harassing peer interactions.

In this study, we described interactions as occurring among classmates who were neither strangers nor close friends. Because the interpretation of teasing as hostile or playful may be influenced by familiarity and social status (Keltner et al., 2001), future research should investigate how adolescents reason about potentially harassing interactions among partners who vary in familiarity, intimacy, or sociometric popularity. Other factors such as targets' attractiveness may also influence adolescents' interpretations and evaluations, and should be investigated in future research. Future research should also assess reasoning about other relevant and similarly ambiguous situations in both face-to-face and cyber/online contexts, as well as with or without an audience to clarify adolescents' concerns with coercion or humiliation. Finally, it would be worthwhile to determine whether same-aged teens with varying dating or harassment experience differ in their interpretation of the types of situations we examined here.

Despite its limitations, our findings speak to how early and middle adolescents weigh personal and moral concerns in their understandings of opposite-sex interactions. Adolescents reasoned that interactions with opposite-sex peers were harmless assertions of prerogative when personal concerns were highlighted, but humiliating, coercive, and harmful intrusions on others' welfare as moral concerns became more prominent. Thus, this study contributes to our understanding of socio-moral reasoning

and peer harassment by identifying how early and middle adolescents distinguish between opposite-sex interactions that are viewed as personal or as morally coercive and harassing.

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Appendix

Commenting Situation, Male Actor

Personal condition: One day as class is getting out, Patrick walks past Paula and says, 'Hey Paula, you look different today. Are you wearing new glasses?'

Mixed-personal condition: Dusty is walking down the hall to go to his next class and he sees Lily standing at her locker getting her books. As Dusty walks by Lily, he says, loud enough for all the kids in the hall to hear, 'Wow Lily, you look really hot in those pants'.

Mixed-moral condition: Kevin sees Ellie out in the school parking lot in the morning just as all of the kids are arriving at school. Kevin is standing outside with his friend. As Ellie walks by, Kevin says, 'Hey Ellie, are you wearing your Granny's shoes today?'

Moral condition: Russell is with his friends looking for a seat in the cafeteria to eat their lunch when he sees Carol sitting by herself eating her lunch. As Russell and his friends walk by Carol, Russell says, 'Geez Carol, no wonder you are eating by yourself. You stink and eat like a pig'.

Dating Situation, Male Actor

Personal condition: One day, Peter walks up to May in the halls after school and says, 'I'd really like it if you would go to a movie with me this weekend. Will you go out with me?'

Mixed-personal condition: Frank asks a girl, Becky, out on a first date and Becky says, 'Thanks for asking, but I can't go out with you this weekend'. Then for the next few days, Frank sends Becky text messages asking her to go out on a first date with him.

Mixed-moral condition: Ron asks a girl, Helen, out on a first date and Helen says, 'Thanks for asking, but I can't go out with you this weekend'. Then every day that week, Ron waits for Helen at her locker after each class period. When Helen comes to her locker to get her books for her next class, Ron asks her to go out with him again in front of all the kids in the hall.

Moral condition: Fred asks a girl, Katie, out on a first date and Katie says, 'Thanks for asking, but I can't go out with you this weekend'. Then, Fred tells Katie that if she doesn't go out with him this weekend, he'll tell everyone he knows that Katie begged him to go out with her and that he turned her down because she was so desperate.