CHILDREN'S AND ADOLESCENTS' NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF HARMING: ASSUMING AND MITIGATING BLAME

by

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how children and adolescents make sense of transgressive experiences in which they assume versus mitigate blame for causing harm. Specifically, the present study focused on how children of various ages constructed different aspects of their moral agency (i.e., one sense-making process) with assumption and mitigation. Participants (*N* = 120; 5-, 9-, and 16-year-olds) provided accounts of their own transgressive experiences in which they assumed blame and mitigated blame for hurting a peer. Narratives were coded for two features theorized to be implicated in the construction of moral agency: various types of reasons and explanations used to explain harmful behavior, and feelings of guilt. With assumption of fault, 5-year-olds constructed accounts without making reference to any reasons or explanations; with mitigation of fault, they described situations in which their peers hurt themselves or were hurt by others. By contrast, 9- and 16-year-olds referenced not self-monitoring with assumption of fault; they discussed how their peers misconstrued their intentions with mitigation of fault. In all, findings suggest that children and adolescents are learning about different aspects of their moral agency in experiences in which they assume and mitigate blame.

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INTRODUCTION

Everyday transgressive experiences are important contexts in which children develop their sense of themselves as moral agents, in part because doing harm presents a tension between their hurtful actions and their sense of themselves as "good" people (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a; Wainryb, 2011; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). When children act in ways that end up hurting others, they can reflect on their behavior, their reasons for engaging in the act, their guilt over causing harm, and the extent to which their actions were morally wrong. Extant research on moral development has taken it for granted that people should assume responsibility for their harmful actions; the mitigation of responsibility has been characterized as defensive, self-protective, or as consistent with moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). However, recent evidence suggests that people may be attuned to what their actions and experiences show about their moral agency even when they mitigate responsibility for their wrongdoings (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Recchia, Brehl, & Wainryb, 2012; Wainryb et al., 2005; Wainryb, Komolova, & Brehl, 2011). For example, when accounting for their transgressive behavior, children reference their hurtful actions and *at the same time* they sometimes mention that they believe the harm was necessary, their reasons were benevolent, or there were extenuating circumstances. Given that children might make sense of their behavior (e.g., explain why they engaged in the act) differently in experiences in which they assume fault and in experiences in which they mitigate fault

for causing harm, it may be that these two types of transgressive experiences make distinct contributions to children's developing sense of moral agency, as defined by the moral developmental perspective. This perspective—which is the one that we take in the present study—refers to moral agency as people's understanding of the relationship between their morally relevant actions (e.g., those that cause harm) and their psychological experience, such as their goals, beliefs, and emotions (see Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a).

Yet, no research has examined how children and adolescents construct their own moral agency in experiences in which they assume and mitigate responsibility for their wrongdoings. This reflection can take place in many ways, but in this study, we focus on the way such reflection is evident in children's narrative accounts (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Specifically, our primary purpose in the present study was to examine the differences in how children and adolescents construct their moral agency in accounts of experiences in which they assume blame for causing harm and in experiences in which they mitigate blame for causing harm.

The reasons that people provide to explain why they caused harm (e.g., their intentions) have long been considered critical to moral understanding. More specific to the present study, the type of reason that children reference to explain why they engaged in behavior that ended up hurting others is likely to differ with assumption and mitigation of fault. For instance, the reasons that children provide to explain their wrongdoings in situations in which they assume fault for causing harm might more directly link their harmful actions and aspects of themselves, such as their own intentions, goals, beliefs, and emotions (e.g., "I took his game because I wanted to play with it"). Other reasons and

explanations that children provide to explain their harmful behavior can be less directly connected to themselves, but still might promote their agency; these types of reasons might occur more frequently with mitigation of blame. For example, children might refer to situational constraints to explain why they engaged in a behavior that caused harm (e.g., "I kept not throwing the ball to her because I couldn't see her standing behind another kid"). These second types of reasons—those that stem from the self less directly—might also contribute to moral development because it is important that children learn the limits or outer-boundaries of their moral agency. In addition to making sense of more straightforward instances of harming (e.g., those in which harm was caused intentionally), children also need to reason about transgressive experiences caused by accidents, about those in which their interpretations differ from those of others, about times that goals come into conflict, and experiences in which short-term harm is necessary for long-term gains. Given that reasons and explanations are implicated in the construction of moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b), and that children's reasons for their behavior might differ with experiences of assumption and mitigation of blame, these two experiences might both contribute, albeit differently, to the development of moral agency.

To address this claim, we examined children's narrative accounts of two transgressive events (those in which they assume blame and those in which they mitigate blame for causing harm) to find the types of reasons, explanations, and emotions that children provided to explain their harmful behavior. We also documented the types of harmful behavior that they referenced and the extent to which children judged their

harmful behavior as wrong to learn about the context in which their reasons and feelings were referenced.

The second, related purpose of the present study was to examine whether the differences (in types of reasons and guilt) between experiences of assumption and mitigation of fault varied for children and adolescents of different ages. Children's cognitive, social-cognitive, emotional, and narrative abilities change with development; older children's and adolescents' more sophisticated abilities are often used to integrate their harmful actions with their sense of themselves as moral people (Wainryb & Brehl, 2006). Specific to the present study, we expected that developments in these abilities would be implicated as children constructed their moral agency with assumption or mitigation of blame. For example, older children and adolescents might judge their harmful actions quite differently in these two types of transgressive experiences (more negatively with assumption, less negatively with mitigation) due to their ability to consider multiple facets of an experience simultaneously, whereas younger children might judge their actions equally negatively in both contexts due to cognitive limitations. We included a broad age range (5 to 16 years) to capture how children construct their moral agency differently with assumption and mitigation at distinct developmental periods.

Therefore, this study asks how do children and adolescents of various ages construct their moral agency differently (via references to various types of reasons and explanations and to guilt) with assumption and mitigation of fault for causing harm?

Experiences of assumption and mitigation of blame might distinctly contribute to the construction of moral agency

All children will inevitably act in ways that end up hurting others. In some experiences, children might know (or at least suspect) that their behavior will end up causing harm before they engage in it—this includes both instances in which they intend to cause harm and those in which the harm is incidental to their pursuit of other goals. In other transgressions, the harm might be unanticipated; children might not recognize the harm that they caused until after the fact or until others tell them that their actions were hurtful. And in yet other transgressive experiences, children might view their actions as less authentically *theirs*, such as in instances with external constraints, in those in which their actions were accidental, or those in which they struggled to regulate their impulses. In some of these scenarios, it might be appropriate for those who caused harm to assume full responsibility for their behavior. However, it might also be appropriate—and crucial to the development of moral agency—for children to sometimes mitigate the extent to which their transgressions were their fault. When children mitigate fault for causing harm, they may be presenting what actually happened (or what they think happened) in their experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a), instead of constructing self-protective distortions (Baumeister et al., 1990). Though we agree that assuming fault for wrongdoings is, in many instances, important to the development of moral agency, we think that *always* assuming fault or *only* being able to assume fault for causing harm is likely to be maladaptive.

Harming others is an inevitable part of social life, and at times, children harm others unintentionally or without foreseeing the harm that ensues from their actions. We

suspect that while it is important that children learn to acknowledge their own wrongdoings—particularly the aspects of their interactions that are legitimately under their own control or stem more directly from themselves—it is also important that children construct an understanding that there are limits to their own (and others') moral agency. By this we mean that children also need to recognize the aspects of an experience that are less under their control. In addition, they need to provide room for other people to act as moral agents, with thoughts, feelings, and desires of their own. Therefore, we expect that children's transgressive experiences of assumption and mitigation of blame provide them with distinct contexts in which they can elaborate various aspects of their agency, and ultimately, further a more adaptive view of themselves as moral beings. In short, an adaptive sense of moral agency must fit with children's various complex and multifaceted experiences, must be able to incorporate mistakes and missteps, must allow for forgiveness of self and others, and must promote future moral development (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a).

Before hypothesizing about how experiences of assumption and mitigation of blame might uniquely contribute to children's sense of themselves as moral agents, it is important to note that one conceptualization of moral agency contends that people do not construct their moral agency with mitigation of blame.

Two perspectives on moral agency

People's understandings of how their own morally relevant actions relate to themselves have been the focus of work on moral agency. Two distinct, yet related, conceptualizations of moral agency have been put forth by researchers: the agency as control perspective and the moral developmental perspective. Those working from the

"agency as control" perspective examine *the extent to which* people perceive that they have more or less autonomy or control over their behavior (e.g., Little, Snyder, & Wehmeyer, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this paradigm, actions are often classified on a continuum that ranges from fully autonomous and self-chosen (high agency) to externally constrained (low or diminished agency; Adler, 2012). The majority of work in the agency as control perspective has examined people's agency in nonmoral domains (e.g., academic performance), but the agency as control conception has also been applied to morally relevant behaviors (i.e., pertaining to the welfare or justice of people).

Specifically, the agency as control position has been used in moral disengagement theory to argue that people are disengaged from their agency in experiences in which they harm others. Moral disengagement theory proposes that people typically engage in actions that hurt others only after they have convinced themselves that those actions are justified. People either rationalize to themselves that their behavior is not actually harmful or they minimize or distort the relation between themselves and their behavior (e.g., they acted only because a person in authority mandated it). Further, since people do not see their harmful actions as stemming from themselves, they are spared feelings of guilt or remorse for causing harm (Bandura, 2002). Thus, implicit in moral disengagement theory is the assumption that people always mitigate responsibility for their wrongdoings; that is, this theory does not consider that in some experiences people might assume blame for the harm that ensued from their actions. Since this perspective holds that moral agency is not constructed in experiences in which people cause harm, there is no empirical work examining *how* it is constructed in these types of experiences.

Using the agency as control perspective generally, and moral disengagement theory specifically, we could attempt to address the present study's research question. Recall that we ask: What are the ways in which experiences of assumption and mitigation of fault offer distinct contributions to children's sense of themselves as moral agents? In other words, which types of reasons and explanations are referenced with each type of transgressive experience? The agency as control perspective would allow us to ask: To what extent do children perceive that they had control over their actions in experiences in which they assume blame? This question is not the same as ours; an examination of *the extent* to which children perceive that they have control over their actions cannot reveal *the various types* of reasons and explanations that children provide to make sense of their harmful actions. A second problem that we encounter with the agency as control perspective has to do with mitigation of fault. Moral disengagement theory argues that people are disengaged from their own moral agency with mitigation; thus, we could not ask how moral agency is constructed in this context. Due to these limitations, the moral developmental perspective is used in the present study.

Instead of focusing on the extent of (or disengagement from) people's sense of their moral agency, those working from the "moral developmental" perspective, examine how people might construct 'less' moral agency in qualitatively distinct ways (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). As noted, this perspective defines moral agency as the type of association that is formed between people's morally relevant actions and beliefs, desires, emotions, and situational features. In contrast with the dearth of empirical work on moral transgressions in the agency as control tradition, there is a growing body of work in the moral developmental tradition on how children construct their moral agency in their

transgressive experiences. In fact, the moral developmental perspective argues that experiences in which people transgress are key contexts for the development of moral agency. Because doing harm challenges people's sense of themselves as moral beings, people reflect on the ways in which their hurtful behavior did and did not stem from themselves; through this reflection, they construct more elaborate understandings of their own moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). For example, in narrative accounts of their own experiences, children connect their own harmful actions to a variety of aspects of their experiences, both to those that are internal to themselves (e.g., their intentions, goals, beliefs, emotions) and to those that are external to themselves (e.g., situational constraints, their inability to know others' thoughts or desires; Recchia et al., 2013; Wainryb et al., 2005).

Although much work is emerging in the moral developmental perspective on how children construct their moral agency in their transgressive experiences, no work has yet addressed how children might make sense of their harmful actions differently in situations when they assume and mitigate fault for causing harm. Nevertheless, the moral developmental perspective will be used to guide our understanding of moral agency. Conceptually, this perspective allows for moral agency to co-occur with transgressive experiences, even in those in which fault is mitigated. From the moral developmental framework, we can ask whether (and if so, how) different aspects of children moral agency are constructed with assumption and mitigation of fault. More specifically, what particular types of reasons and explanations are referenced in accounts in which they assume blame, and are these the same as the particular types of reasons and explanations that are referenced in accounts in which they mitigate blame for hurting others?

Aspects of moral agency that might differ with mitigation and assumption of blame

Through examinations of children's narrative accounts of their own transgressive actions, moral developmental researchers have identified many elements that contribute to children's moral agency, such as children's various reasons for causing harm (e.g., peer pressure, various intentions, pursuit of an instrumental goal, misunderstandings, provocation), their own emotions about their wrongdoing (e.g., guilt, anger), how the victim's perspective conflicted with their own (e.g., the victim's differing cognitions or desires), the harmful consequences of their actions (e.g., to their victims, to themselves, to their relationships), as well as other features that have been conceptually linked to the construction of moral agency (e.g., Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Recchia et al., 2013; Wainryb et al., 2005, 2011). Some of these features might be particularly important to the construction of moral agency in experiences in which children assume or mitigate fault for causing harm.

Moral development researchers have long emphasized the importance of intentions and emotions. By the age of 5, most children can distinguish between intentional and accidental transgressions when they are not confounded with information about consequences (Darley, Klosson, & Zanna, 1978). Prior work has found that people, including children, assign more blame to people when they cause harm intentionally, as compared to when the harm was unintended or accidental (Darley & Shultz, 1990; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe; 2012). However, it might not be that intentional harm is always paired with the assumption of fault and unintentional harm is always paired with the mitigation of fault. Research with adults has shown that when considering hypothetical

situations involving intentional harm, people attend to the agents' reasons for acting—if agents provide adequate justification for causing intentional harm, then their actions are judged to be less blameworthy. In scenarios involving unintentional harm, people also consider the agents' reasons for engaging in the behavior, in addition to considering what caused the unintentional actions to occur, and whether the actors should have or could have prevented the harm from occurring (Malle et al., 2012).

Although much of the moral development literature has discussed intentional versus accidental harming, children often describe their own transgressive behaviors as not quite intentional-not quite unintentional (Wainryb et al, 2005). So, in addition to reflecting on their own intentions—or in lieu of considering information about their intentions at all—children might consider other types of justifications to explain their behavior in experiences in which they caused harm and assume or mitigate blame. For example, research suggests that children might refer to personal, social-conventional, or competing moral concerns to mitigate fault for causing harm.

Work in the domain-specific tradition has shown that children, beginning at a young age, construct knowledge about different social domains through their interactions with others and reflections on these social interactions. Moral concepts are constructed through, and brought to bear on, experiences that involve the well-being or fair treatment of others (e.g., causing or preventing harm); social-conventional concepts are brought to bear on situation-specific agreed upon ways of interacting (e.g., rules or customs); and personal concepts are applied to experiences that involve personal preferences or autonomy (e.g., desires; Turiel, 1998; Nucci, 1981). Recent social domain theory work has begun to examine how children reason about multifaceted situations—that is,

situations with competing concerns or those from multiple domains. For instance, in one study, children and adolescents were presented three hypothetical scenarios: in one scenario, a child acts in a way that harms another because she wants to play a different game (moral concerns competing with personal concerns); in another scenario, a child acts in a way that harms another because the teaching assistant asks him to play with another child (moral and conventional); and in the third scenario, a child acts in a way that harms another because she is trying to help someone else (moral and moral). After children were presented with each scenario, they were asked to rate how much the child who caused the harm was to blame. Across all three scenarios, children generally rated the actor as deserving no blame at all or medium/mixed levels of blame; however, children were twice as likely to say that the actor was to be blamed in the scenario with personal concerns as compared to the other two types of scenarios (Brehl, 2008). Although these findings were with hypothetical scenarios, it might be that in their own experiences, children often mitigate fault for causing harm by referencing conventional or situational features (e.g., rules, authority dictates) or competing moral concerns (e.g., trying to actually help the victim or another person) to explain their hurtful behavior. Evidence is less clear about whether incidental reasons such as personal concerns will be referenced in situations in which children mitigate or assume fault for hurting others, but we expect personal concerns will be referred to more often with mitigation of fault.

In addition to referring to different types of reasons and explanations, children might bring their moral emotions (e.g., guilt, shame) to bear on the construction of moral agency (Wainryb et al., 2005) with assumption and mitigation of fault. Theorists propose that children's "empathic distress may be transformed into guilt if they perceive their

own actions are responsible for the hurt" (Hoffman, 1984, p. 289). Therefore, it is likely that children will experience guilt more frequently with the assumption of fault for causing harm. Though guilt has been shown to be critical to children's moral development, evidence shows that there is an "over arousal effect" that limits people's ability to process situational features and appropriately respond to another's distress; thus, there might be an optimal range of empathetic arousal (Hoffman, 1984; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Furthermore, the absence of guilt for causing harm in some experiences is not necessarily maladaptive, but rather, it might reflect people's complex understandings of situations in which their legitimate motives and intentions come into conflict with other's goals (Wainryb & Recchia, 2013).

Relatedly, research has shown that sometimes children construct accounts of their transgressions without making any reference to their reasons or explanations for their harmful actions. Children might be particularly likely to construct these "numb" or "opaque" accounts to avoid overwhelming feelings of anger or guilt (Wainryb, 2011). For example, in accounts of situations in which they caused severe harm to others, children sometimes do not represent, or only minimally represent, their own internal experiences. In these types of accounts, children refer to the facts of what happened, but they do not elaborate on why they engaged in the hurtful behavior or whether the victim misunderstood their behavior. Given that children might be more hyper-aroused by their own moral emotions (e.g., guilt, shame) in transgressive experiences in which they assume blame, numb constructions of moral agency might appear more frequently with assumption.

Along with these hypothesized differences, we expect that there will be some similarities between experiences of assumption and mitigation of fault. Specifically, children might reference similar types of harmful actions and make comparable judgments about the wrongness of those actions with both transgressive contexts. Prior work shows that children reference many different types of harmful behavior, such as actions that are more observable and concrete (e.g., physical harm, disputes about sharing toys) and those that are more psychological in nature (e.g., breaking a promise; Wainryb et al., 2005). Previous research has also shown that children tend to judge their own harmful actions negatively (i.e., as not okay) or as simultaneously negative and positive (Wainryb et al., 2005). The present study aimed to document the types of behavior and judgments that children made with assumption and mitigation of blame to find whether these aspects of moral agency construction were similar with assumption and mitigation of fault, and to document the contexts in which children were constructing different aspects of their moral agency (via reasons and explanations and guilt).

Age-related differences and the construction of moral agency with assumption and mitigation of blame

The research reviewed above suggests that children and adolescents might make sense of their transgressive behavior in distinct ways in experiences in which they assume and mitigate blame for their wrongdoings. In particular, the features that we expect will vary between assumption and mitigation are the types of reasons and explanations provided to explain their behavior and whether they refer to feeling guilt for causing harm. Moreover, there is evidence that children and adolescents at various developmental periods might attend differently to these features.

The cognitive capacities linked to narrative construction (e.g., verbal ability, memory, executive function; Keil, 2006), social-cognitive and theory-of-mind abilities (Chadler & Lalonde, 1996), and children's ability to elaborate on their own experiences (Reese, Yan, Jack, & Hayne, 2010) increase significantly between early and middle childhood. Further, between late childhood and adolescence, children's capacity to draw meaning from their experiences shows marked development (McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010). These developmental changes have been linked to children constructing more elaborated accounts of their own transgressions between the ages of 5 and 16, as well as accounts that are more likely to reference psychological features, such as reasons and emotions (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Wainryb et al., 2005). However, how these age-related changes are associated with the assumption and mitigation of fault is not known. Nevertheless, hypotheses can be formed from relevant work.

As previously mentioned, children as young as 5 years old can distinguish between accidental and intentional harm, and they judge intentional harm to be more wrong. However, this is only when information about consequences is not confounded with information about intentions. In their accounts of transgressing, young children sometimes refer to their intentions (in 54% of narratives), and sometimes refer to the victim's emotions (in 46% of narratives; Wainryb et al., 2005). When young children were asked to make judgments of their transgressive behavior, they judged them negatively, presumably because they attended almost exclusively to the harmful consequences of those actions (Wainryb et al., 2005). By contrast, older children and adolescents could integrate both their reasons for their actions and the harmful consequence to the victim when they made moral judgments. This evidence suggests that

young children might focus more exclusively on either their harmful action *or* on their intentions with assumption and mitigation. We suspect that children will more exclusively attend to the harmful action in accounts of assumption of fault, and this singular focus might be associated with not referencing any type of reason or explanation for causing harm. In other words, with assumption, they might be more likely to construct numb accounts of experiences in which they transgress than they do in accounts of mitigation. It is unknown what types of reasons and explanations young children might reference to explain their behavior in experiences in which they mitigate fault for causing harm.

Older children and adolescents can construct more complex understandings of their transgressive experiences, taking into account many features simultaneously. Given that older children and adolescents more often attend to psychological features of their transgressive experiences, variations in the types of internal features that they consider might be related to how they construct distinct aspects their moral agency with assumption and mitigation. First, there is evidence that in accounts of their transgressions, children and adolescents refer to their victim's cognitions more frequently with age (Recchia, et al., 2013). More specific to the present study, we expect that older children and adolescents will likely refer to victim's cognitions more frequently with the mitigation of fault, namely by referring to the victim misunderstanding their intentions or misinterpreting what was happening. Also, based on the finding that adults consider whether the actor could have acted differently to assign blame (Malle, 2012), and children's increasingly ability to self regulate with age (Eisenberg et al., 1997), we predict that adolescents might reflect on how they were not self-monitoring in accounts

of their wrongdoings. However, we are uncertain whether referring to not self-monitoring will occur more frequently with assumption or mitigation of fault—children might reference not self-monitoring to mitigate fault ("I wasn't paying attention, so it was not my fault that he got hurt"), or they may do so to assume fault ("I wasn't paying attention, so it was my fault that he got hurt").

The current study

In this study, we collected transgression narratives from 5-, 9-, and 16-year-olds who were asked to produce one narrative about an instance that they assume responsibility for causing harm and one narrative about an instance that they mitigate responsibility for causing harm. We coded the narratives for the presence of references to various types of harmful behavior, to various types of reasons and explanations, and to guilt; we then asked children to judge their harmful behavior as okay (positive) or not okay (negative).

In summary, we hypothesized that in their accounts in which they assumed responsibility, children would be more likely to reference intending to harm the victim, to not provide any reasons and explanations for their behavior (i.e., construct numb accounts), and to reference guilt for their behavior. We hypothesized that in accounts in which children mitigate responsibility for causing harm, they would be more likely to reference unintentional harm, benevolent intentions (i.e., moral reasons for causing harm), situational constraints (e.g., rules, authority dictates), and incidental reasons (e.g., personal concerns).

Although we expected numb constructions would be occur more frequently with assumption than with mitigation for children of all ages, younger children were expected

to construct numb accounts more often than older children and adolescents with assumption of fault. In other words, older children and adolescents were expected to often provide distinct reasons and explanations to construct their moral agency differently with assumption and mitigation, whereas younger children might often provide reasons and explanations with their mitigation accounts and make no reference to reasons or explanations with assumption of fault. Younger children were expected to equally infrequently refer to the victim's misconstrual with assumption and mitigation of fault, whereas adolescents are expected to refer to victim's misconstrual more often with mitigation than with assumption of blame. We expected that older children and adolescents would refer to not self-monitoring more frequently than younger children, but we were uncertain about whether this type of explanation would be more frequent with assumption or mitigation. Overall, by examining children's own explanations and emotions about their behavior in experiences in which they assume or mitigate fault, this study has the potential to further our understanding of how children might construct different aspects of their moral agency with assumption and mitigation of blame.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Children were recruited in a midsized city in the western United States in schools, community centers, and through word of mouth. The final sample included 120 participants in three age groups: 40 5-year-olds (*M* age = 5-8, range = 4-11 to 6-9), 40 9-year-olds (*M* age = 9-7, range = 9-0 to 10-10), and 40 16-year-olds (*M* age = 16-2, range = 15-2 to 17-3). Each age group included equal numbers of boys and girls. Two additional participants (a 9-year-old boy and 5-year-old girl) were excluded because they could not think of a time that they upset or hurt a peer. The sample was primarily European American (72%), with the remaining children representing a variety of ethnicities: African American (3%), Asian (2%), Hispanic and/or Latino/a (8%), and mixed descent (9%). Seven percent of parents chose to not disclose their child's ethnicity. Written parental permission and child assent were provided for all participants.

Each child was interviewed individually in a private setting in the child's school, home, or community center. Two narrative accounts were elicited from each participant: (1) one about a situation in which the child assumes fault for causing harm to a peer, and (2) one about another situation in which the child mitigates fault for causing harm to a peer. The order of elicitation of the assume and mitigate narratives was counterbalanced by age and gender. To help children recall appropriate events, cards picturing four common types of transgressions (see Wainryb et al., 2005) and a generic "other"

transgression card were used. Each transgression card depicted one type of harmful action: an offensive behavior, a physical behavior, a trust violation, a property dispute, or a general nonspecific transgression. After the transgression cards were presented, children were asked to think of a recent, important time when "you did or said something like what's on these cards…and another kid ended up upset or hurt, and you think it was (not) your fault." If children nominated a generic or recurrent event, they were asked to provide an account of one specific episode.

The narrative elicitation prompts were deliberately worded in a passive voice since research has shown that children use passive language when they discuss their transgressions in natural settings (Sedlak & Walton, 1982). Further, as participants narrated each event, the interviewer encouraged speaking by using general active-listening prompts ("uh huh…") and by repeating phrases of the narrative verbatim ("and then she told you to not pass the note…"). These procedures have encouraged disclosure of transgressions in previous interviews (Wainryb et al., 2005).

After children appeared to be finished narrating each event, they were asked, "Is there anything else you can tell me about that time?" Next, they were asked, "Can you tell me a little more about how you think that what happened was (not) your fault?" After verifying with children that they had nothing more to add, the interviewer asked a manipulation check question to assess whether the child had understood what type of event they had been asked to narrate ("This time, did I ask you to tell me about a time that you think it was your fault or about a time that you think it was not your fault?"). The correct choice was offered last in case younger children merely repeated the first answer choice.

Following the elicitation of both narratives, participants were asked to consider the first event that they had narrated and to evaluate the negativity of their harmful behavior ("Do you think it was okay or not okay that you…?") and to choose the extent to which it was (not) okay ("Was it really (not) okay or just kind of (not) okay?"). Answers formed a 5-point scale (1 = really not okay; 2 = kind of not okay, 3 = mixed/both; 4 = kind of okay; 5 = really okay). Finally, participants were asked to consider the second event that they had narrated and to evaluate their actions. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. (See Appendix A for the entire script.)

Coding

The coding of narrative elements was adapted based on previous similar studies (Recchia et al., 2012, 2013; Wainryb et al., 2005) and elaborated based on the coding of 10% of the data. Interrater reliability was established between the author and a naïve coder on 20% of the narratives. Disagreements were resolved via discussion and consensus. Cohen's *kappas* are reported below.

Narrative length

Each narrative was divided into clauses, with one subject-verb group per line. The length of each narrative was operationalized as the total number of clauses.

Manipulation check

After each event was narrated, children were asked to remind the interviewer whether they had just been asked to provide a "fault" or "not fault" account. Children's responses to the manipulation check were scored as passed (0) or failed (1). As expected,

5-year-olds sometimes failed the manipulation check (26% of their narratives), whereas than 9- and 16-year-olds almost never failed the manipulation check (less than 1% of their narratives). It is important to note that all 5-year-olds began their accounts with an understanding of the manipulation (e.g., they began their mitigation accounts saying that the incidence was not their fault), but they did not correctly recall the initial instructions at the end of their narration. We think that this is an important part of the phenomenon rather than a manipulation failure—this finding suggests that for some 5-year-olds, experiences of assumption and mitigation are less clearly distinguished. Children in this youngest age group passed the manipulation check equally frequently with assumption and mitigation of blame.

Narrative content

Types of harmful behavior

Each narrative was coded for the presence of six types of harmful behaviors (*kappa* = .73): (a) harm resulting from the victim's *blocked goal* (e.g., not letting the victim be "it" during tag), (b) harm resulting from *excluding* the victim or psychological separation (e.g., not inviting the victim to a party; ignoring the victim), (c) harm resulting from *offensive behavior* (e.g., name calling), (d) *physical* harm, (e) *property*-related harm (e.g., refusing to share), and (f) harm resulting from a *trust violation* (e.g., breaking a promise). Since these six codes were not mutually exclusive, after coding was completed, we summed the types of harmful behavior codes to get descriptive information about how frequently children referred to more than one type of harmful behavior; scores could range from 1 to 6. Examples of each type of harm code are in Table 1.

Types of reasons and explanations

Each narrative was coded for the presence of seven types of reasons and explanations for the harmful behavior: (a) *intending* the harmful consequences to the victim or foreseeing the harm (i.e., the harm was caused on purpose or it was foreseen), (b) *not intending* the harmful consequences to the victim (e.g., accidental harm), (c) *benevolent* intentions (i.e., prosocial intent), (d) *incidental* reasons for engaging in the harmful behavior (e.g., personal rights, prescriptive beliefs, desires, thoughts), (e) *not self-monitoring* or not having self-control (e.g., being careless, overreacting), (f) external or *situational constraints* (e.g., rule violations, authority dictates, weather), and (g) *victim's misconstrual* of the experience (i.e., misunderstanding on the victim's part). These seven codes were not mutually exclusive, so after coding was completed, we summed the types of reasons/explanation codes to get descriptive information about how frequently children referred to more than one type of reason/explanation; scores could range from 1 to 7. In this study, we had formed hypotheses about the presence of each type of reason or explanation; we did not form hypotheses about the number of different types of reasons presented, or in whether particular reasons and explanations frequently co-occurred.

There were a number of narratives that did not contain explicit mention of reasons. Each of these narratives was coded into one of three categories: (h) *numb* construction (i.e., the narrator references that he/she caused harm, but does not provide reasons or explanations for the action), (i) *victim hurt self* or a third party hurt the victim (i.e., the victim hurt herself/himself—in a way other than misconstruing—or some other person engaged in the harmful behavior), and (j) *fragmented* or incomprehensible

construction (i.e., there was no harmful behavior to explain or the narrative was incomprehensible). Based on previous research (Wainryb, 2011; Wainryb et al., 2010; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010), we had anticipated that children might fail to reference their reasons for engaging in the harmful behavior (i.e., form a numb account); we did not anticipate *a priori* that children might have difficulties considering their actions, the outcome of those actions, and their blameworthiness simultaneously. During coding scheme development, we noticed that young children sometimes narrated experiences that met only two of the three criteria, which were to tell about a time "(1) when you did something, (2) someone ended up upset, and (3) you think that it was (not) your fault". Specifically, a group of accounts provided by 5-year-olds left out the "when you did something" criteria. In these accounts, either the victim hurt himself or a person other than the narrator hurt the victim. Consider the following example of a narrative coded as "victim hurt self"; all capitals signals that the interviewer was speaking; and where indicated, the narrative was edited for length:

> CAN YOU THINK OF A TIME LIKE THAT (i.e., like the behaviors illustrated on the transgression cards), WHEN YOU DID OR SAID SOMETHING (pause) ANOTHER KID ENDED UP UPSET OR HURT (pause) AND IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT? Umm. One time I like, um, hit someone by throwing a book. AND WAS THAT A TIME THAT IT WAS YOUR FAULT OR WAS NOT YOUR FAULT? Was my fault. OK, WE'LL TALK ABOUT THAT TIME IN A MINUTE, BUT FOR NOW (emphasized "now"), LETS THINK OF A TIME WHEN IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT. Mmm. (long pause) CAN YOU THINK OF A TIME WHEN YOU DID OR SAID SOMETHING, ANOTHER KID ENDED UP UPSET OR HURT, AND IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT? Me and my friend Sunny, one of her, her horses bucked her off […] UH HUH. WAS THAT A TIME WHEN YOU DID OR SAID SOMETHING, AND ANOTHER PERSON ENDED UP UPSET OR HURT? AND IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT? It wasn't my fault. IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT? (pause) BUT DID YOU DO OR SAY ANYTHING? (long pause) WERE YOU THERE THAT TIME? No, my, my friend Sunny was somewhere else, but she just comes here to visit. MM HMM. CAN YOU THINK OF A TIME WHEN YOU (emphasized "you") DID SOMETHING, BUT IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT? Mmm…I might have Kareem

> punching me in the eyeball once. WHAT WAS THAT? One of my friends punched me in the eyeball once […] AND DID THAT FRIEND GET UPSET, TOO? Mmm, no. (pause) SO WHO WAS UPSET THAT TIME? Um, I think I was. One time Cole got upset. IS THAT A TIME WHEN YOU DID OR SAID SOMETHING, COLE GOT UPSET OR HURT, AND IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT? (pause) Ummmmm…one of my friends punched him in the stomach […] (6-year-old boy).

Even after the interviewer repeatedly reminded the participant what the three criteria were, he could not think of an incidence from his own life that fit the prompt's 3 criteria. We decided against replacing the children who produced these "victim hurt self" accounts because *these very same children* provided accounts with the other event type (i.e., with assumption) that fit all three criteria.

The other code that we did not anticipate *a priori* was "fragmented"—that is, when children provided accounts that were off topic or were too incoherent to code. Only children in the youngest age group constructed fragmented accounts (15% of their assume accounts and 10% of their mitigate accounts were fragmented); thus, we did not include the fragmented code in our analyses.

Cohen's *kappa* for the 10 types of reasons and explanations was .65. Examples of these codes are provided in Table 1. In some narratives, children referenced reasons that did not fit into any of the above categories (e.g., being provoked). These narratives were marked as having an "other" type of reason and were not included in analyses. Four assume narratives and three mitigate narratives were given the other type of reason code.

Guilt

Each narrative was coded for the presence of *guilt* (*kappa* = .51). This code was comprised of negative moral emotions surrounding the harmful behavior, such as guilt,

shame, regret, remorse, or a nonspecific negative emotion (e.g., "I felt bad about it"). An example of a reference to guilt is provided in Table 1.

Judgments of harmful behavior

Children were explicitly asked to evaluate their harmful behavior as "okay or not okay". Responses formed a 5-point scale: 1-really negative (really not okay), 2-kind of negative (kind of not okay), 3-mixed (the act was both okay and not okay), 4- kind of positive (kind of okay), and 5-really positive (really okay).

Table 1

Examples of categories used for coding the types of each narrative element

Narrative elements, and their types	Examples
Harmful behavior	
Blocked goal	There is this game we play where one person is the boss over the other one. He wanted to be the boss, but I wouldn't let him.
Excluding	We all came from our hotel rooms and decided to play capture the flag on the field. After a while, we realized that we were missing one girl, so went to her room and she was crying because she felt like we had left her out.
Offensive behavior	We all skateboarded a lot. We would say, "he sucked" and stuff like that. Yeah, and it kind of hurt him.
Physical	We were playing and we bonked our heads and tripped over each other. We both got upset and hurt and got sent to timeout.
Property-related	I took his cards without asking, and he's like, "give 'em back, give 'em back." And I wouldn't. That's basically it.
Trust violation	He asked if he could borrow some money for lunch, and I said I didn't have any. Then later, he saw me buying a cookie, and he was all hurt that I lied to him.
Reasons and explanations	
Intending the harm	I said some mean words about Pricilla. She was standing right there and heard us. But we kind of wanted to make her feel bad.
Not intending the harm	She asked me if I liked her pants, and I said that pink wasn't my favorite color. I didn't really mean to hurt her feelings.
Benevolent intentions	Melissa told me that she knew that Allie had been making out with this guy. I didn't want the secret to get out, so I told Allie that Melissa said that. Melissa got pretty upset with me and was like, "you weren't supposed to tell."

Table 1 *(continued)*

Narrative elements, and their types	Examples
Incidental reasons	My friend took my phone, and I was like, "give it back". He wouldn't, so I hit him and he got really upset. I didn't think that it was my fault because he invaded my privacy.
Not self-monitoring	I broke his family's valuable wooden statue. I was just being careless, and when I'm in somebody else's house, I should be more careful of what I'm doing.
Situational constraints	My friend wanted me to come to his friend's surprise party, but it was really snowy. My parents told me that I couldn't go cause it was a snowstorm. I didn't have a choice cause my parents said so, and we might have crashed.
Victim's misconstrual	She thought that I'd been ignoring her, but I didn't think that I was. She called me and said that she was really upset, but I actually think that I didn't do anything wrong.
Numb construction	I promised my friend Jenny that I would play with her, but then I ditched Jenny and played with someone else.
Victim hurt him/herself	My friend was taking the trash out and he had two big bags. He stepped on his skateboard and broke his arm.
Fragmented construction	She came over, and she knocked it out the rest of the door, and she gave it all the way downstairs. And we said, "no, don't." That was before we met her.
Guilt	
	I said mean things to her, and I really felt bad about it since it made her feel bad. I didn't know what to do after that, and I really felt bad. I really thought it was my fault that she felt sad.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses indicated that none of the main effects or interactions involving gender were significant; gender was therefore dropped from subsequent analyses. Order was not included in the analyses since it was counterbalanced within age and gender. Analyses of narrative length, type of harmful behavior, type of reasons/explanations, guilt, and judgments were conducted as a function of event type (assume, mitigate) and age (5-, 9-, and 16-year-olds), with event type as a repeated measure. For each significant omnibus effect, effect size is reported as partial eta-squared (η_p^2). Bonferroni corrections (with an alpha level of $p < .05$) were used for all post-hoc pairwise comparisons. Degrees of freedom vary as a function of occasional missing data.

Although analyses were often based on dichotomous data, ANOVA-based procedures were used because they have been shown to be more appropriate for analyzing this type of data than are loglinear-based procedures, as the latter run into a distinct estimation problem (see Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001).

Narrative length

Children's narratives varied from 4 to 116 clauses; on average, they contained 27 clauses. An Event Type X Age ANOVA with *number of clauses* as the dependent variable revealed an effect of **event type**, $F(1, 117) = 5.09$, $p = .026$, Wilks' $\lambda = .96$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Assume narratives ($M = 25.82$, $SE = 1.53$) had fewer clauses than mitigate narratives ($M = 28.52$, $SE = 1.50$). As expected, the ANOVA revealed an **age** effect, F (2,

117) = 9.99, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$, with the narratives of 5-year-olds including fewer clauses ($M = 19.19$, $SE = 2.42$) than those of 9- and 16- year-olds ($M = 27.90$, $SE = 2.42$ and $M = 34.31$, $SE = 2.42$, respectively). There was no significant event type by age interaction.

Narrative content

Types of harmful behavior

Given that some children reported engaging in multiple types of harmful behaviors, narratives could include multiple categories of harm; 10% of children referred to more than one type of harmful behavior (*M* number of types = 1.13, *SD* = .38, range = 1 – 4, mode = 1). The number of different types of harmful acts referenced in any one narrative did not significantly vary between assumption ($M = 1.18$) and mitigation ($M = 1.08$) accounts. Similarly, the number of types of harmful behavior that children referred to did not vary as a function of their age (*Ms* = 1.10, 1.15, and 1.13 for 5-, 9-, and 16-year-olds, respectively).

The most common types of harmful actions were offensive behavior (25% of narratives) and physical harm (25%). The other types of harmful behaviors (i.e., blocked goal, exclusion, property harm, trust violation) were each referenced in 11 to 15% of the narratives. These six types of harmful acts were analyzed using an Event Type X Age MANOVA, and the analysis revealed significant multivariate effects for **event type**, F (6, 112) = 4.52, $p < .001$, Wilks' $\lambda = .81$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$, **age**, F (12, 224) = 4.16, $p < .001$, Wilks' $\lambda = .67$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$, and the **event type by age** interaction, F (12, 224) = 1.90, $p = .036$, Wilks' $\lambda = .82$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. The proportion of narratives (by event type and age) in which each type of harmful behavior was present is provided in Table 2.

Four out of the six types of harmful actions were equally likely to occur with assumption and mitigation of fault. Specifically, 11% to 12% of the narratives referred to blocked goals, with assumption and mitigation, respectively. Trust violations were referred to in 13% of assumption narratives and in 15% of mitigation narratives. Exclusionary behavior was equally likely to occur with assumption (15%) and mitigation (13%), as well as physical forms of harm: in 24% and 26% of assumption and mitigation accounts, respectively. Follow-up ANOVAs revealed effects of **event type** on *property-related* harm, F (1, 117) = 4.04, p = .047, η_p^2 = .03. Children were significantly more likely to reference property-related harm with assumption (19%) than with mitigation (10%). Additionally, they were more likely to reference offensive behavior with assumption (33%) than with mitigation (17%), but this main effect was qualified by an interaction (see below).

The types of harmful behavior that were most frequently discussed by 5-year-olds were physical harm (28%) and property-related harm (23%). For 9-year-olds, the most frequent types of harming were physical harm (31%) and offensive behavior (25%), and for 16-year-olds, the most frequent types of harming were trust violations (39%) and offensive behavior (34%). Follow-up ANOVAs revealed **age** effects for *property harm,* F (2, 117) = 3.48, p = .034, η_p^2 = .06, and *trust violations*, F (2, 117) = 15.06, p < .001, η_p^2 = .21. Property-related harms occurred more frequently among 5-year-olds (M = .23) than 16-year-olds (M = .09), with 11-year-olds not significantly different from either group (M = .13). Finally, harm resulting from trust violations was more frequent among 16-year-olds (M = .30, SE = .04) than among 5-year-olds (M = .04, SE = .04) and 9-year-olds (M = .09, SE = .04).

Follow-up ANOVAs revealed an **event type by age** interaction for *offensive behavior*, F (2, 117) = 3.86, p = .024, η_p^2 = .06, and *excluding*, F (2, 117) = 5.27, p = .006, η_p^2 = .08. Follow-up t-tests revealed that 5-year-olds were equally likely to include references to offensive behavior with assumption (M = .15) and mitigation (M = .18). In contrast, 9- and 16-year-olds were more likely to include references to offensive behavior in their assume accounts (*Ms* = .35 and .50, respectively) than in their mitigate accounts (*Ms* = .15 and .18, respectively). Five-year-olds were more likely to include references to excluding in their assume accounts (M = .20) than in their mitigate accounts (M = .03), whereas 9- and 16-year-olds referenced excluding equally frequently with assumption (*Ms* = .18 and .08, respectively) and mitigation (*Ms* = .18 and .20, respectively). Post-hoc t-tests results are presented in Table 2.

Types of reasons and explanations

Similar to harmful acts, participants could refer to multiple reasons and explanations for harming; 35% of narratives included references to more than one type of reasons and explanations (M number of types = 1.63, *SD* = .77, range = 1 – 4, mode = 1). The number of different types of reasons and explanations referenced in any one narrative did not vary with assumption (M = 1.65) and mitigation (M = 1.61). With age, children referred to more types of reasons and explanations (*Ms* = 1.22, 1.72, and 1.79 for 5-, 9-, and 16-year-olds, respectively).

The types of reasons and explanations that were referred to most frequently were incidental reasons (32% of narratives), not intending the harm (25%), situational constraints (20%), not self-monitoring (20%), and victim's misconstrual (19%). Categories that were infrequently referred to were the victim hurting himself/herself

(7%), intending the harm (4%), or having benevolent intentions (4%). The remaining code, numb construction, was referred to in 11% of the narratives.

The Event Type X Age MANOVA with the nine types of reasons and explanations as dependent variables revealed significant multivariate effects for **event type**, F (9, 109) = 11.80, $p < .001$, Wilks' $\lambda = .51$, $\eta_p^2 = .49$, **age**, F (18, 218) = 6.97, $p < .001$, Wilks' $\lambda = .40$, $\eta_p^2 = .37$, and an **event type by age** interaction, F (18, 218) = 4.36, $p < .001$, Wilks' $\lambda = .54$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$. The proportion of narratives (by event type and age) in which each type of reason or explanation was present is given in Table 3.

Contrary to our hypotheses, the codes that were referenced most frequently (i.e., incidental reasons, not intending the harm, and situational constraints) were not found to differ between assumption and mitigation of harm. Follow-up ANOVAs revealed effects of **event type** for *intending* the harmful consequence to the victim, F (1, 117) = 8.49, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$ and *numb* construction, F (1, 117) = 7.61, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. As hypothesized, references to intending the harmful consequence to the victim were present in assume fault accounts ($M = .08$) more often than in mitigate fault accounts ($M = .01$), although references in both types of experiences were infrequent. Also as expected, numb constructions were also formed more often with assumption ($M = .16$) than with mitigation ($M = .06$). Main effects of event type on *victim's misconstrual*, *victim hurt self*, and *not self-monitoring* were qualified by an interaction (see below).

Follow-up ANOVAs revealed **age** effects for eight of the nine codes: *not intending* the harmful consequences to the victim, F (2, 117) = 4.43, $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, *benevolent* intentions, F (2, 117) = 5.93, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, *incidental reasons* for engaging in the harmful behavior, F (2, 117) = 3.44, $p = .035$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, *situational*

constraints, F (2, 117) = 11.10, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$, and *numb* constructions, F (2, 117) = 10.82, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$. Main effects of age on *victim's misconstrual*, *not self-monitoring*, and *victim hurt self* were qualified by an interaction (see below). *T*-tests revealed that not intending the harmful consequences to the victim was significantly more likely among 9-year-olds (*M* = .34) than 5-year-olds (*M* = .15), with 16-year-olds not significantly different from either group (*M* = .25). Benevolent intentions were more likely among 16-year-olds (*M* = .10) than 9-year-olds (*M* = .01) and 5-year-olds (*M* = .00). Incidental reasons were more frequent among 16-year-olds (*M* = .41) than 5-year-olds (*M* = .21), with 9-year-olds not significantly different from either group (*M* = .33). Situational constraints were more frequent among 9-year-olds (*M* = .33) and 16-year-olds (*M* = .21) than 5-year-olds (*M* = .06). In contrast, numb constructions were more frequent among 5-year-olds (*M* = .24) than 9-year-olds (*M* = .06) and 16-year-olds (*M* = .03). References to intending the harmful action were equally infrequent across the three age groups.

Main effects of event type and age were qualified by an **event type by age** interaction on *victim's misconstrual* of the experience, F (2, 117) = 6.03, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, *not self-monitoring*, F (2, 117) = 22.19, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$, and *victim hurt self*, F (2, 117) = 11.73, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$. As expected, follow-up *t*-tests revealed that 5-year-olds equally infrequently included references to the victim's misconstrual in their assume (*M* = .05) and mitigate (*M* = .00) accounts; whereas 9- and 16-year-olds referenced the victim's misconstrual more frequently with mitigation (*Ms* = .45 and .38, respectively) than with assumption (*Ms* = .15 and .13, respectively). Five-year-olds almost never referred to not self-monitoring (*Ms* = .03 with assumption and mitigation each), whereas

9- and 16-year-olds referred to not self-monitoring more frequently with assumption (*Ms* = .30 and .70, respectively) than with mitigation (*Ms* = .05 and .08, respectively). References to the victim hurting herself/himself were more frequent with mitigation for 5-year-olds (M = .33) than with assumption (M = .00); 9- and 16-year-olds infrequently referenced this code in both of their assume (*Ms* = .00 for each, respectively) and mitigate (*Ms* = .08 and .00, respectively) accounts. Post-hoc *t*-tests results are presented in Table 3.

Guilt

Children referenced guilt in 16% of their narratives. An Event Type X Age ANOVA with *guilt* as the dependent variable revealed effects of **event type**, F (1, 117) = 26.68, $p < .001$, Wilks' $\lambda = .81$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$, **age**, F (2, 117) = 5.24, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, and an **event type by age** interaction, F (2, 117) = 3.95, $p = .022$, Wilks' $\lambda = .94$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. As we hypothesized, 5-year-olds were equally unlikely to describe guilt in both experiences of assumption (M = .08) and mitigation (M = .03); whereas, 9- and 16-year-olds were more likely to describe guilt in experiences in which they assumed blame (*Ms* = .35 for 9- and 16-year-olds each, respectively) than in those in which they mitigated blame (*Ms* = .05 for 9- and 16-year-olds each, respectively).

Judgments of harmful behavior

Recall that children judged their harmful behavior on a scale ranging from really negative (1) to really positive (5). On average, children judged their actions to be between kind of negative and mixed/both negative and positive (M = 2.42). An Event Type X Age ANOVA with the *judgment* as the dependent variable revealed effects of **event type**, F

(1, 116) = 77.85, $p < .001$, Wilks' $\lambda = .60$, $\eta_p^2 = .40$, and an **event type by age** interaction, F (1, 116) = 4.24, $p = .017$, Wilks' $\lambda = .93$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Overall, children judged their behavior as more negative with assumption of fault ($M = 1.85$) than with mitigation of fault ($M = 2.99$). However, the difference between the two experiences was larger for 9- and 16-year-olds than it was for 5-year-olds.

Table 2

Types of harmful actions, by Event Type and Age (Proportions)

	5-year-olds		9-year-olds		16-year-olds	
	Assume	Mitigate	Assume	Mitigate	Assume	Mitigate
Blocked goal	.10	.10	.15	.15	.08	.10
(SE)	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*
Excluding	$.20_a$	$.03_b$	.18	.18	.08	.20
(SE)	*(.06)*	*(.05)*	*(.06)*	*(.05)*	*(.06)*	*(.05)*
Offensive behavior	.15	.18	$.35_a$	$.15_b$	$.50_a$	$.18_b$
(SE)	*(.07)*	*(.06)*	*(.07)*	*(.06)*	*(.07)*	*(.06)*
Physical harm	.25	.30	.35	.28	.13	.20
(SE)	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.07)*
Property-related	.33	.13	.13	.13	.13	.05
(SE)	*(.06)*	*(.05)*	*(.06)*	*(.05)*	*(.06)*	*(.05)*
Trust violation	.03	.05	.10	.08	.28	.33
(SE)	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*	*(.05)*

Note. The numbers in each cell represent the proportion of narratives (by event type and age) in which each type of harmful action was present. Mean proportions in each row are labeled with different subscripts when the omnibus interaction was significant and posthoc Bonferroni tests revealed significant simple effects of event type at $p < .05$. Proportions within a column may sum to greater than 1.0 because it was possible for multiple categories to be coded in the same narrative.

Table 3

Types of reasons and explanations, by Event Type and Age (Proportions)

	5-year-olds		9-year-olds		16-year-olds	
	Assume	Mitigate	Assume	Mitigate	Assume	Mitigate
Intending	.03	.00	.10	.00	.10	.03
(SE)	*(.04)*	*(.01)*	*(.04)*	*(.01)*	*(.04)*	*(.01)*
Not intending	.10	.20	.33	.35	.23	.28
(SE)	*(.06)*	*(.07)*	*(.06)*	*(.07)*	*(.06)*	*(.07)*
Benevolent intentions	.00	.00	.00	.03	.08	.13
(SE)	*(.02)*	*(.03)*	*(.02)*	*(.03)*	*(.02)*	*(.03)*
Incidental reasons	.23	.20	.28	.38	.35	.48
(SE)	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.07)*	*(.07)*
Not self-monitoring	.03	.03	$.30_a$	$.05_b$	$.70_a$	$.08_b$
(SE)	*(.06)*	*(.04)*	*(.06)*	*(.04)*	*(.06)*	*(.04)*
Situational constraints	.13	.00	.30	.35	.18	.25
(SE)	*(.06)*	*(.06)*	*(.06)*	*(.06)*	*(.06)*	*(.06)*
Victim's misconstrual	.05	.00	$.15_a$	$.45_b$	$.13_a$	$.38_b$
(SE)	*(.05)*	*(.06)*	*(.05)*	*(.06)*	*(.05)*	*(.06)*
Numb construction	.33	.15	.10	.03	.05	.00
(SE)	*(.06)*	*(.04)*	*(.06)*	*(.04)*	*(.06)*	*(.04)*
Victim hurt self	$.00_a$	$.33_b$	.00	.08	.00	.00
(SE)	*(.00)*	*(.05)*	*(.00)*	*(.05)*	*(.00)*	*(.05)*

Note. The numbers in each cell represent the proportion of narratives (by event type and age) in which each type of reason or explanation was present. Mean proportions in each row are labeled with different subscripts when the omnibus interaction was significant and posthoc Bonferroni tests revealed significant simple effects of event type at $p < .05$. Proportions within a column may sum to greater than 1.0 because it was possible for multiple categories to be coded for the same narrative.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we asked whether, and if so, how two types of children's own transgressive situations (those in which they assume fault for causing harm and those in which they mitigate fault for causing harm) offer distinct contributions to children's sense of themselves as moral agents. Specifically, we were examining two features of their experiences that were implicated in the construction of moral agency: the types of reasons and explanations that children provide to explain their harmful behavior and their references to guilt. We also coded the type of harmful behavior that children engaged in and their judgments of their behavior to learn more about the background of children's experiences in which they assume and mitigate fault. In general, the findings indicated that experiences of assumption and mitigation contribute to children's development of moral agency in some similar ways and in some distinct ways. Moreover, many of the differences we found between these two types of transgressive experiences were qualified by an interaction with age. In other words, the difference between assumption and mitigation appeared to be different for 5-year-olds than it was for 9- and 16-year-olds.

Excepting two types of harmful actions (property-related harm and offensive behavior), children referenced similar types of behaviors with assumption and mitigation of fault. Property-related harm (e.g., disputes about sharing, using someone's belongings without permission, damaging someone's property) and offensive behavior (e.g., name calling, laughing at someone's mistake) were more often referenced in accounts of

assumption of blame, perhaps due to features of the behaviors themselves (e.g., ruthlessness, more concrete consequences). However, in general, children discussed similar types of behavior with assumption and mitigation of fault. Similarly, although children judged their behavior as more negative with assumption than with mitigation, across both types of events, children rated their behavior as falling somewhere between negative and mixed (simultaneously negative and positive).

It is against this backdrop of similarities that we interpret the reasons and emotions that children provided to explain their harmful behavior in experiences of assumption and mitigation of blame for their wrongdoings. We expected that children would reference two types of reasons and explanations more frequently with the assumption of fault (intending and numb), and five types of reasons and explanations more frequently with the mitigation of fault (not intending, benevolent intentions, incidental reasons, situational constraints, and victim's misconstrual). We were unsure about whether one type of reason (not self-monitoring) would occur more frequently with assumption or mitigation, and we did not anticipate two types of constructions (victim hurt self and fragmented) would occur at the onset of the study.

The construction of moral agency with assumption of blame

We found that our hypotheses about the reasons and explanations that would occur with assumption of fault were supported by our data. Children were more likely to reference intending the harmful consequences or to form numb constructions with assumption of fault than they were with the mitigation of fault. There are two caveats to these findings: first, intending the harmful consequences was referenced infrequently overall (in no more than 10% of the assumption narratives); second, although children of

all ages formed numb accounts more frequently with assumption than with mitigation, the difference between assumption and mitigation was only significant for children in the youngest age group.

Five-year-olds constructed numb accounts twice as frequently with assumption than with mitigation of blame. This is consistent with prior work that suggests that numb constructions are formed in situations in which children are overwhelmed by feelings of guilt (Wainryb, 2011). It may be that with the assumption of blame, young children are struggling to regulate their feelings of guilt, and they are unable to consider why they engaged in the harmful behavior. For example, the following assume blame narrative was coded as numb.

> Um, one time I didn't share with someone. They got upset. CAN YOU TELL ME EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED? He, he got mad. SO YOU DIDN'T SHARE, AND HE GOT MAD? Sometimes I did, but one time I didn't. He got hurt. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT YOU CAN TELL ME ABOUT THAT TIME? NO? CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT HOW YOU THINK THAT WHAT HAPPENED WAS YOUR FAULT? Because I wasn't sharing. (5-year-old boy)

This narrator referred to his behavior that caused harm (not sharing), and the negative emotional consequences of that behavior (he got mad), but he does not provide any reasons or explanations for his action—we are not given any information about *why* he did not share. In fact, he seems somewhat fixated on his behavior and the harm that ensued from his actions.

Prior research implies that children should assume responsibility for their wrongdoings (e.g., Bandura, 2002), and other work argues that the consideration of reasons and explanations is conducive to adaptive moral development (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a, 2010b). Combining these two claims is problematic in the present study

given that when 5-year-olds are asked to construct narrative accounts of situations in which they assume fault for causing harm, they often fail to reference their reasons for engaging in harm. So, it might not be adaptive to press young children to assume fault for hurting others without helping them to consider how their behavior was connected to their intentions, goals, emotions, desires, or situational features.

These findings do not provide an answer as to why older children and adolescents did not form numb accounts more frequently with assumption of fault. One possible interpretation is that older children and adolescents are better able to regulate their feelings of guilt and shame than younger children in situations in which they assume blame. However, this speculation appears to be somewhat at odds with the finding that 9- and 16-year-olds referenced guilt significantly more frequently with assumption than with mitigation, whereas 5-year-olds referred to guilt equally infrequently with both types of experiences. Perhaps the process of labeling and discussing their feelings of guilt is in and of itself one way in which older children and adolescents are, in fact, regulating their emotions. By stating that they feel bad about causing harm, they might be acknowledging their wrongdoing and simultaneously preserving some sense of themselves as "good" people (i.e., "bad" people would not likely feel guilt for hurting others). Thus, in their experiences in which they assume blame, 9- and 16-year-olds might feel guilty, but not be overwhelmed by this emotion. This interpretation is consistent with our finding that 9- and 16-year-olds often provide reasons to explain their harmful behavior with assumption of fault.

Thirty percent of 9-year-olds' and 70% of 16-year-olds' assumption of fault narratives contained a reference to not self-monitoring, whereas, less than 10% of their

mitigation narratives contained this type of reason. This suggests that with assumption of fault, children and adolescents are learning about what aspects of their moral agency they failed to control (e.g., their attention), but they think that they ought to have controlled. Importantly, this type of explanation might allow children to be more forgiving of themselves and to imagine a future in which they can make better decisions. By contrast, some types of reasons and explanations (e.g., causing intentional harm) likely present more of a challenge to children's relationships with others and their sense of themselves as moral beings.

The construction of moral agency with mitigation of blame

Young children appear to have difficulties mitigating fault for causing harm. When they were asked to provide accounts of times "when you did or said something, another kid ended up upset or hurt, and you think that it was not your fault," they often narrated experiences that only met the last two criteria. In one-third of their accounts of mitigation, 5-year-olds discussed an experience in which the victim hurt herself or was hurt by someone else; these types of accounts were presented even after the interviewer repeatedly prompted them to describe an event in which *they* engaged in a behavior that ended up causing harm. The finding that young children often narrate a "victim hurt self" account with mitigation suggests that when harm ensues from young children's actions, they automatically or reflexively think that it is their fault—if their action caused harm, regardless of their reasons for engaging in the action, they tend to consider that it is their fault. These findings are consistent with prior work that has shown that young children tend to over-attribute intentionality or conflate outcomes and intentions (Wainryb & Brehl, 2006). From these findings, it appears that it is not until after the age of 5 that

children learn how to mitigate fault for their own harmful actions. Eight percent of 9-year-olds also constructed "victim hurt self" accounts with mitigation, but more frequently, children in this middle age group referenced reasons that were similar to those used by 16-year-olds in their accounts of mitigation.

Five types of reasons and explanations were hypothesized to be referenced more frequently with mitigation: not intending the harmful consequences to the victim, benevolent intentions, incidental reasons, situational constraints, and the victim misconstruing the experience. Only references to the victim misconstruing the experience occurred more frequently with mitigation of fault, and this effect was driven by the 9- and 16-year-olds. This finding suggests that with mitigation of blame, older children and adolescents are learning about how their moral agency comes into conflict with the agency of others. Thus, they might be learning about the limits of their moral agency and that in some experiences, it is difficult or impossible to foresee how others will interpret the situation. In this way, children and adolescents are constructing both their own moral agency and the agency of others in their experiences of mitigation. Consider the following example, which is a fairly typical account of an instance in which the narrator mitigates fault for causing harm. References to the victim's misconstrual of the experience (according to the narrator) are bolded:

> […] So I was with one of my friends, and I asked, and she wasn't really looking at me, but I asked if I could, um, maybe like take, um, have something, bring it um somewhere and then bring it right back to her. I think it might have been like a stuffed animal or something. And **she thought that I stole it**, and, and, and **she thought that she didn't give me permission**, and I thought it wasn't my fault. But I can't remember much about that, so. **She thought that I stole it** even after I asked […] SO SHE THOUGHT THAT YOU STOLE IT? Mm hmm. Cause she wasn't really looking at me […] AND CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT HOW YOU THINK THAT WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN YOU AND THAT GIRL WAS NOT YOUR FAULT? I thought because since I

> asked permission she said yes, and she didn't hear me, so **it's just a misunderstanding**. But that when she got mad at me, it was not my fault, cause I got permission to take it and bring it back. (9-year-old girl)

In this account, the narrator constructs both the victim's agency and her own agency; she attempts to make sense of the victim's behavior by considering how the victim's beliefs differed from her own ("she thought…I thought…"). Thus, with mitigation, older children and adolescents appear to be learning that it is sometimes difficult to guess how others construe their interactions, and because of this imperfect understanding of others' thoughts, desires, and emotions, harming others might be inevitable and, perhaps, understandable. Instead of constructing self-protective distortions of experiences in which they mitigate fault, children seem to be constructing a realistic sense of the limits of their own moral agency with these types of experiences. It is also important to note that the narrator does not seem to imply that the victim is exclusively to blame for the misunderstanding, but rather she suggests that there is some legitimacy in her perspective ("she wasn't really looking at me; she didn't hear me").

Surprisingly, unintentional harming, benevolent intentions, incidental reasons, and situational constraints were not used significantly more frequently with mitigation. This contrasts with previous research, which has shown that children and adolescents judge hypothetical actors to be blameless or to deserve only part of the blame when they hurt others in situations with these sorts of competing concerns. However, there may be a few explanations for why our findings may be discrepant from those found in prior work.

First, it might be that particular types of reasons and explanations might often co-occur in the same narrative; perhaps children reference unintentional harm, incidental reasons, situational constraints, or benevolent intentions in conjunction with other types

of reasons (e.g., not self-monitoring; victim's misconstrual) that distinguish assumption and mitigation. In the present study, we did not examine which types of reasons and explanations tended to co-occur. Future research should explore the pattern of types of reasons referenced with assumption and mitigation of fault.

Second, it may also be that coding the *presence* of different types of reasons did not fully capture how children were distinguishing experiences of assumption and mitigation via their reasons. It is possible that children elaborated some types of explanations in one of their narratives and then only minimally referenced those explanations in the other narrative. With our coding scheme, both narratives would be given the same code, regardless of the extent to which children elaborated their reference. This suggests that further research should examine the frequency of references to each type of reason with assumption and mitigation of blame.

Third, some of these codes encompassed a variety of subcodes, and it might be that these subcodes were used differentially with assumption and mitigation of blame. For example, the code situational constraints included references to parental authority ("She was upset that I wouldn't talk to her, but my mom said that I was grounded and couldn't be on the phone"), environmental constraints ("I couldn't drive to the party he wanted me to go to because it was snowing"), federal laws ("It was against the law to wear an Obama t-shirt on election day, so I told her that"), and peer pressure or group dynamics ("Well a lot of us kids thought it was wrong to watch R-rated movies, so we all told them to stop it"). The subtypes of these reasons might be differentially associated with assumption and mitigation of fault.

To illustrate these possibilities, consider the following two narratives from the same adolescent. The first account was provided when she was asked to talk about an experience that was not her fault (mitigate responsibility):

> Um, last year at my old school, I had—so it was like the four of us and we were like all best friends and it was my friend Karen, Chelsea, and Megan, and I, and um so Karen and Chelsea are really loud, I, like we're all sort of the same personality sort of except for Megan, she's a little bit quieter. So Megan would like say things to me, like about how Chelsea and Karen were really bad influences on her and she wished they didn't swear so much and that they just do a lot of bad stuff. Because, um, Karen and Chelsea would take things from the lost and found (laughs while talking) and just like act like it was theirs. And Megan was like, "I just feel bad cause that's stealing; they shouldn't do that," and I was just like, "Oh okay." And, um, that day I told Karen and Chelsea what Megan said, and they got really mad, and they didn't want to be her friend anymore. So they started like pushing her away. And then Megan like got really upset and started crying. She called me and asked me why I told them that. And I was just, I didn't really think it was my fault at all (talks louder), and I just said, "**Cause you shouldn't be saying that about your friends,**" and then she was just really upset, and she was crying and I didn't really know what to do. And so we stopped being her friend for a long while and yeah that's kind of what happened (laughs nervously) […] CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT WHY YOU THINK THAT THAT TIME WAS NOT YOUR FAULT? Um, **I just felt that it wasn't right for her to say things like that if she was their friend. She should've not have told me, but told them how it made her uncomfortable if they swore so much and like taking things from the lost and found. And I just didn't think it was right for her to say it to me.** (16-year-old girl)

The bolded parts of this narrative were coded as referring to the narrator's incidental reasons. The narrator explains that she violated Megan's trust because of her prescriptive belief about what friends should do if they disagree with each other, and she elaborates on this explanation in detail.

The same narrator also refers to incidental reasons (and some other types of explanations) in her account of an experience in which she assumes fault for causing harm:

> So I think it was fifth grade, um, we would take these spelling tests […] like we'd have the whole week to prepare for it, and then Friday, we would take it, and she

> [the teacher] would read off the list, and then she would read the words and then we'd spell it […] and I (emphasis) thought I was so clever, and I figured out a way that if you wrote down the answers, like wrote down each spelling word, and then like during the tests when she said them, you just did it, like just wing it, and then like after when you have to pass it, you pass it to like the next person in front of you to correct it. Instead of giving them the one you were doing, you pull out a one you did before—like you wrote down the right ones, and then like give it to the person so you have like a hundred percent. MM HMM. So I did that, and I told my friend Bree like, "Oh this is such a clever way of like ace-ing this," (high voice) and then she was like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah" (supportive voice). And so she started doing it too, and she told her friend Anna, and **I didn't like Anna at the time** (whispers, laughs while talking). And **I was kind of mad** because then Anna would be getting a good score also. And so I stopped doing it, I don't know why I stopped doing it, I just did. And Anna and Bree were still doing it. So one day I was talking to my friend Ginger, and I said, "Oh! They're cheating!" And so we went and told the teacher that they were cheating, and how they were cheating, and they both got into a lot of trouble. And Bree was really sad and mad at me for—well, she never found out that I told on her. She just thought that someone told. And yeah, it was my fault for her getting in trouble (laughs nervously while talking). MM HMM. And I still feel bad to this day, and yeah. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU CAN TELL ME ABOUT THAT TIME TO HELP ME UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN YOU AND BREE? Yeah. Um, not really, we were like really—it was in that moment when you're not really fully best friends, but almost there, and **I suppose I was a bit jealous of her and Anna's relationship because they were, they've been friends ever since like first grade and yeah, I was just kind of upset.** AND CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT HOW YOU THINK THAT WHAT HAPPENED THAT TIME WAS YOUR FAULT? I feel like **I was being really selfish, and instead of telling them personally, "Oh let's not do that anymore," I wanted them to get in trouble**. And I'm the one that showed them how to do it, and like not even owning up to the fact that I did it before too, **but just pushing them under the bus**. MM HMM. Yeah (sighs). (16-year-old girl)

This second account—her assume fault account—was coded as referencing incidental reasons ("I didn't like Anna; I was a bit jealous), intentional harm ("I wanted them to get in trouble"), and not self-monitoring ("I was being really selfish instead of telling them…"). Both her mitigate and assume accounts reference incidental reasons, but the account in which she assumes blame also contains references to other types of reasons and explanations. With mitigation, the narrator elaborated on incidental reasons in more depth than she did with assumption. The incidental reasons that she referenced with

mitigation might be classified into a subtype of prescriptive beliefs, whereas the incidental reasons that she referenced with assumption (being mad and jealous) might be classified into a different subtype of incidental reasons (e.g., emotions). So, future studies should examine the possible subtypes of incidental reasons or situational constraints that children reference with assumption and mitigation in order to find whether children are constructing similar or distinct aspects of their moral agency vis-à-vis these explanations with assumption and mitigation of blame.

Conclusions

By summary, we found that 5-year-olds most frequently constructed numb accounts with assumption of blame. Given that research suggests that numb accounts might be problematic to the development of moral agency (e.g., Wainryb, 2011), in situations in which young children assume fault for their wrongdoings (either when they are pressed to do so by others or when they do so on their own), they might need help considering why they engaged in the hurtful behavior and in regulating the guilt, shame, or regret that might accompany such experiences. When they were asked to mitigate blame for their wrongdoings, 5-year-olds frequently constructed accounts in which their peers hurt themselves or were hurt by others. Thus, young children might need adult scaffolding to recognize and reflect upon situations in which they engaged in an action, someone ended up hurt, and it was not their fault.

With assumption of fault, 9- and 16-year-olds constructed their moral agency around their failure to self-monitor and their feelings of guilt; this suggests that they acknowledge the harm that ensued from their actions and also learn about how they can act differently in future interactions to avoid causing unnecessary harm. With mitigation

of fault, 9- and 16-year-olds constructed their moral agency around the victim's misconstrual of the experience. Thus, mitigation appears to be context in which children explore how their own moral agency might have limits, in part because people cannot always anticipate how others will interpret their shared interactions.

Additional research is needed to examine which types of reasons and explanations often co-occur in children's and adolescents' experiences of assumption or mitigation of fault, the extent to which children elaborate some types of reasons with either assumption or mitigation, and the subtypes of reasons that might be differentially paired with assumption or mitigation of blame. Further, future work is also needed to take a closer look at the developmental transition that occurs between the age of 5 and 9 years old—the period in which most children learn how to mitigate fault for acting in a way that caused harm—and to find which aspects of children's moral agency are developing between 9 and 16 years old. Furthermore, the mechanisms that contribute to these developmental changes should be explored.

It is also important to note that when people consider their blameworthiness, they likely classify experiences as falling somewhere between "fully assume blame" and "fully mitigate blame." In fact, any given experience probably contains aspects that are related to people assuming fault and aspects that are related to people mitigating fault. Though we elicited accounts that children nominated as assumption or mitigation experiences, it was not uncommon for children—most often adolescents—to change their mind about their blameworthiness as they narrated their experience. For example, after the adolescent cited above constructed her mitigation account about hurting her friend Megan (because she told Chelsea and Karen what Megan had said about them), she was

asked the manipulation check question ("Can you remind me, did I ask you to tell me about a time that was your fault or about a time that was not your fault?"). The participant gave the correct response ("not my fault") and then added:

> Well at the time, I didn't think it was my fault because it—I was sort of choosing over which friends to be loyal to, I, I felt like I should tell them that Megan was thinking that way, but then again, I feel like I was breaking the trust between me and Megan for going behind her back also and telling them what she said. (16-year-old girl)

Upon reflection, this adolescent considers both how she may and may not be to blame for her hurtful behavior. She also mentions that over time, her thoughts about her blameworthiness have changed. Research is needed to capture these complexities—to find how children think about experiences in which they both assume and mitigate blame, to document the process whereby children come to classify aspects of an experiences as "their fault" or "not their fault," and to chart why and how children sometimes change their mind about their blameworthiness.

Though there is much work to be done, the present study begins to address to these important questions. Our findings suggest that being able to both assume fault and to mitigate fault for causing harm is critical to the development of an adaptive sense of moral agency. These contexts offer complementary opportunities in which children can learn to recognize failures of moral agency that ought to have been under their own control, as well as those that are less foreseeable. It is also likely that these type of experiences jointly contribute to children's conceptions of themselves as moral people, despite the fact that they sometimes act in ways that hurt others; these findings suggest that children construct aspects of their moral agency that are less self-protective with

assumption of fault, and those that are more self-protective (but still might reflect what children believed happened) with mitigation.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Order B: Mitigation then Assumption

I'm here because I'm studying how kids/people (and I don't mean brothers and sisters, I mean just kids/people that know each other)–how kids/people sometimes get along with each other and how sometimes they say or do something and another kid ends up feeling upset or hurt by it. And sometimes it's their fault and sometimes it's not their fault.

EVENT A: Now I want to talk to you about some of your own times when you did or said something and some other kid ended up feeling upset or hurt. First, I want you to think of a time like this when you think that what you did was **not your fault**. To help you think of a time, I have cards that show what other kids/people have talked about, and I want you to think about times you've done these things.

- (offensive behavior) Some kids/people talk about times when they said something mean or hurtful, and that ended up upsetting or hurting another kid, and they think it was **not their fault**.
- (physical) Some kids/people talk about times when they hit, slapped, pushed, or tripped another kid, and that ended up upsetting or hurting the other kid, and they think it was **not their fault**.
- (trust violation) Some kids/people talk about times when they broke a promise, spread a rumor, or talked about another kid behind their back, and that ended up upsetting or hurting the other kid, and they think it was **not their fault**.
- (property) Some kids/people talk about times when they took something without permission, didn't share, or broke something that belonged to someone else, and that ended up upsetting or hurting the other kid, and they think it was **not their fault**, and
- (other) Some kids/people talk about times when they did or said something else that I couldn't really draw, and that ended up upsetting or hurting another kid, and they think it was **not their fault**.

Now I want you to think of one of your own times when you did or said something like one of these. Once you've thought of that time, point to the card that is like what you did…Okay, you know I wasn't there that time, so I need know the whole story of what happened. Tell me all the details so I can picture it as though I'd been there. So take a minute and make a picture in your mind of everything that happened that time—that time when you did or said something, and the other kid ended up feeling upset or hurt, and you

think it was **not your fault**. When you've got the entire story, go ahead and begin – start by telling me the name of the kid who ended up feeling upset or hurt.

- Is there anything else you can tell me about that time?
- Can you tell me a little more about how you think what happened between you and (victim) was **not your fault**?

MANIPULATION CHECK: Thank you, your story really showed me what happened. Real quick, can you remind me what I asked you to do? Did I ask you to tell me about a time that you think it was your fault or about a time that you think it was **not your fault?** Great.

EVENT B: Okay, remember how I said that kids sometimes think it was their fault and they sometimes think it was not their fault? Now I want you to think of another one of your own times when you did or said something and some other kid ended up feeling upset or hurt, something like what's shown on one of these cards. But this time, I want you to think of a time like this when you think that what you did was **your fault**.

- (offensive behavior) Some kids/people talk about times when they said something mean or hurtful, and that ended up upsetting or hurting another kid, and they think it was **their fault**.
- (physical) Some kids/people talk about times when they hit, slapped, pushed, or tripped another kid, and that ended up upsetting or hurting the other kid, and they think it was **their fault**.
- (trust violation) Some kids/people talk about times when they broke a promise, spread a rumor, or talked about another kid behind their back, and that ended up upsetting or hurting the other kid, and they think it was **their fault**.
- (property) Some kids/people talk about times when they took something without permission, didn't share, or broke something that belonged to someone else, and that ended up upsetting or hurting the other kid, and they think it was **their fault**, and
- (other) Some kids/people talk about times when they did or said something else that I couldn't really draw, and that ended up upsetting or hurting another kid, and they think it was **their fault**.

I want you to think of one of your own times when you did or said something like one of these. Once you've thought of that time, point to the card that is like what you did. It can be a different time using the same card or a time using another card…Again, you know I wasn't there that time, so I need know the whole story of what happened. Tell me all the details so I can picture it as though I'd been there. So take a minute and make a picture in your mind of everything that happened that time—that time when you did or said something, and the other kid ended up feeling upset or hurt, and you think it was **your fault**. When you've got the entire story, go ahead and begin – start by telling me the name of the kid who ended up feeling upset or hurt.

- Is there anything else you can tell me about that time?
- Can you tell me a little more about how you think what happened between you and (victim) was **your fault**?

MANIPULATION CHECK: Thank you, your story really showed me what happened. Real quick, can you remind me what I asked you to do? Did I ask you to tell me about a time that you think it was not your fault or about a time that you think it was **your fault?**

JUDGMENT OF EVENT A: Great, thank you for telling me the whole story. So here's what I want us to do now: I want to ask you some questions about that first time you told me about—the time when you think it was **not your fault**. So, when you think about the time when you (act) and (victim) felt [upset/hurt], do you think it was okay or not okay that you (act)? Do you think it was really (not) okay or just kind of (not) okay?

1	2	3	4	5
really not okay	*kind of not okay*	*mixed/both*	*kind of okay*	*really okay*

JUDGMENT OF EVENT B: So here's what I want us to do now: I want to ask you some questions about that other time you told me about—the time when you think it was **your fault**. So, when you think about the time when you (act) and (victim) felt [upset/hurt], do you think it was okay or not okay that you (act)? Do you think it was really (not) okay or just kind of (not) okay?

1	2	3	4	5
really not okay	*kind of not okay*	*mixed/both*	*kind of okay*	*really okay*

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