



The Happy Victimizer Pattern in Adulthood – State of the Art and Contrasting Approaches: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Introduction

The Happy Victimizer Phenomenon (HVP) relates to the stable finding that young children attribute positive emotions like happiness to a rule transgressor despite judging the transgression as wrong (Arsenio & Kramer, 1992; Arsenio & Lover, 1995; Nunner-Winkler, 1999; 2012; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), whereas older children attribute negative emotions like shame or guilt. Various studies suggest that the HVP disappears in the course of (moral) development (for reviews, see for example Arsenio, Gold, & Adams, 2006; Krettenauer, Malti & Sokol, 2008). In the moral developmental literature, various, partly interrelated explanations and interpretations of this phenomenon have been suggested. The classical explanation as offered by Nunner-Winkler and Sodian (1988) implies that moral cognitions, that is, making and justifying moral judgments, evolve before moral motivation. The attribution of positive emotions to a rule transgressor is seen as indicating a lack of moral motivation. Based on the assumption that (negative) moral emotions like guilt can be seen as an indicating that the self does not only know a moral rule but also feel committed towards it (Malti, Gummerum, Keller, & Buchmann, 2009), the HVP can be interpreted to the effect that a lack of negative moral emotion attributions coincides with a lack of moral commitment.

Another, transition-oriented explanation (Arsenio et al., 2006; Lagattuta, 2005; Krettenauer et al., 2008) views the HVP as a developmental transition based on a dis-integration of moral rule knowledge and moral motivation (as assessed by moral emotion attributions and justifications thereof): Whereas young children already possess appropriate moral rule knowledge, their development of moral motivation, that is, prioritising moral values over hedonistic needs, is delayed. According to this understanding, the HVP would be restricted to (early) childhood.

This position, however, is challenged by recent empirical evidence suggesting that the HVP can also be found in adolescence and adulthood and seems even to be widely spread (e.g., Heinrichs, Minnameier, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, & Latzko, 2015; Krettenauer, Asendorpf, & Nunner-Winkler, 2013; Krettenauer & Eichler, 2006; Nunner-Winkler, 2007). Therefore, the question arises whether the HVP actually does disappear in the course of sociomoral development. This question is essential: If the HVP represents a transitional stage affecting all (or at least the vast majority of) children and



adolescents, then the occurrence of the HVP in adolescence and adulthood must represent either a developmental delay or even a deviation. First longitudinal findings do not yet offer a clear picture (Krettenauer et al., 2013). However, cross-sectional research can be used to address the very basic question whether the patterns consisting of moral judgment, emotion attribution and respective justifications found in adulthood actually do represent the Happy Victimizer Phenomenon as documented in children.

Moreover, there are indications that patterns of moral decision-making may also differ according to the specific context or situation referred to (e.g., Bienengraber, 2011). We may therefore assume that Happy Victimizing in adulthood represents a phenomenon that is distinct from the phenomenon studied in children. We therefore suggest that in adolescents and adults, it is more appropriate to speak of Happy Victimizer Patterns, that is, patterns of moral reasoning and emotion attributions which, while having some similarities with the HVP on the surface, carry different meanings and represent more complex moral functioning.

This special issue presents new ideas to explain patterns of moral decision-making in adolescence and adulthood. In paper 1 by Heinrichs, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Latzko, Minnameier, and Döring, the current state of the art in Happy Victimizer research is presented, with a focus on the core theoretical and methodological issues involved in trying to disentangle the phenomenon and the pattern. In papers 2, 3, and 4, empirical evidence is presented on three levels, each level being addressed in at least one of the papers. The levels refer to (a) the emergence of the Happy Victimizer Pattern in adolescence and adulthood; (b) the personal determinants of the Happy Victimizer Pattern; and (c) situational variations in the manifestation of the pattern. Moreover, each paper represents a specific theoretical perspective towards studying the pattern. Each of these approaches has different pedagogical implications. Thus, the action-theoretical explanation (Heinrichs, Kärner, & Reinke) assumes that cognitive control strategies, in particular moral disengagement strategies, play an important role in forming an intention (as the first phase in the process of acting) in the case of an ambivalence or tension between cognitive, emotional, and motivational states. Forming an intention to act requires a decision on the part of the individual as well as his/her commitment to a specific course of action. The emotion development perspective (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger & Latzko) is grounded in the expectation that adults who display the specific judgment-attribution-justification pattern differ from adults not displaying it with respect to their justifications of emotion attributions. The cognitive-structural explanation of the HVP (Minnameier) postulates that it can be reconstructed as a specific moral judgment structure (cf. Minnameier, 2012) which is applied in specific situations that can be modelled game-theoretically.

In their Comment to this Special Issue, Gertrud Nunner-Winkler and Beate Sodan, the researchers first investigating the role of moral motivation in the course of children's moral development, critically discuss the ideas and approaches presented and evaluate the relative merit of the respective positions in explaining the occurrence of Happy Victimizing in adolescence and adulthood. Gaining deeper insights into the Happy Victimizer and Happy Victimizing contributes to a better understanding of children's, adolescents' and adults' social, emotional and moral – what we call “sociomoral” – learning and development. Sociomoral literacy, that is, successfully engaging in meaningful, positive and caring relationships is both a prerequisite for and consequence of successful teaching and learning processes at school (Malti, Häcker, & Nakamura, 2009) and in other learning environments and is especially important in a globalized society (Latzko & Malti, 2010). If teachers are to foster students' sociomoral competencies in diverse classrooms and schools, where multiple, sometimes divergent and contradictory social, religious, and moral values are present and often clash, they need a deeper understanding of children's and adolescents' moral functioning. Thus, both recent curricula and professional standards for teachers have made explicit reference to the necessity of fostering positive social relationships, openness and tolerance towards diversity, conflict resolution, and democratic values (e.g., Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; Kultusministerkonferenz, 2014), all of which are based on sociomoral competencies.



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