No Child Left Alone: Moral Judgements Affect Risk Assessment.

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**Abstract/Intro**

- The United States has seen a sharp increase in the number of parents getting arrested for allowing their children to be a lone.
- This is true despite the fact that the risk to children left alone is low:
  - There are ~ 50 million children in the US
  - 30-40 children die because they are left alone in cars annually (Mclaren, et. al. 2005)
  - 100 stereotypical child abductions (50 come home safely) (US Dept of Justice)
  - Estimated risk of child being abducted: one in 1.4 million. (Gardner, 2009)
- The availability heuristic is likely playing a role, but...
- People are not just afraid, they are also angry...is moral condemnation affecting risk assessments as well?
  - Moral judgments affect people’s estimates of harm.
  - Intentional actions are seen as more harmful than unintentional actions (Ames & Fiske, 2013, 2015).
  - Moral intuitions also affect judgments about cause
  - “Speeding home to hide cocaine versus hiding parents’ anniversary gift” (Alicke, 1992).
  - “Moral coherence”: people modify their factual beliefs to match moral intuitions.
  - Moral arguments about capital punishment affect beliefs about related facts (Liu & Ditto, 2012).

Hypothesis: People’s moral condemnation of parents distorts people’s risk assessments about children who are alone (i.e. “It’s not only wrong because it’s risky, it’s also risky because it’s wrong.”)

**Methods**

- For each item there were 5 “moral” conditions:
  - 1: Accidental (parent gets knocked unconscious/unintentionally leaves child alone)
  - 2: Work (parent goes to work)
  - 3: Relax (parent goes to do something relaxing, e.g. gym)
  - 4: Volunteer (parent goes to do something good)
  - 5: Lover (parent goes to meet his/supper’s best friend)

Example Vignette: Accident: Sandy A. (26) is a safety inspector and the mother of 10-month-old baby Olivia. On Tuesday evenings, Sandy takes Olivia to a “Parent-Child” exercise class at a gym. One evening in early fall, Sandy and Olivia finish class and return to their car, which is parked in the gym’s cool underground parking garage. Sandy telephones Olivia into her parked car (Olivia immediately falls asleep). Sande and, walks a few steps to the parking machine to pay for their parking. On her way back, Sandy finds that the car and knocked a few objects. The driver immediately calls an ambulance, which takes Sandy to the hospital.

Variations and Depend Measures of Each Study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Mean Risk Judgement</th>
<th>Possible Contributors to Norm Change</th>
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**Results**

- **Design**
  - 5 studies
  - 910 participants
  - Each participant read 5 vignettes about a parent who leaves his/her child alone.
  - Keeping the duration and location constant, we varied why the parent leaves (i.e. the moral condition.
  - 5 items:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s name &amp; age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time alone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bright 6 months</td>
<td>Home, eating a snack, watching Frozen</td>
<td>15 minutes (45 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright 3 years</td>
<td>Playing in pool in the car</td>
<td>20 minutes (90 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright 6 months</td>
<td>A park outside a mile from her house</td>
<td>30 minutes (240 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright 3 years</td>
<td>Starbuck’s, outside a black door from where her mother is</td>
<td>45 minutes (150 minutes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion: People’s overall risk assessment was high. The modal response was 10, and the mean was 7.35. Our conclusion is supported by the fact that people rated situations where children were left alone intentionally as more dangerous than when they were left alone unintentionally. In reality, of course, children who are allowed to be alone in circumstances approved by their parents are undoubtedly safer than children who find themselves alone by accident. Converging evidence for our conclusion comes from differences in responses among the four “intentional” conditions. Despite identical descriptions of the circumstances in which children were alone children were judged to be in more danger when the parent was meeting an illicit lover than when she was volunteering for charity, relaxing or going to work. Finally, our conclusion is supported by the fact that when participants were asked to provide a moral judgment, the difference in risk assessment between conditions increased but when they were asked to reason about what might happen to the child the differences decreased.