

## Justin Martin

Department of Psychology, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA, USA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0698-0049>

[jmartin@whitworth.edu](mailto:jmartin@whitworth.edu)

# Superhero Media as a Potential Context for Investigating Children's Understanding of Morally Relevant Events

*Izvorni znanstveni rad / original research paper*

*Primljeno / received 19. 5. 2021. Prihvaćeno / accepted 12. 12. 2022.*

DOI: 10.21066/carcl.libri.12.1.1



Currently, superhero films are one of the more popular film genres, and the genre does not appear to be slowing down anytime soon. In addition, the lives and exploits of superheroes are told through other forms of media such as animated films and television series targeted towards children. However, these narratives are also violent. If older children (i.e., approximately 7–11) engage with superhero media, then it is important to understand the ways they attempt to make sense of this genre. To this end, the essay examines how superhero media may serve as a potential context for older children's understanding of morally relevant events. This potential—based on three broad areas of scholarship on children's capacities for understanding others and their morally relevant acts—is explored along two dimensions. The first is through common narrative features of the genre, and the second is through research implications. It is suggested that a research program utilizing the genre's narrative features as a part of a methodology to investigate older children's understanding of morally relevant acts affords unique opportunities to build upon existing scholarship on the relationship between media content and children's moral understanding.

**Keywords:** superheroes, fantasy, children, moral development, social development, media, education

## Superhero media as a cultural phenomenon

According to Box Office Mojo (2022), there have been an estimated 149 superhero films released since the first *Superman* (1978), which is an average of just over three films each year. Of these films, nearly 75% (111) have been released since the turn of the century, with many recent releases within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU),

featuring both solo superheroes (*Black Panther* 2018; *Captain Marvel* 2019, and *Spiderman: Far From Home* 2020) and superhero team-ups (*Avengers: Infinity War* 2018 and *Avengers: Endgame* 2019), grossing over one billion and two billion worldwide, respectively. Lastly, the fact that phase six of the MCU includes films planned through 2025 (Vary, 2022) suggests that the genre is poised to remain a staple in popular culture for the foreseeable future.

But live action blockbusters only represent part of the genre's influence. In recent decades, many of these superheroes have been depicted across various animated properties targeted towards children. Recent film examples include the multiple award-winning *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), the recently released (*Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* 2023) and planned (*Spider-Man: Beyond the Spider-Verse* 2024) sequels, and *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors* (2018). Recent cartoons include *Avengers Assemble* (2013–2018), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2015–2019), *Spider-Man* (2017–2020), and *Marvel Super Hero Adventures* (2017–2020).

As a cultural phenomenon, the relevance of superhero media cannot be overstated. Humanities disciplines such as African American studies (Nama 2011), English (Eckard 2017), philosophy (White 2019), and theology (Stevenson 2019) have analyzed superhero origin stories, decisions, and their implications for understanding important questions about what it means to be human (e.g., good and evil, fate and free will, justice and welfare, trauma and resilience, selfishness and sacrifice, isolation and community). Similarly, social scientists in communication (Miczo 2016), education (Letizia 2020), political science (Picariello 2019), and psychology (Langley 2019) have explored the ways the lives of superheroes are consistent and inconsistent with empirical research, bearing on how we think about, feel about, treat, and live with others.

Although Justin Martin (2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2023) explores the potential of using developmental psychology as a lens to analyze superhero media, a developmental perspective is largely absent from psychological analyses of the genre. Relatedly, it is worth noting that the longevity of the medium, particularly as it is expressed through narratives involving the same characters (and, to some degree, social worlds) across generations, raises questions about what it means for grandparents, parents, and children to grow up with these characters and experience their struggles, conflicts, and triumphs together. If (grand)parents and their (grand)children consume the same superhero media, *what* exactly do they talk about? What *features* of the content are enjoyed by both children and adults? And do children and adults enjoy these features for the *same* reason(s) or for *different* reason(s)?

Although speculative, this essay explores how scholars may begin to uncover tentative “answers” to these questions from the child's perspective by bringing together scholarship in three areas related to children's emerging capabilities for understanding others and their morally relevant acts. In line with the view that moral acts (and the concepts used to make sense of them) frequently occur in both straightforward (i.e., the moral act is the only or most salient issue) and multifaceted (i.e., additional acts or issues are salient) social interactions (e.g., Helwig 2006; Killen 2018; Turiel 2008b),

morally relevant acts refer to acts that are performed in both types of interactions. The author argues that, collectively, findings in these three areas suggest that older children bring to bear important competencies when viewing superhero media, and that these competencies (and their similarities to those of adults) may help partially explain the cultural relevance of the genre. These competencies, related to their ability to (1) distinguish between fantasy and reality, (2) distinguish between social concepts, and (3) understand certain psychological characteristics of persons, are discussed along two dimensions. One is through some of the genre's common narrative features, and the other is through research implications. The research implications focus on two research programs conducted by Marina Krmar and colleagues (Cingel & Krmar 2019; Krmar & Cooke 2001; Krmar & Curtis 2003; Krmar & Hight 2007; Krmar & Valkenburg 1999; Krmar & Vieira 2005) and Marie-Louise Mares and colleagues (Mares & Acosta 2008, 2010; Mares & Braun 2013; Mares & Woodard 2005; Martins et al. 2016), respectively. Both examine the relationship between media content and children's understanding of morally relevant events.

The essay focuses on older children (approximately 7–11) for two reasons. First, as suggested by the findings discussed below, children's competencies in the above-mentioned areas appear to be more evident and consistently demonstrated in older children compared to younger children. Second, a search conducted by the author in 2018 of animated superhero shows created between 1992 and 2017 and reviewed by Common Sense Media (2018) revealed that the majority (28/32 or 87.4%) were recommended for older children (e.g., 7+ or 8+). Some of the studies from the abovementioned research programs include younger (e.g., ages 3–6), but not older children. These studies were included because their findings have a bearing on the potential for superhero media to serve as stimuli in developmental research in at least two ways. For one, some studies include superhero media as part of their stimuli (e.g., Krmar & Hight 2007). In addition, some studies (e.g., Krmar & Curtis 2003; Krmar & Hight 2007; Mares & Braun 2013; Martins et al. 2016) include salience manipulations that can be easily adapted to studies using superhero media. Overall, the essay aims to highlight the potential of superhero media, with its increasing ubiquity and sophistication (Peaslee 2007), to serve as an important context for empirical investigations of older children's morally relevant understanding.

## **Superhero media and children's social worlds**

One reason it is important to consider superhero media as a context for exploring children's understanding of morally relevant events is because in the lives of both superheroes and the children who (may or may not) watch them, moral considerations pervade their social worlds. Even though it is true that children's social lives are generally not rife with the kinds of harm or crimes depicted in superhero media (e.g., superheroes' use of violence towards supervillains and their protection of civilians from harm), children's experience with harm by way of various acts (e.g., hitting, pushing,

teasing, theft) and vantage points (as a perpetrator, victim, or observer) is nevertheless a common feature of their social interactions (Killen & Smetana 2015; Pasupathi & Wainryb 2010; Turiel 2008a). A second reason is that older children's ability to distinguish fantasy from reality raises questions and possibilities concerning their views of superheroes, their actions, and their potential relevance—if any—for children's everyday lives. Preschoolers have been found to distinguish between fantasy and reality (e.g., Sharon & Woolley 2004) and between one fictional world and another (Skolnick & Bloom, 2006). Further, older children, compared to younger children, may use a wider array of characteristics to distinguish human entities from fantasy entities (Boerger 2011) and may be more likely to justify their classification of events as impossible (versus possible) using factual information (Shtulman & Carey 2007). For these reasons, the aims of the essay are consistent with the suggestion that media frequently consisting of or characterized by moral acts that parallel those children observe and experience in their social worlds warrants theoretical and empirical analysis (Krcmar & Cingel 2020).

In some studies (Sharon & Woolley 2004; Skolnick & Bloom 2006), superheroes are included as part of the fantasy-related stimuli. In others (Boerger 2011; Shtulman & Carey 2007), many of the events, characteristics, and physical laws investigated are consistent with common superhero abilities. Taken together, these findings suggest that if explicitly probed, children may demonstrate an awareness of the fictional nature of superheroes and therefore may distinguish the types of features often characteristic of superheroes that children consider unrealistic (e.g., super speed) from those they may consider to be characteristic of their own lives (e.g., acting based on certain motivations, feeling remorse after harming another, etc.). Such a distinction may contribute to scholars' understanding of how children interpret the actions of superheroes by revealing some of the assumptions about the world/reality children may rely on when viewing superhero media (Bierwirth & Blumberg 2010; Peters & Blumberg 2002).

A third reason pertains to the contexts in which (some) children may frequently view superhero media. When such viewing is taking place alongside parents/caregivers, siblings, and/or peers, developmental analyses of discussions that take place around the events may help identify areas of consistency and inconsistency between how moral concepts are applied in the fictional world and how they are applied in children's everyday social interactions. These analyses can also identify any potential age-related changes associated with to these discussions in cases where asymmetrical co-viewing occurs (e.g., between adults and children, older and younger siblings/peers). Using developmental analyses to help explain these common social viewing experiences is consistent with the notion that children's developing understandings of morality—although influenced by their understanding of the features of moral acts themselves—are also informed by their varying interactions with parents/caregivers, siblings, and peers (Killen & Smetana 2015; Smetana & Jambon 2018).

To summarize, developmental analyses related to children's understanding of morally relevant events in the context of superhero media should account for how the two contexts (children's social lives and those of superheroes) are "linked" through

the salience of moral considerations. Such accounting is influenced by at least two components: children's ability to distinguish fantasy from reality and the nature of the discussions they may have with others when viewing superhero media. To this end, and before discussing more specific research implications rooted in a developmental framework, two general features of superhero media (a comparison of acts and a comparison of perspectives) are discussed. Of course, these features are by no means exclusive to superhero media and are in fact often found in other fictional genres. Nevertheless, it is argued that, partly for the reasons mentioned above, the use of these features in superhero media may afford unique opportunities for researchers interested in older children's morally relevant understanding and decision making.

### **Features of superhero media**

To the extent older children consume superhero media, suggestions from scholarship in three areas can elucidate the genre's potential for serving as a context for developmentally rooted research. The first area, children's ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, was mentioned within the discussion of the social worlds inhabited by superheroes and children. The other two competencies, pertaining to distinguishing between social concepts and understanding certain psychological characteristics of persons, are mentioned next. Although not exclusive to a specific feature of the genre, the two competencies are mentioned within brief examinations of the comparison of acts and the comparison of perspectives, respectively. These capacities include those that are presumed to be present prior to the age of 7 (i.e., preschool) as well as those presumed to emerge (or become more consistent) around the age of 7 (i.e., 6–8). Since both kinds of competencies pertain to what might be expected of older children, they are discussed together.

Two caveats are worth mentioning. First, the developmental approach to children's understanding of morally relevant acts presented here is largely based on a constructivist view of moral understanding, which situates individuals (including children) as active meaning makers whose emergent morally relevant understandings are born out of social interactions, reflection, and the (re)consideration of the features of those interactions (e.g., the consequences and intentions behind the act) (Killen 2018; Wainryb 2004). The origins of this view in the context of moral understanding are often attributed to Jean Piaget (1932/1997), who was one of the first to investigate children's development of moral concepts. He believed that children's social interactional contexts, and their attempts to understand them, significantly influenced their views on morality. Two of the best indicators of this understanding, according to Piaget, are how they make sense of rules and how they assign punishment for rule violations. His investigations included observing children playing games, interviewing them about the rules of the games, and presenting them with hypothetical vignettes where a child breaks a rule and must be punished (a form of retributive justice). Younger children (e.g., prior to around age 8), whose social interactions are largely characterized by dependency and unilateral

authority relations (e.g., parents/caregivers exerting significant influence over the child), were more likely to accept rules and authority dictates from parents/caregivers/adults as “givens” and believe that children who break rules deserved of (harsher) punishment (i.e., indicating an emphasis on an act’s consequences). By contrast, older children, whose social interactions are largely characterized by more bilateral, equality-based peer relations, were more likely to believe that rules could be altered (i.e., did not always have to be accepted as “givens”) and account for intentions as well as consequences when assigning punishment.

Despite subsequent research challenging Piaget’s conceptualization of children’s developing moral understanding (for reviews, see Killen & Smetana 2015; Turiel 1998), Piaget’s work was influential in subsequent constructivist research on moral understanding (e.g., Damon 1977; Kohlberg 1971/1981, 1984; Turiel 1983). Moreover, one can argue that Piaget’s main influence on subsequent constructivist research in this area is through raising questions, explicitly or implicitly, about the relationship between moral (e.g., justice/fairness) and nonmoral (e.g., authority, rules) social concepts. Indeed, many of the human development scholars influenced by Piaget, with varying degrees and conceptualizations, incorporated this relationship into their research programs and subsequent theoretical formulations.

In Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1971/1981) three-level sequence of moral understanding, for instance, he contends that earlier forms of moral understanding include confluences of moral and nonmoral concepts. Although Kohlberg is most often associated with the Heinz dilemma (e.g., Should Heinz steal the drug to save his ill wife?), he also presented people with other moral dilemmas that similarly presented the protagonist with (at least) two courses of action. At the first level of moral reasoning (*preconventional*; typical of children), what is moral is bound up with what is essentially personal or based on self-interest. With more cognitive development and experience with sociomoral conflicts (e.g., where differing perspectives needed to be balanced), among other things, individuals progress to a *conventional* level of moral reasoning. While morality at this level is no longer conflated with self-interest, it is conflated with another category of nonmoral, albeit more abstract (in terms of encompassing a larger number of other people’s perspectives), considerations. These are considerations related to sociality (e.g., relationships, family) or society (e.g., the legal and social order). This level of moral reasoning is more typical of adolescence and adults. Some individuals eventually reach a *postconventional* level of moral reasoning, where moral concerns are typically no longer conflated with nonmoral concerns. To some degree, the Kohlbergian constructivist approach to moral understanding, specifically his views on the role of perspective-taking in moral development, informs research on the relationship between media content and children’s understanding of morally relevant events (Krcmar & Cooke 2001; Krcmar & Curtis 2003; Krcmar & Valkenburg 1999).

In response to viewing the relationship between moral and nonmoral social concepts as one where the two are initially conflated in younger ages before becoming more “purely” distinguished in older ages as suggested by Piaget (1932/1997) and

Kohlberg (1971/1981), other constructivist approaches emerged. Within these approaches, scholars believe that, to some degree or another, children's social development is conceptually heterogenous, such that concepts related to morality develop separately from, and alongside, nonmoral social concepts. William Damon's (1977) investigations, for instance, distinguish children's understanding of justice (moral) from their understanding of nonmoral concepts such as authority, rules, and conventions. At the same time, research in social cognitive domain theory (SCDT; Killen 2018; Killen & Smetana 2015; Nucci 2009; Smetana et al. 2014; Turiel 1983, 1998) extensively elaborates on the notion of distinct social concepts with investigations spanning four decades. SCDT contends that a fundamental feature of being human is the development of and interaction between concepts that are not only distinguished from each other, but "reside" in their own conceptual domains.

It is further suggested (e.g., Nucci, 2016; Turiel, 1998, 2008b) that one way to view this approach in relation to Kohlberg's (1971/1981) view is that each of his levels broadly corresponds to a conceptual domain formed, elaborated, and reconsidered throughout a person's development as they experience and try to make sense of varying social interactions and their features. Thus, Kohlberg's preconventional level pertains to concepts that govern social interactions that are *personal/psychological* in nature (e.g., related to individual autonomy, desires/wants, preferences, etc.). The conventional level, by contrast, pertains to concepts that are *conventional/societal* in nature, related to the regulation and maintenance of social relationships and groups (e.g., norms, laws, rules, customs, policies). Lastly, the postconventional level deals with concepts bearing on the treatment of others who possess inherent dignity. Such treatment is not determined by the individual (personal/psychological) or the group/society. These concepts are *moral* in nature, with examples including harm/welfare, justice/fairness, and rights/civil liberties. Rights here are in the "human" sense and not the "personal prerogative" sense. In this view, Kohlberg's three-level sequence was essentially derived from investigations of people's understanding of multifaceted situations where moral concepts (e.g., stealing) conflict with nonmoral concepts (e.g., adhering to the law). SCDT's domain distinction and interactional approach to the study of moral understanding informs the author's approach to superhero media, and thus shapes the contours of the present argument.

The second caveat pertains to the examples from superhero media that are referenced in relation to the two genre features. Only animated films and series are included for two reasons. One, animated narratives often include the same or very similar conflicts or considerations depicted in live-action films. Martin (2019, 2021a, 2023) explores the potential for live-action superhero narratives to encourage reflection on and interrogation of the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations. Some of the themes he identifies are also reflected in the episodes below. Second, as mentioned above, animated superhero narratives are often targeted towards older children. The animated media examples come from the film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, and the cartoons *Avengers Assemble* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

### *Comparison of acts*

One common feature of superhero narratives includes the existence of a hero-villain dynamic. This dynamic often entails a plot whereby the superhero responds to or avenges acts committed by a supervillain (often in service of a larger plan) or tries to prevent those acts altogether. Despite superheroes and supervillains using violent means (although the latter are often characterized as showing less restraint and “going too far”), their ends are noticeably different. Superheroes are portrayed as (morally) “good” and villains as (morally) “bad” because of what their actions “say” about their orientation towards others (Miczo 2016). For instance, whereas superheroes tend to use violence to avenge, protect, and sometimes inspire others, supervillains often use violence for selfish or immoral reasons. These portrayals of superheroes and supervillains are broadly consistent with the finding that adults view fictional heroes as being more moral than villains (Eden et al. 2015; Eden et al. 2017; Grizzard et al. 2018).

But are older children capable of making similar distinctions? Research in SCDT (Killen 2018; Killen & Smetana 2015; Nucci 2009; Smetana et al. 2014; Turiel 1983, 1998) suggests that they are because, like adults, children can attend to various features within social acts/events and make conceptual distinctions between events based on these features. As noted, examples of events investigated by SCDT include those that are moral (e.g., pertaining to harm and fairness), conventional/societal (e.g., pertaining to rules, laws, and authority), and personal/psychological (e.g., pertaining to autonomy, desires, and preferences). For instance, children delineate between (1) moral and socio-conventional events (e.g., Davidson et al. 1983; Turiel 2008a) and (2) moral, socio-conventional, and personal events (Ardila-Rey & Killen 2001; Nucci 1981). Some of the criteria children and adults appear to use to make such conceptual distinctions include the extent to which an act’s permissibility or prohibition should be generalizable across contexts (e.g., typical of moral acts but not socio-conventional or personal acts), dependent on the existence of laws/rules or authority dictates (e.g., typical of socio-conventional acts but not moral or personal acts), or left to personal preference or discretion (e.g., typical of personal acts but not socio-conventional or moral acts). In the context of morally relevant considerations often central to superhero narratives (e.g., those related to harm), research within SCDT suggests that two important features of moral acts (older) children (and adults) attend to when evaluating them are (1) whether the harm was intentional and (2) the consequences of the act for the victim’s welfare (for reviews, see Killen & Smetana 2015; Turiel 1998). Findings further suggest that older children can distinguish one moral act from another (e.g., one involving harm versus one involving unfairness) (Smetana & Ball 2019), and that this ability may also extend to acts committed by cartoon characters (Bierwirth & Blumberg 2010).

One common narrative device that can be used to explore these features involves the supervillain temporarily “switching sides” to work with the superhero to, for example, defeat a mutual or more dangerous supervillain. These kinds of storylines afford opportunities to explore the relationship between acts and their consequences as sometimes superheroes and supervillains openly discuss or debate to what extent, if at all,

they try to reconcile the consequences of their actions for others' welfare. Furthermore, supervillains can be shown "answering" this question differently depending on if a harmful act is committed while on the side of or in opposition to the superhero. One application of this device is found in season three, episode seven of *Guardians of the Galaxy*. The former-villain-now-turned-superhero Gamora takes her sister Nebula (a pirate and mercenary who sometimes sides with Gamora) on a series of trips to planets they harmed while under the authority/control of their father Thanos. These trips are an attempt to make amends and provide some restitution. Gamora hopes to show Nebula the value of acting in ways that promote others' welfare instead of causing them harm. In addition to the action sequences typical of the genre, throughout the episode the characters often debate the merits of Gamora's plan. Another example is found in season one, episode twenty-six of *Avengers: Assemble*, where the Cabal, a supervillain team formed by the supervillain Red Skull to defeat the Avengers, sided with the Avengers after Red Skull betrays them. In one scene, Captain America saves the supervillain Dracula's life. Surprised by the act, he asks Captain America why he chose to save him even though he would not act similarly.

Another common narrative device includes the use of storylines that reveal alternate realities or parallel universes, as such devices are particularly suited for manipulating key features of (morally relevant) events. For instance, the same act committed by a superhero (e.g., using violence to foil a supervillain's plan) can have varying consequences for others' welfare depending on what universe the act took place in. On one version of earth, the only person harmed could be the supervillain, whereas on another version of earth, both the supervillain and innocent bystanders could be harmed. Similarly, these alternate earths can include societies with different social or societal arrangements (e.g., different legal systems, configurations of power relations that have implications for individuals' welfare and civil liberties, etc.), where the kinds of vigilante justice characteristic of superheroes are illegal in one society but legal in another.

Or planets can vary regarding how much autonomy or agency individuals can exercise in their everyday lives. SCDT scholars (Helwig et al. 2014; Nucci 2014) assert that children's early understandings of personal/psychological concepts such as freedom and rights in the prerogative sense inform their developing understandings of moral concepts such as civil liberties and rights in the moral (i.e., human) sense. As with the example of manipulating the consequences for others' welfare, manipulating the social configurations or arrangements against which moral concepts are applied can provide opportunities to portray superheroes' behavior across different contexts. As Justin Martin (2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2023) suggests, superhero narratives afford opportunities to explore how superheroes' morally relevant understandings interact with nonmoral understandings across different social interactions and arrangements. These relationships have the potential to engage children's emerging capacity to conceptually alter the meaning of events based on their features (Smetana & Jambon 2018; Wainryb 2004).

The plot of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* revolves around this narrative feature, with different versions of Spider-Man (from different realities) teaming up to stop the villain Kingpin. Throughout the film, it is revealed that similar morally relevant choices made by different versions of Spider-Man led to different outcomes. For instance, in at least one reality, Spider-Man's choices lead to his death, and in another reality Peter Parker's (Spider-Man's) marriage to Mary Jane does not survive his decision to become a superhero.

In *Avengers Assemble* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, this narrative device is applied in ways that highlight different social configurations or arrangements. For example, *Avengers Assemble* (season one, episode fifteen) sees the supervillain Dr. Doom use time-travel to interject in the lives of those who would eventually become Avengers (e.g., Tony Stark/Iron Man, Bruce Banner/Hulk) at important moments. Doom's insertion into these critical events effectively causes them to never become superheroes. Instead, they become grateful to and servants of Doom. And since the Avengers never form, Doom is essentially able to rule the world and command complete devotion from humanity. Thor is the episode's main protagonist, as he, born on Asgard, is unaffected by Doom's manipulation of time on earth. The episode contains multiple instances of Thor commenting on and responding to the social arrangements of this new reality. The comments pertain to both the (1) interpersonal dynamics of the superheroes mounting a rebellion against Doom (they call themselves "Defenders" and consist of a few part- and full-time members of the Avengers of the previous reality) and (2) the hierarchical relationship between Doom and the people subjected to his rule.

In *Guardians of the Galaxy*, the now-superhero Rocket Raccoon is abducted and brought back to his home world, one characterized by robots subjecting animals to experimentation and augmentation for evolutionary purposes against their will (season one, episode nine). The episode highlights how technology, scientific experimentation, and theories about evolution can inform different social arrangements. In addition, it explores how different social arrangements can influence one's sense of justice and harm, as Pyko, leader of a rebel group of animals, decides to use the robots' tools to experiment on other animals — all for the purposes of optimizing their evolutionary potential and exacting revenge on the robots. Rocket disagrees with the approach, and questions what makes Pyko (morally) different from the robots. It is worth noting that Rocket's past experiences with forced experimentation and associated immoral treatment was the subject of the recently released film *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* (2023).

### **Comparison of perspectives**

In addition (and related) to comparing the acts of superheroes to those of supervillains across varying contexts, some superhero narratives examine or allude to the underlying motivations or perspectives influencing such acts (Martin 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2023). Given the fact that superheroes' acts are generally in the service of the same ends (protecting or helping others), the variability in perspectives tends to pertain to supervillains (the occasional presence of anti-heroes in superhero media

notwithstanding). For instance, superheroes encounter myriad supervillains and their motivations for committing moral violations (e.g., harming and stealing from others) can range from primarily self-centered (e.g., the pursuit of local or world domination) to primarily other-centered (e.g., trying to help, save, or avenge a loved one). It is not surprising, then, that some supervillains are at times portrayed in a more sympathetic manner than others (and treated as such by superheroes). Along these lines, recent work explores the usefulness of a sympathetic villain for comparing Kohlberg's and SCDT's approaches to people's developing understanding of moral and nonmoral considerations (Martin in press).

Children, like superheroes (and adults, for that matter), can consider the psychological features of persons when trying to understand interpersonal events. They can distinguish between an act and the intention behind the act when evaluating morally relevant events (Margoni & Surian 2017), including distinctions between harmful acts that may or may not be intentional (Fu et al. 2014) or necessary (Jambon & Smetana 2014) given the situation. In addition, they tend to reference more psychological concepts when narrating personal experiences involving harm (Komolova et al. 2017) compared to younger children. In their review of research on children's developing psychological knowledge, Cecilia Wainryb and Beverly Brehl (2006) identify ages 7–8 as a general point in development where children start to understand that other people's minds act on and interpret information (instead of merely mirroring the said information) and that people's emotional/affective state can be multifaceted (e.g., outwardly expressing one state yet internally feeling another). Similarly, they identify 7–9 as a general point in development where children start to appreciate the ways that what a person believes to be true about the world (whether or not the said belief is factually accurate) can inform their moral judgments. Relatedly, findings suggest that around 7 may be when children understand how a person's false beliefs can inform their morally relevant actions in situations where they break a rule they were not aware existed (see Lagattuta & Weller 2014 for a review).

Given children's developing capacities concerning their emerging appreciation of the roles intention, emotion, and information/knowledge play in others' morally relevant understanding, it is worthwhile, from a research perspective, to consider the ways superhero narratives provide opportunities for various characters to explain their perspectives to core events. These explanations, in turn, could potentially encourage older children to consider the ways their own psychological characteristics inform their understanding of the morally relevant events they observe and participate in. One way this occurs in superhero media is through a superhero encountering multiple supervillains throughout a film, episode, or season who vary in their motivations for the acts they commit. As the superhero encounters each supervillain, either separately or as part of a group of supervillains, their interactions often include explanations of the reasons behind their actions. Sometimes, these explanations are accompanied by another common narrative device, an "origin" flashback where viewers are taken to an event in that supervillain's past that (1) pertains to the given motivation and (2) clearly

highlights the supervillain's psychological response to the event. For example, a strong emotional reaction or a resulting belief about whether people are generally good or bad or trustworthy or untrustworthy. Other times (as in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* episode with Gamora and Nebula), characters' divergent perspectives are revealed through frequent debates about a morally relevant act or topic (e.g., the value of promoting welfare versus perpetrating harm).

To be clear, most of the examples mentioned above illustrate this feature as well, as morally relevant acts in superhero narratives are often accompanied by justifications or articulated perspectives underlying the acts. For example, Thor and Doom have differing perspectives on the alternative social arrangements of the new world. Thor believes he is oppressing humanity through forced conformity whereas Doom believes he is saving humanity from itself by curing diseases and hunger and reducing conflicts. Likewise, Rocket Raccoon and Pyko differ in their perspectives on justice and the merits of using the same methods employed by their oppressors (experimenting on animals) to exact revenge.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting a couple of additional examples of how this feature is applied. One of the interesting aspects of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, consistent with the view that moral and nonmoral social concepts are separate from but interact with each other (e.g., Turiel 1983, 1998, 2008a, 2008b), is the contrasting views on Spider-Man represented by Miles (who eventually becomes Spider-Man once the "original" Spider-Man in his world dies), and his father who is a police officer. Miles' experiences throughout the film are largely unconventional in the sense that harm considerations are frequently made salient in unusual ways (e.g., the witnessing of the original Spider-Man's death and resulting guilt over not doing more to save him; the discovery of Kingpin's destructive plan; barely evading threats posed by Dr. Octopus and Prowler, the latter revealed to be his uncle Aaron). These experiences are contrasted with those of his father, a dedicated police officer. It is not too surprising, then, that throughout the film their views on the necessity and legitimacy of Spider-Man's actions are contrasted. Whereas Miles is inspired by his actions, his father criticizes his law-breaking vigilantism and lack of accountability, believing he does more harm than good to the city. In a very broad sense, this disagreement between father and son parallels one criterion in the distinction between conventional and moral acts (e.g., Turiel 1983, 1998, 2008a, 2008b). The former is usually understood to be rule-dependent whereas the latter is usually understood to be rule-independent (although, of course, rules are often created to uphold moral principles). As with other superheroes, Spider-Man's morally relevant mission often requires him to act outside the law to protect others from harm.

Episode ten of season one of *Guardians of the Galaxy* takes an intrapersonal approach to contrasting perspectives rather than an interpersonal one, as the team visits a planet with a unique feature: a surface that psychologically returns those who step on it back to "who they used to be." Thus, as members begin exploring the planet, they soon start to change, act, think, and feel in ways consistent with the kind of person they were

before they decided to become heroes. This kind of plot device affords opportunities to explore consistencies and inconsistencies between different phases of a person's life, and the ways these phases are informed by the relationship between one's psychological features (e.g., their beliefs about themselves, others, what is valuable to them) and their morally relevant actions (e.g., their orientations toward promoting welfare or perpetrating harm).

## **Superhero media as a context for empirical investigations**

With some competencies related to older children's understanding of morally relevant events and common narrative devices of superhero media highlighted, the following section considers some tentative research implications. Specifically, this section briefly explores how superhero media can potentially serve as a context for exploring older children's understanding of morally relevant events. As mentioned earlier, the implications focus on contributing to and expanding upon the work of Marina Krmar (Cingel & Krmar 2019; Krmar & Cooke 201; Krmar & Curtis 2003; Krmar & Hight 2007; Krmar & Valkenburg 1999; Krmar & Vieira 2005) and Marie-Louise Mares (Mares & Acosta 2008, 2010; Mares & Braun 2010; Mares & Woodard 2005; Martins et al. 2016).

### ***Sample of previous research***

In general, hypothetical vignettes in Marina Krmar and colleagues' studies (Krmar & Curtis 2003; Krmar & Valkenburg 1999; Krmar & Vieira 2005) involved social interactions that either ended in justified (e.g., a man harming someone who grabbed their sister's purse) or unjustified (e.g., a man harming his friend because his friend accuses him of lying) violence. Except for Krmar and Eduardo Vieira's (2005) investigation, which only assessed evaluations of the acts, the studies assessed evaluations and justifications. The coding scheme for the justifications was informed by approaches to the development of morally relevant and prosocial understanding either based on or similar to constructivist approaches that differ from SCDT (Eisenberg 1982; Piaget 1932/1997; Kohlberg 1984).

Each justification category for children's evaluations used in these studies is presented next, with categories described earlier generally reflecting less advanced moral reasoning than those described later. Authority/punishment reasoning appeals to authority-related sanctions ("You could get yourself arrested"). Stereotypical justifications pertain to using stereotyped images of good and bad or using the word "should" without giving a reason ("It's wrong to hit," "You shouldn't kick"). Hedonistic reasoning focuses on self-interest ("It was her purse, so he should beat [the thief] to get it back"). Needs-oriented justifications appeal to the victim's welfare ("That guy could get really hurt if you kicked him"). Perspective taking/empathic reasoning includes identifying with another or appealing to the actor's motives ("[He/She] is his friend," "He's a person too, you know," "He probably didn't mean it"). Lastly, human rights justifications reflect a hierarchy of (individual) rights ("He wanted to defend his sister and he has a right to do that").

Collectively, their work has advanced our understanding of children's thinking about and responses to media centered around morally relevant events. Krccmar and colleagues' investigations generally focus on children's exposure to violent media and their responses to violence in both media and hypothetical contexts. Marie-Louise Mares and colleagues' studies reported here tend to focus on children's evaluations and understanding of depictions of inclusivity and aggression in fictional media. The section is organized by findings bearing on one or both of the following: children's engagement with fantasy media violence (which includes superhero media) and their evaluations and understanding of justified, provoked, or contextualized violence (i.e., the type of violence often perpetrated by superheroes).

*Fantasy media violence.* In one of their earlier studies, Krccmar and colleagues found an association between 6–12-year-olds' exposure to violent fantasy programs, assessed by self-reporting their television viewing frequency, and an increased likelihood to view justified violence depicted in hypothetical vignettes as acceptable (Krccmar & Valkenburg 1999). Similarly, Krccmar and Vieira (2005) found that children's self-reported exposure to fantasy violence was negatively associated with perspective taking ability, which was in turn associated with a greater likelihood of approving justified violence in hypothetical vignettes. When Krccmar and Anna Hight (2007) presented 3–5-year-olds with chase scenes where one character pursues another and a conflict ensues (and asking them to describe how it should end) and controlled for parental reports of their television viewing habits, a character effect emerged. Specifically, children provided more aggressive responses to the scene involving action/fantasy characters compared to the scene involving neutral characters. Watching action/fantasy violent cartoons on a regular basis, however, was not associated with providing more violent endings to the scenes.

In a study employing exposure to fantasy violence within experimental manipulations, Krccmar and Stephen Curtis (2003) compared younger (5–8) and older (9–14) children across three conditions. Two of the three conditions were experimental in that children watched one of two fantasy violence programs manipulated by scene ending (violent or nonviolent). Children in the third (control) condition did not watch a video. They found that when controlling for age, children in the fantasy violence experimental groups, regardless of video ending (violent or nonviolent), were more accepting of the harm in the justified violence vignettes compared to the children who did not watch a video. The findings from these investigations are generally consistent with the results from Mares and Emory Woodard's (2005) meta-analysis as it pertains to aggressive prosocial content (e.g., a physically or socially aggressive confrontation that was resolved peacefully). Although only a small sample of the studies included in the meta-analysis fit this category, findings suggest that children's viewing of nonaggressive prosocial content is associated with greater prosocial outcomes than children's viewing of aggressive prosocial content. Since the use of violence in superhero media is often depicted as serving morally relevant ends, further research into the breadth and depth of these links is particularly important. This is especially the case given that the latest study

included in their meta-analysis (1989) preceded some of the more popular superhero cartoons of the 1990s (e.g., *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Spider-Man: The Animated Series*, and *X-Men: The Animated Series*) as well as the relatively robust expansion of superhero media in the 2000s as mentioned above.

Also, as stated above, beginning around age 7 or 8, children bring more of an “interpretive” mind to bear on their attempts to understand morally relevant acts. This age-related shift, supported by findings related to multiple psychological features of persons (intentions, desires, emotions, and “factual” beliefs about the world), parallels one of the constructivist propositions described earlier. Whereas younger children hold a more “copy” view of the mind where the mind, or a person’s “inner” world, is not sufficiently distinguished from their “outside” world (e.g., features of their environment), older children start viewing the mind as something that enables people to construct meaning from their social interactions and observations. As a result of this greater acknowledgement by older children of the complexity of mental states and the interrelatedness of mental life—which, to be clear, is *not* the ability to know precisely what other people feel or think—it is likely that in some instances older children are evaluating *different* situations than younger children despite experiencing or witnessing the “same” act or event (Wainryb & Brehl 2006).

The potential benefits of using superhero media as a context to study older children’s more interpretive or constructivist view of the mind may include familiar characters, the consistency of morally relevant considerations, and the frequent comparison of superheroes and supervillains across contexts that parallel those within children’s social worlds. Examples of parallels include interactions with friends and family that can inform harm and fairness considerations, and interactions with authorities that can inform beliefs about the adherence to or breaking of rules or authority dictates. Building on the findings bearing on children’s ability to distinguish fantasy from reality and moral from nonmoral acts, future research could examine older children’s evaluations and justifications of various acts across real, non-superhero fiction, and superhero fiction contexts. In line with Krmar and colleagues’ findings linking fantasy violence exposure to the acceptability of justified harm, justified harm could occur in all three contexts under the same circumstances (e.g., provocation). As control comparisons, older children can also respond to a “justified” (reasonable, understandable) nonmoral act performed by the same vignette characters in the same contexts.

Such a design could contribute to researchers’ understanding of potential features unique to superhero media as they pertain to how older children construe moral and nonmoral acts they commit during their everyday social interactions. In addition, exploring children’s responses to justified acts across varying media genres may help elucidate any nuanced understandings children may bring to their viewing experiences, as findings suggest that brief exposure to non-superhero fiction violence is not associated with an increase in aggressive story endings (Krmar & Cooke 2001). Lastly, considering that (1) children who regularly watched action/fantasy violent cartoons were not more likely to provide more violent endings to conflict scenes (Krmar & Hight 2007) and (2) the suggestion that research presenting children with acts associated with

contrasting outcomes (positive vs. negative) and social attitudes (normative vs. deviant) may stimulate their understanding of intentionality (see Lagattuta & Weller 2014 for review), one or more of the design elements could be modified to compare superheroes and supervillains.

*Justified, provoked, or contextualized violence.* Krcmar and Patti Valkenburg's (1999) investigation also assessed children's engagement with violent realistic programs such as *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted* and found that more exposure was associated with lower stage (e.g., stereotypical) moral reasoning across both justified and unjustified vignettes. Krcmar and Curtis (2003) found that for both justified and unjustified violence vignettes, older children (9–14) used more advanced reasoning strategies (e.g., more often appealing to others' welfare and rights) than younger (5–8) children. Like Krcmar and Valkenburg (1999), they also found that when controlling for age, children in the fantasy violence experimental group who saw the violent endings tended to use less advanced reasoning in the justified violence vignettes compared to children who did not watch a video. After presenting younger (4–7-year-old) and older (8–11-year-old) children with clips from the realistic violence television show *Walker, Texas Ranger* that varied across provocation (the focal character was either attacked first or retaliated) and punishment (the focal character was either handcuffed and taken by the police once they arrived or not), Krcmar and Mark Cooke (2001) asked them to respond to a vignette involving one child bullying another. Children chose one of four response options for the bullied child, two nonaggressive (Tell an adult; Confront the bully and nicely ask him to return the lunch) and two aggressive (Chase the bully, push him down, and retrieve the lunch; Tell all his friends so they can gang up on the bully with him and get the lunch back). Most children, regardless of age and media viewing condition, chose a nonaggressive ending (93% and 89% respectively). In addition, older children were less likely than younger children to perceive the fighting in the clips as right.

In a study involving parent-child dyads with children aged 4.5–6.5, Drew Cingel and Krcmar (2019) assigned children to one of four media viewing conditions: watching an *Arthur* (1996–2022) episode with (1) no moral message and alone, (2) a moral message and alone, (3) a moral message and natural mediation, and (4) a moral message and active mediation. Parents in the natural mediation conditions were instructed to discuss the episode with their children as they would at home, and parents in the active mediation condition were instructed to discuss the episode with their children while also helping explain or point out important concepts or lessons. They found a direct effect of viewing condition on children's moral evaluations but not their justifications for those evaluations. Regarding the former, children who watched the episode with a moral message alone or with a parent had greater discrepancies in their moral evaluations of hypothetical events involving justified and unjustified violence compared to children who watched the episode without a moral message.

In general, watching the treatment video alone versus with a parent (via natural or active mediation) did not appear to influence children's perspective taking, moral judgments, or moral reasoning strategies (regardless of whether or not the violence was

justified). Nor did the nature of the conversations parents had with their children in the two mediation conditions (assessed via a “parent-talk” variable). Taken together, these findings suggest that at least for certain media content, young children’s ability to ascertain morally relevant features is not associated with their co-viewing of that content with parents (Cingel & Krcmar 2019). The following suggestion is consistent with the results of Krcmar and Vieira’s (2005) study. They did not investigate mediation but presented parents and their children (5–12) with the same vignettes including justified and unjustified instances of harm. Neither parents’ evaluations of justified violence nor unjustified violence were associated with their children’s moral evaluations.

When considering potential research implications centered on the use of superhero media, some descriptive patterns in children’s use of justification categories are worth mentioning. For each category of violent media (fantasy and realistic), viewing frequency (low and high), and hypothetical harm vignette (justified and unjustified), Krcmar and Valkenburg (1999) found that children used the same three justification categories (e.g., stereotypical, needs oriented, and perspective taking/empathic), accounting for more than 80% of their justifications used in the study. Krcmar and Curtis’ (2003) study yielded more variability, yet similar consistencies emerged. For two of the three conditions (control/no video and nonviolent), the same three categories represented most 5–8-year-olds’ responses (88% and 56% respectively). For the third condition (violent), hedonistic responses alone accounted for over 40% of 5–8-year-olds’ responses. For 9–14-year-olds, authority/punishment and human rights reasoning were two of the top three categories used across all three conditions. For the two media viewing conditions, perspective taking/empathic justifications made it into the top three.

Research in SCDT suggests that in addition to conceptual domain distinctions, children’s variability in the use of justification categories (in both degree and kind) when trying to make sense of multifaceted events is best understood by accounting for at least three additional (potential) influences. They include (1) the relationship between people’s “factual” beliefs about the world and their understanding of morally relevant events (e.g., Wainryb 2004; Wainryb & Brehl 2006), (2) how individuals attempt to weigh or coordinate moral and nonmoral considerations in situations where they may conflict (e.g., Turiel 2008b; Turiel & Banas 2020), and (3) age-related changes relevant to these understandings (e.g., Killen 2018; Turiel & Nucci 2018; see Killen & Smetana 2015 for a review addressing all three). Multifaceted events are those that include multiple concepts or considerations, either from the same domain (e.g., a harm/welfare issue vs. a justice/fairness issue), different domains (e.g., a harm/welfare issue vs. a legal/rule-based issue; a harm/welfare issue vs. a preference/prerogative issue), or both. Given the presence of mitigating circumstances or antecedent events (e.g., provocation, knowledge of harm being done to others), one could argue that the kinds of justified, provoked, or contextualized events used in Krcmar and colleagues’ studies can be considered (potentially) multifaceted. And considering the abovementioned ways

superhero media complicate and manipulate features within morally relevant events (e.g., characters switching sides, alternate universes, and flashbacks), superhero media may afford robust opportunities for researchers to examine children's understandings of morally relevant events in multifaceted contexts.

Consistent with the emphasis on presenting children with media content and hypothetical vignettes that include similar acts of harm (e.g., hitting, kicking), research investigating children's understanding of superhero media can keep the harmful act constant while varying features surrounding the act. One such feature is the nature or extent of the outcome. Unlike physical provocation in real life contexts (actual or hypothetical), superheroes and the supervillains they encounter are often powerful enough to withstand the violence experienced, with many physical conflicts, when all is said and done, accounting for nothing more than a tussle between competitors. Therefore, in many cases it is very unlikely that either will be irreparably or mortally harmed during their encounters (although of course there are notable exceptions). To this end, researchers could not only investigate similar types of provocation across real life and fictional (superhero) contexts but vary the outcomes across the justified/provoked contexts. In the minds of older children, for instance, does it matter if superheroes commit harmful acts against those who likely can withstand them (e.g., supervillains) versus those who likely cannot (e.g., ordinary citizens)? If so, in what way(s)? Furthermore, what if the physical impact of harm for the victim is ambiguous or unknown?

Another feature is the nature or extent of the provocation or justification. This can be manipulated in at least three ways (e.g., individuals provoked, accuracy of superheroes' knowledge of provocation, and superheroes' responsibility for the provocation). In terms of the individuals provoked, researchers could vary the victims, comparing responses to superheroes being victimized, their family members or friends being victimized, strangers being victimized, and so forth. Moreover, situations varying the number of victims, controlling for relationship status, can be examined (e.g., Spider-Man stopping a mugging versus stopping someone attempting to poison the entire city). Regarding knowledge accuracy, children can respond to situations that vary the extent to which superheroes know for certain who attacked them first, believe they know, were misled to believe it was one person when in fact it was another, etc. Lastly, researchers could vary the knowledge, beliefs, or motivations behind (super)villains and other individuals wanting to provoke superheroes in the first place. For example, is the provocateur guided by suffering actual harm of a physical and/or psychological nature for which the superhero is factually responsible? If so, was the harm intentional or accidental? Alternatively, is the provocateur blaming the superhero based on an assumption of or belief in their culpability, yet they do not know for certain? These kinds of manipulations, which may serve as useful tests of the kinds of diverse and flexible thinking supported by research on children's understanding of morally relevant events (e.g., Killen 2018; Killen & Smetana 2015; Smetana et al. 2014; Turiel 1998, 2008a, 2008b; Wainryb & Brehl 2006), can be explored within the social worlds of superheroes, given the genre's narrative features.

Despite the work of Mares and colleagues mentioned above not focusing on fantasy violence specifically, the above research implications may also contribute to our understanding of non-superhero fictional characters who may act in similar ways. In investigations of children's ability to comprehend morally relevant lessons from fictional media, Mares and Emily Elizabeth Acosta (2008) found that 5–6-year-olds had difficulty identifying the moral lesson of a television episode from *Clifford the Big Red Dog* about a three-legged dog and that centered on the themes of tolerance and inclusiveness. In a similar study (Mares & Acosta 2010), however, they found that the comprehension of children (4–6) improved with the use of inserts. Children watched two episodes on themes of prejudice and inclusiveness, one from *Arthur* and one from *Sagwa the Chinese Siamese Cat* (2001–2004). Moreover, the results suggest that inserts can be used to alter children's evaluations of depicted conflict and the characters' final feelings about each other. The inserts, introduced at the beginning and during an interpersonal conflict of each episode, were meant to make the morally relevant significance of the characters' actions (more) salient. As the above discussion of superhero media suggests that there is a "built-in" salience of morally relevant considerations within the genre, older children's comprehension of major themes of the events, in addition to their morally relevant understanding of them, can be assessed.

Investigations of older children's understanding of morally relevant acts committed by various characters in popular tween sitcoms (*That's So Raven* 2003–2007, *Unfabulous* 2004–2007, *iCarly* 2007–2012, and *Victorious* 2010–2013) also suggest ways in which these acts may sometimes be evaluated in relation to nonmoral concepts (Mares & Braun 2013; Martins et al. 2016). For instance, 10-year-olds' exposure to high levels of conflict was associated with appeals to group functioning (e.g., "they don't think she will fit well and she might cause trouble for the group...") as a reason to exclude someone in hypothetical vignettes. These considerations were in turn associated with a greater likelihood of accepting the exclusion of the persons in the vignettes (Mares & Braun 2013), consistent with SCDT's contention that many morally relevant social interactions also involve nonmoral considerations (e.g., concerns related to the fairness of exclusion and concerns related to the cohesiveness of the group).

Whereas Mares and Michael Braun's (2013) findings point to the importance of conventional/societal considerations in certain moral evaluations, the results of Nicole Martins et al. (2016) point to ways personal/psychological considerations can sometimes influence moral evaluations. When presenting 9–11-year-olds with media aggression in one of four conditions (social or physical aggression; the perpetrator is a protagonist or antagonist), they found that, overall, how much children liked the perpetrator was positively related to their moral indifference (e.g., they were more likely to accept the aggression committed by a liked character). Further, this positive relationship between liking and moral indifference, in turn, was associated with children's self-reported likelihood of imitating the aggressive act(s), especially when children perceived those acts to be funny. A few contextual patterns also emerged. For instance, (1) perpetrator liking was not associated with moral indifference in conditions where the perpetrator

was an antagonist, (2) how socially aggressive participants believed the act to be was negatively related to moral indifference when the perpetrator was an antagonist, and (3) at high levels of perceived funniness, there was a positive relationship between character liking and moral indifference when the protagonist was the aggressor.

Incorporating similar design elements into investigations of superhero media, researchers can study children's evaluations and understandings of morally relevant events in multifaceted contexts that also include group- and person-oriented considerations. One approach could entail exploring the relationship between harm, exclusion, and group functioning by presenting children with vignettes where superhero teams (modeled after or similar to the Avengers, Justice League, etc.) are considering including, excluding, or removing someone from the team due to an act the team considers immoral. Researchers could also vary the level of consensus that appears to exist within the team (e.g., all agree to include/exclude/remove, all disagree, half agree and half disagree, the majority agree/disagree, etc.) or how the team makes morally relevant decisions (e.g., by consensus, majority, representation, leader, etc.). Research suggests that older children bring considerations related to procedural justice to bear when evaluating different decision-making contexts (see Helwig 2006; Helwig et al. 2014 for reviews). Another approach involves comparing children's understanding of superheroes' morally relevant acts across different liking contexts. For example, prior to evaluating superheroes' acts and justifying their evaluations, children's liking instructions can vary in terms of asking them to choose a superhero that they really like, somewhat like, etc. They would then evaluate hypothetical acts committed by that superhero and explain their evaluations. In line with (1) findings suggesting that understandings of fictional characters may be informed by a moral continuum instead of a moral dichotomy (Sanders & Tsay-Vogel 2016), (2) the abovementioned findings linking perpetrator liking to moral indifference, and (3) the SCDT proposition that children are capable of altering the meaning of morally relevant events based on how they appraise and relate their relevant features (e.g., Smetana & Jambon 2018; Wainryb 2004), such a design (or ones similar) can contribute to our understanding of the flexibility of children's thoughts in myriad ways.

## Conclusion

Concerns about the effects of media violence on children and their ability to comprehend morally relevant messages from media notwithstanding (Coyne et al. 2017; for a review, see Erwin & Morton 2008; Mares & Acosta 2008, 2010; Mares & Woodard 2005), it is important to consider how children's understanding of moral concepts, such as those related to aggression and harm, may have a bearing on their interpretations of media content (Bierwirth & Blumberg 2010; Peters & Blumberg 2002). Like the superheroes in the media older children may consume, their own lives consist of varied social interactions involving persons with diverse perspectives and psychological features. Many of these interactions across both contexts involve moral consequences, such as harming and being harmed by others (Martin 2019, 2021a,

2021b). If older children engage with such media and, as constructivists and specifically SCDDT scholars contend, actively construct meaning of their social worlds through their interactions with the environment (e.g., Killen 2018; Smetana & Jambon 2018; Wainryb 2004), then what would it mean for researchers to conceive of superhero media as a part of this environment? It is important for researchers wanting to understand older children's development of morally relevant competencies to investigate the features they are attending to when engaging with this environment, the ways in which they are attending to them, and the connections—if any—they make between these fictional morally relevant interactions and their own.

## References

- Ardila-Rey, Alicia & Melanie Killen. 2001. Middle Class Colombian Children's Evaluations of Personal, Moral, and Social-Conventional Interactions in the Classroom. *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 25 (3): 246–255. <<https://doi:10.1080/01650250042000221>>.
- Bierwirth, Kristen P. & Fran C. Blumberg. 2010. Preschoolers' Judgments Regarding Realistic and Cartoon-Based Moral Transgressions in the US. *Journal of Children and Media* 4 (1): 39–58. <<https://doi:10.1080/17482790903407317>>.
- Boerger, Elizabeth A. 2011. "In Fairy Tales Fairies Can Disappear": Children's Reasoning About the Characteristics of Humans and Fantasy Figures. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 29 (3): 635–655. <<https://doi:10.1348/026151010X528298>>.
- Box Office Mojo. <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com>> (accessed 26 July 2022).
- Cingel, Drew. P. & Marina Krmar. 2019. Prosocial Television, Preschool Children's Moral Judgments, and Moral Reasoning: The Role of Social Moral Intuitions and Perspective-Taking. *Communication Research* 46 (3): 355–374. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650217733846>>.
- Common Sense Media. <<https://commonsensemedia.org/>> (accessed 19 June 2018).
- Coyne, Sarah M., Laura Stockdale, Jennifer Ruh Linder, David A. Nelson, Kevin M. Collier & Lee W. Essig. 2017. Pow! Boom! Kablam! Effects of Viewing Superhero Programs on Aggressive, Prosocial, and Defending Behaviors in Preschool Children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 45 (8): 1523–1535. <<https://doi:10.1007/s10802-016-0253-6>>.
- Damon, William. 1977. *The Social World of the Child*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Davidson, Phillip, Elliot Turiel, & Allen Black. 1983. The Effect of Stimulus Familiarity on the Use of Criteria and Justifications in Children's Social Reasoning. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 1 (1): 49–65. <<https://doi:10.1111/j.2044-835X.1983.tb00543.x>>.
- Eckard, Sandra, ed. 2017. *Comic Connections: Analyzing Hero and Identity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Eden, Allison, Mary Beth. Oliver, Ron Tamborini, Anthony Limperos & Julia Woolley. 2015. Perceptions of Moral Violations and Personality Traits Among Heroes and Villains. *Mass Communication and Society* 18 (2): 186–208. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2014.923462>>.
- Eden, Allison, Serena Daalmans, & Benjamin K. Johnson. 2017. Morality Predicts Enjoyment But Not Appreciation of Morally Ambiguous Characters. *Media Psychology* 20: 349–373. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2016.1182030>>.
- Eisenberg, Nancy. 1982. *The Development of Prosocial Behavior*. New York: Academic Press.

- Erwin, Elizabeth J. & Naomi Morton. 2008. Exposure to Media Violence and Young Children with and without Disabilities: Powerful Opportunities for Family-Professional Partnerships. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 36 (2): 105–112. <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-008-0276-x>>.
- Fu, Genyue, Wen S. Xiao, Melanie Killen & Kang Lee. 2014. Moral Judgment and Its Relation to Second-Order Theory of Mind. *Developmental Psychology*, 50 (8): 2085–2092. <<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037077>>.
- Grizzard, Matthew, Jialing Huang, Kaitlin Fitzgerald, Changhyun Ahn, & Haoran Chu. 2018. Sensing Heroes and Villains: Character-Schema and the Disposition Formation Process. *Communication Research* 45 (4): 479–501. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650217699934>>.
- Helwig, Charles C. 2006. Rights, Civil Liberties, and Democracy Across Cultures. In *Handbook of Moral Development*. 1st Edition. Edited by Melanie Killen & Judith G. Smetana, 185–210. New York: Psychology Press.
- Helwig, Charles C., Martin D. Ruck & Michele Peterson-Badali. 2014. Rights, Civil Liberties, and Democracy. In *Handbook of Moral Development*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edited by Melanie Killen & Judith G. Smetana, 46–69. New York: Psychology Press.
- Jambon, Marc & Judith G. Smetana. 2014. Moral Complexity in Middle Childhood: Children's Evaluations of Necessary Harm. *Developmental Psychology* 50 (1): 22–33. <[doi.org/10.1037/a0032992](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032992)>.
- Killen, Melanie & Judith G. Smetana. 2015. Origins and Development of Morality. In *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*. 7<sup>th</sup> edition. Vol. 3, edited by Michael E. Lamb, 701–749. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Killen, Melanie. 2018. The Origins of Morality: Social Equality, Fairness, and Justice. *Philosophical Psychology* 31 (5): 767–803. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2018.1486612>>.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. 1971/1981. *Essays on Moral Development. Vol. 1. The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. 1984. *Essays on Moral Development. Vol. 2. The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Komolova, M., Monisha Pasupathi, Cecelia Wainryb & Sarah Lucas. 2017. Children's and Adolescents' Conceptions of Personhood: A Narrative Approach. *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 41 (3): 350–359. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025415627701>>.
- Krcmar, Marina & Anna Hight. 2007. The Development of Aggressive Mental Models in Young Children. *Media Psychology* 10 (2): 250–269. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213260701375652>>.
- Krcmar, Marina & Drew P. Cingel. 2020. Media as a Context for Studying Moral Development. In *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Development: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Lene Arnett Jensen, 649–662. London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Krcmar, Marina & Edward T. Vieira Jr. 2005. Imitating Life, Imitating Television: The Effects of Family and Television Models on Children's Moral Reasoning. *Communication Research* 32 (3): 267–294. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650205275381>>.
- Krcmar, Marina & Mark C. Cooke. 2001. Children's Moral Reasoning and Their Perceptions of Television Violence. *Journal of Communication* 51 (2): 300–316. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2001.tb02882.x>>.
- Krcmar, Marina & Patti M. Valkenburg. 1999. A Scale to Assess Children's Moral Interpretations of Justified and Unjustified Violence and Its Relationship to Television Viewing. *Communication Research* 26 (5): 608–634. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/009365099026005004>>.

- Krcmar, Marina & Stephen Curtis. 2003. Mental Models: Understanding the Impact of Fantasy Violence on Children's Moral Reasoning. *Journal of Communication* 53 (3): 460–478. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2003.tb02602.x>>.
- Lagattuta, Kristen Hansen & Drika Weller. 2014. Interrelations Between Theory of Mind and Morality: A Developmental Perspective. In *Handbook of Moral Development*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edited by Melanie Killen & Judith G. Smetana, 385–407. New York: Psychology Press.
- Langley, Travis, ed. 2019. *The Joker Psychology: Evil Clowns and the Women Who Love Them*. New York: Sterling.
- Letizia, Angelo. 2020. *Graphic Novels as Pedagogy in Social Studies: How to Draw Citizenship*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mares, Marie-Louise & Emily Elizabeth Acosta. 2008. Be Kind to Three-Legged Dogs: Children's Literal Interpretations of TV's Moral Lessons. *Media Psychology* 11 (3): 377–399. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213260802204355>>.
- Mares, Marie-Louise & Emily Elizabeth Acosta. 2010. Teaching Inclusiveness via TV Narratives in the US: Young Viewers Need Help with the Message. *Journal of Children and Media* 4 (3): 231–247. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2010.486127>>.
- Mares, Marie-Louise & Emory Woodard. 2005. Positive Effects of Television on Children's Social Interactions: A Meta-Analysis. *Media Psychology* 7 (3): 301–322. <[https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0703\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0703_4)>.
- Mares, Marie-Louise & Michael T. Braun. 2013. Effects of Conflict in Tween Sitcoms on US students' Moral Reasoning About Social Exclusion. *Journal of Children and Media* 7 (4): 428–445. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2013.785972>>.
- Margoni, Francesco & Luca Surian. 2017. Children's Intention-Based Moral Judgments of Helping Agents. *Cognitive Development* 41: 46–64. <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2016.12.001>>.
- Martin, Justin F. 2019. Growing Up in Wakanda: Understanding the Psychological Features of Social Life. In *Black Panther Psychology: Hidden Kingdoms*, edited by Travis Langley and Alex Simmons, 21–35. New York: Sterling.
- Martin, Justin F. 2021a. The Many Ways of Wakanda: Viewpoint Diversity in Black Panther and Its Implications for Civics Education. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 8: 24–36.
- Martin, Justin F. 2021b. Capes, Conflict, and Co-Viewing. *Academia Letters*: Article 2149. <<https://doi.org/10.20935/AL2149>>.
- Martins, Nicole, Marie-Louise Mares, Mona Malacane Alanna & Peebles. 2016. Liked Characters Get a Moral Pass: Young Viewers' Evaluations of Social and Physical aggression in Tween Sitcoms. *Communication Research* 47 (8): 1181–1205. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650216644016>>.
- Miczo, Nathan. 2016. *How Superheroes Model Community: Philosophically, Communicatively, Relationally*. Lanham: Lexington.
- Nama, Adilifu. 2011. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Nucci, Larry. 1981. Conceptions of Personal Issues: A Domain Distinct from Moral or Societal Concepts. *Child Development* 52 (1): 114–121. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1129220>>.
- Nucci, Larry. 2009. *Nice is Not Enough: Facilitating Moral Development*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson.
- Nucci, Larry. 2014. The Personal and the Moral. In *Handbook of Moral Development*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edited by Melanie Killen & Judith G. Smetana, 538–558. New York: Psychology Press.

- Nucci, Larry. 2016. Recovering the Role of Reasoning in Moral Education to Address Inequity and Social Justice. *Journal of Moral Education* 45 (3): 291–307. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2016.1167027>>.
- Pasupathi, Monisha & Cecilia Wainryb. 2010. Developing Moral Agency through Narrative. *Human Development* 53 (2): 55–80. <<https://doi:10.1159/000288208>>.
- Peaslee, Robert M. 2007. Superheroes, “Moral Economy”, and the “Iron Cage”: Morality, Alienation, and the Super-Individual. In *Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, edited by Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndalianis, & Chris Mackie, 37–50. Washington: New Academia.
- Peters, Kristen M. & Fran C. Blumberg. 2002. Cartoon Violence: Is It as Detrimental to Preschoolers as We Think?. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 29 (3): 143–148. <<https://doi:10.1023/A:1014576307194>>.
- Piaget, Jean. 1932/1997. *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. New York: First Press.
- Picariello, Damien K., ed. 2019. *Politics in Gotham: The Batman Universe and Political Thought*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sanders, Meghan S. & Mina Tsay-Vogel. 2016. Beyond Heroes and Villains: Examining Explanatory Mechanisms Underlying Moral Disengagement. *Mass Communication and Society* 19 (3): 230–252. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1096944>>.
- Sharon, Tanya & Jacqueline D. Woolley. 2004. Do Monsters Dream? Young Children’s Understanding of the Fantasy/Reality Distinction. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 22 (2): 293–310. <<https://doi:10.1348/026151004323044627>>.
- Shtulman, Andrew & Susan Carey. 2007. Improbable or Impossible? How Children Reason About the Possibility of Extraordinary Events. *Child Development* 78 (3): 1015–1032. <<https://doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2007.01047.x>>.
- Skolnick, Deena & Paul Bloom. 2006. What Does Batman Think About SpongeBob? Children’s Understanding of the Fantasy/Fantasy Distinction. *Cognition* 101 (1): B9–B18. <<https://doi:10.1016/j.cognition.2005.10.001>>.
- Smetana, Judith G. & Courtney Ball. 2019. Heterogeneity in Children’s Developing Moral Judgments About Different Types of Harm. *Developmental Psychology* 55 (6): 1–14. <<https://doi:10.1037/dev0000718>>.
- Smetana, Judith G. & Marc Jambon. 2018. Parenting, Morality, and Social Development: New Views on Old Questions. In *New Perspectives on Moral Development*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. Edited by Charles C. Helwig, 121–139. London and New York: Routledge.
- Smetana, Judith G., Marc Jambon & Courtney Ball. 2014. The Social Domain Approach to Children’s Moral and Social Judgments. In *Handbook of Moral Development*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edited by Melanie Killen & Judith G. Smetana, 23–45. New York: Psychology Press.
- Stevenson, Gregory, ed. 2019. *Theology and the Marvel Universe*. Lanham: Lexington/ Fortress Academic.
- Turiel, Elliot & Amy K. Banas. 2020. The Development of Moral and Social Judgments: Social Contexts and Processes of Coordination. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 20 (85): 23–44. <<https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2020.85.2>>.
- Turiel, Elliot & Larry Nucci. 2018. Moral Development in Context. In *Advancing Developmental Science: Philosophy, Theory, and Method*, edited by Anthony S. Dick & Ulrich Müller, 95–109. London and New York: Routledge.
- Turiel, Elliot. 1983. *The Development of Social Knowledge: Morality and Convention*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Turiel, Elliot. 1998. The development of morality. In *Handbook of Child Psychology*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Vol. 3, edited by William Damon, 863–932. New York: Wiley.

- Turiel, Elliot. 2008a. Thought About Actions in Social Domains: Morality, Social Conventions, and Social Interactions. *Cognitive Development* 23 (1): 136–154. <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2007.04.001>>.
- Turiel, Elliot. 2008b. The Development of Children's Orientations Toward Moral, Social, and Personal Orders: More Than a Sequence in Development. *Human Development* 51 (1): 21–39. <<https://doi.org/10.1159/000113154>>.
- Vary, Adam B. 2022. Marvel Studios' Phases 5 and 6: Everything We Learned at Comic-Con About the Multiverse Saga. *Variety*. <<https://variety.com/2022/film/news/marvel-studios-phase-5-phase-6-multiverse-saga-comic-con-1235323893/>> (accessed 1 August 2022).
- Wainryb, Cecilia & Beverly A. Brehl. 2006. I Thought She Knew that Would Hurt My Feelings: Developing Psychological Knowledge and Moral Thinking. In *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. Vol. 34, edited by Robert Vail, 131–171. Cambridge: Academic Press.
- Wainryb, Cecilia. 2004. Is and Ought: Moral Judgments About the World as Understood. In *Mind, Morals, and Action. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, edited by Brian W. Sokol and Jodie A. Baird, 3–18. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- White, Mark D. 2019. *Batman and Ethics*. New York: Wiley.

## Justin Martin

Odsjek za psihologiju Sveučilišta Whitworth, Spokane, WA, SAD

### Medijske pripovijedi o superherojima kao potencijalni kontekst za istraživanje dječjega razumijevanja moralno relevantnih događaja

Trenutačno su filmovi o superherojima jedan od popularnijih filmskih žanrova i čini se da se taj trend neće uskoro promijeniti. Osim toga, životi i pothvati superheroja prikazani su i putem drugih medija poput animiranih filmova i televizijskih serija namijenjenih djeci. Međutim, te su priče ujedno i nasilne. Ako se starija djeca (od 7 do 11 godina) susreću s medijskim sadržajem o superherojima, važno je razumjeti načine na koje oni pokušavaju shvatiti taj žanr. U tu svrhu, ovaj rad istražuje kako medijski sadržaj o superherojima može poslužiti kao potencijalni kontekst za razumijevanje moralno značajnih događaja kod starije djece. Taj potencijal – temeljen na tri šira područja istraživanja dječje sposobnosti razumijevanja drugih i njihovih moralno značajnih postupaka – istražuje se putem dviju dimenzija. Prvu predstavljaju zajednički pripovjedni elementi žanra, a drugu istraživačke implikacije. Predlaže se istraživački model koji se koristi pripovjednim obilježjima žanra kao dijelom metodologije za istraživanje razumijevanja moralno značajnih postupaka kod starije djece. Takav model također nudi mogućnost nadogradnje postojećih istraživanja o odnosu između medijskoga sadržaja i moralnoga razumijevanja djece.

**Ključne riječi:** superheroji, fantastika, djeca, moralni razvoj, društveni razvoj, mediji, obrazovanje