

**”Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași**

**Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences**

**Doctoral School of Psychology and Educational Sciences**

**Ph.D. Thesis**

**CHILDREN’S MORAL LIVES: MORAL  
REPRESENTATION, LICENSING, AND CLEANSING  
MECHANISMS**

**Scientific Advisor:**

**Professor Dr. Andrei Corneliu Holman**

**Ph.D. Candidate:**

**Diaconu Alexandra (căs. Maftai)**

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## Summary of the present research

### I.1. The Rationale for the Research Project

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Over the last two decades, the number of moral psychology studies has been steadily rising. Nevertheless, the identification of the mechanisms of moral judgment in children is not a sufficiently exploited research area, most researches focusing on adolescence as a crucial period for moral development (Molchanov, 2007; 2013). Moral licensing is a relatively new research area within the field of morality. Contradicting several well-established psychological theories (especially perspectives that point to the importance of consistency in one's behavior, and, therefore, the individual's need to preserve their coherence of moral identity (Colby & Damon, 1993), the moral licensing mechanisms have first been explored and theorized no sooner than twenty years ago, a short period compared to other psychology-related research areas (Miller & Monin, 2001).

Though the number of studies on moral licensing and moral cleansing is increasing, no studies have yet been published that focus on these specific mechanisms among children. Thus, while the moral licensing literature is generous on research made on adults, but is lacking any approach in exploring children's outcomes in the field of moral licensing, our study may cover these gaps, providing preliminary data on the role played by temporal variability and moral emotions, within moral licensing contexts.

Moral psychology is a complex domain, and children's moral understanding is subject to various influences within their families, social and cultural communities, educational settings, and peers. Thus, we first investigated the way children spontaneously relate to morality to clarify and establish the optimal operationalization of morality. We were also interested in exploring whether the moral licensing and cleansing effects appear in children, the potential differences between adults and children, and the moderating role of temporal distance, as defined by the Construal Level Theory. Additionally, we explored two different temporal orientations, namely *past* and *future*, and their disparate impact on children's moral behavior, within the moral licensing and moral cleansing mechanisms.

Our approach was based on Conway and Peetz's findings (2012), who launched the idea that temporal variability moderates both moral licensing and moral cleansing. Consistent with this idea, we hypothesized that children, compared to adults, would process and react differently in moral licensing situations, due to their different capacity to conceptualize temporal constructs. While in adults the abstract conceptualization of past moral behaviors emphasizes the moral values associated with that specific behavior and determines people to act consistent with their past behavior (Conway & Peetz, 2012) when it comes to children, we expect this particular effect to have a different impact, due to their lower capacity to abstract (e.g., Boswell & Greene, 1982; Kato, Kamii, Ozaki & Nagahiro, 2002; Miller, 1973). Therefore, unlike adults, the valence of recalled behavior (moral vs. immoral) would not generate significant differences in children's behavioral patterns, when moderated by temporal variability.

To our knowledge, at the present moment, no published studies are exploring the moral licensing effect among children, and the role played by moral emotions within this context. Therefore, our contribution is two-fold: first: we aim to add valuable data to the lack of theoretical scientific support related to children's moral licensing mechanisms, and second – we aim to extend the empirical data related to the various mechanisms that underlie children's moral judgment and altruistic behavior. The present studies also extend the existing literature on children's moral behaviors, while our findings might be holding significant implications for educational programs and parental practices.

We were interested in a complex, in-depth, and extensive exploration of children's moral representation, moral perspective, moral behavior (i.e., altruism), and future episodic thinking about the self and others. To this aim, we also used a qualitative approach, in addition to the statistical analysis we used in all five studies, by analyzing children's answers and summarizing their main ideas. This dual method of data analysis allowed us to deepen (in both theoretically and practically directions) how children represent the idea of morality and operate with moral concepts within their everyday moral lives.

Also, using an additional content analysis allowed us to form a clearer perspective about the process that contributes to the way children consider and think about their moral evolution (or involution). Moreover, the qualitative approach offered us a preliminary view of how children shape their perspective on others' future morality, closely connected to behavioral priming and altruistic behavior. In addition to the practical utility of the present scientific

approach, its implications at a theoretical level are all the more important as they are singular within the research field of moral licensing among children.

## **I.2. Thesis Organization and Chapters' Overview**

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The thesis is organized around four main chapters. The first chapter presents a general introduction to the main aim of the present research, emphasizing the theoretical and practical contributions we made to the field of moral psychology. The second chapter describes important ideas related to the central research theme, namely moral licensing. We further present an overview of moral psychology, detailing the various approaches in defining morality, starting from the Bible and moving to modern times, where the inconsistency between judgment and conduct, although increasingly intensely explored, is still an inexhaustible source of questions.

Within the second chapter, we also detail some of the main theoretical perspectives on children's moral development, namely a) Jean Piaget's Theory and its general assumptions; b) L. Kohlberg's Theory of the Development of Moral Judgment; c) L. Kohlberg's Theory of the Development of Moral Judgment; and d) C. Gilligan's Theory of Care and Justice. We then continue with the central concept of the present thesis, namely the moral licensing theory, and its opposite mechanisms – moral cleansing. We offer a detailed perspective on the various mechanisms that contribute to the moral licensing process among adults, while no data has yet been published in relation to children's moral licensing mechanisms.

We also describe a series of moral licensing moderators and limits, emphasizing the role played by the cultural context and temporal variability. Another important theory described in the second chapter is The Construal-Level Theory (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008), and its role in moral licensing, suggesting that the moral licensing and cleansing mechanisms in children might be differently impacted by the temporal distance, compared to the results presented in previous literature studying these specific effects. We further continue with a description of children's altruism as moral behavior, usually associated with a warm and close relationship between parents and children, secure attachment, confidence, self-esteem, and parental support. Additionally, we present a ten-stage theory on the development of altruism, proposed by H.K. Ma.

We conclude our second chapter with data related to moral emotions and prosocial behavior, emphasizing on the regulatory and balancing role of moral emotions in the context of social interactions, which actively contribute to the promotion or inhibition of inappropriate behaviors and attitudes. We also describe the link between behavioral priming and moral intentions, summarizing the main findings related to moral licensing and cleansing mechanisms. Additionally, we describe future episodic thinking in children and its role in children's prosocial behavior.

The third chapter of the thesis, and the most extensive one, presents empirical data generated by five studies, involving a total of 530 children aged 7 to 10. **The raw data supporting the conclusions of these articles will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.** The five studies are split within three manuscripts, out of which one is published in a moral psychology international journal – *The Journal of Moral Education*. The other two manuscripts are currently under review in two similar journals. However, the thesis contains the three manuscripts in their original (submitted for review or accepted) form. The first study presents a qualitative perspective on the basis of which we have formulated three main objectives: 1) to identify the main categories of behaviors that children spontaneously associate with the notion of morality, in line with Turiel's Domain-Theory; 2) to investigate children's conceptions of moral and social-conventional rules; 3) to assess the gender differences in the use of care and justice reasoning, in line with Gilligan's (1977; 1982) assertion, that females are care-oriented and that males consistently use the justice orientation and infrequently use the care orientation; and, finally, to assess the most morally relevant behavior for children (which we found to be altruism), and to subsequently use it as a dependent variable in our further studies. Our results reflected a tendency towards morality perceived through behaviors directed towards others, namely through altruism, and also the domination of moral norms as compared to social ones, partially confirming Gilligan's theory concerning gender specificities regarding moral reasoning in the questions of care and justice.

Our second manuscript presents two studies exploring children's altruism after recalling recent and distant morally-valenced behavior, its main findings suggesting a behavioral consistency tendency, instead of a moral licensing or cleansing effect. Within these two studies, we measured children's altruism in two experimental tasks while varying the time (recent vs. distant) and valence (moral, immoral, and neutral) of the recalled behavior. We also investigated the mediating role of present versus retrospective guilt within these mechanisms. In contradiction with the general results of research conducted among adults, our data

suggested behavioral consistency, instead of moral licensing or cleansing. Both studies indicated significant differences in children's altruism when they recalled distant, immoral behaviors compared to most of the other conditions. More specifically, when children recalled immoral behaviors from their distant past, they expressed higher altruism (i.e., moral cleansing), in contrast to the licensing effect found in adults. Additionally, the guilt experienced in the present towards the recalled behavior emerged as a potential mediator of this cleansing effect.

Finally, we explored moral licensing versus behavioral priming in children, and the moderating role of temporal distance, by using two separate prospective moral licensing manipulations that would vary one of these dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., the concreteness of the moral primes), while holding temporal distance constant at its upper end (i.e., distant future). We chose distant behaviors due to results from our second and third studies, which suggested that children expressed higher altruism in distant conditions only, i.e., moral cleansing. That is why, in the last two studies, we further investigated the mechanisms associated with children's moral licensing, cleansing, or consistency in the distant future. Children's altruistic tendencies were measured in both studies. Results revealed children's higher altruism after imagining distant moral behaviors, contrary to findings in adult samples, but only when concrete primes were used. This suggests that, instead of moral licensing, behavioral priming is the dominant effect in children in these circumstances, due to their lower abstraction abilities.

The last chapter (chapter IV) offers a general discussion of the present thesis, including a summary of the paper, along with a series of strengths and limitations. Before the detailed list of materials that we used in our studies, we propose a series of future research directions, related to *The Temporal Self-Appraisal Theory* (Ross & Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2001), *The Fading Affect Bias* (Walker, Skowronski, Gibbons, Vogl, & Thompson, 2003), *The Better-Than-Average Effect* (Alicke & Govorun, 2005), and *The End-Of-History Illusion* - (Quoidbach, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2013).

### **I.3. Conclusions and recommendations**

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The present thesis summarized some of the main findings related to children's moral development and moral judgment. Across five studies, we explored a) children's representation of morality; b) children's altruism after recalling recent and distant morally-valenced behavior, its main findings suggesting a behavioral consistency tendency, instead of a moral licensing or cleansing effect; and c) moral licensing versus behavioral priming in children, and the moderating role of temporal distance, by using two separate prospective moral licensing manipulations that would vary one of these dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., the concreteness of the moral primes), while holding temporal distance constant at its upper end (i.e., distant future).

The conclusions emerged from our first study, a qualitative approach to children's moral representations, are centered among the idea that children perceive morality through behaviors directed towards others, namely through altruism. The domination of moral norms as compared to social ones was also associated with gender specificities regarding moral reasoning in the questions of care and justice. One of the most interesting findings from our first study lies in children's representation of doing good for other people, which implied behaviors with the specific emotional aim of making people happy. Therefore, both solitary and collective actions aimed to bring other people joy were an important part of children's moral representation, a result that can further be used to explore the connections between children's happiness representation and their moral understanding.

The most relevant moral behavior, in children's view, was related to helping others around them. Children described actions such as "helping my friends in need, without them specifically letting me know they need it"; "helping my colleagues at school"; or "share with the poor", and these answers had the highest frequency in children's descriptions (and drawings) of morality. Moral conducts such as "acting respectful", "being polite", "being gentle" and "being friendly" were also among the most frequent answers used by children to represent morality. Almost fifteen percent of children's answers reflected morality through such behaviors. Therefore, we used altruism as a reliable way to measure children's moral behaviors and moral intentions throughout the next studies, where we adapted a series of experimental tasks previously used by Conway and Peetz (2012), and Cascio and Plant (2015).

Results from Studies 2 and 3 indicated significant differences in children's altruism when they recalled distant, immoral behaviors compared to most of the other conditions. More specifically, recalling distant immoral behaviors increased altruism, compared to distant neutral and to recent immoral actions. This suggests that recalling immoral behaviors from the distant past activates the tendency towards moral cleansing in children, in contrast to the licensing effect (i.e., lower altruism) found in adults who recall the same type of behaviors (Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006; Miller & Effron, 2010). Moreover, our results suggest that the guilt experienced in the present towards the recalled behavior mediates this cleansing effect, in line with previous investigations on the effect of guilt on prosocial behaviors (De Hooge, Zeelenberg & Breugelmans; Keltner & Boswell, 1996).

Therefore, results from our second and third study suggested that distant immoral behaviors seem to generate more intense guilt in children, compared to the recent ones, which further increases altruistic tendencies; in contrast, research on adults found the opposite effect. We found a similar moral consistency when adults recalled positive behaviors from the distant past, which further led to increased altruism. In other words, our results suggested that moral cleansing motivates children's present altruism when they recall distant, immoral behaviors, while in adults, moral consistency is the mechanisms that activates altruistic behavior in the present (when recalling distant behaviors). One of the explanatory mechanisms we considered relevant to interpret this specific result is represented by children's present guilt, and its impact on subsequent behaviors. However, though both studies (two and three) provided consistent evidence for the understanding of moral licensing mechanisms and cleansing in children, specifically for the role of temporal variability and guilt (present and retrospective), further research, with larger samples, is needed to clarify these specific links.

Our fourth and fifth studies indicated children's moral consistency, instead of the moral licensing effect suggested by previous research on adults. More specifically, we found that children's moral consistency was mainly determined by priming their prospective moral selves, but only when priming was done with behaviors, not with personality traits. This suggests that the mechanism more plausible to be responsible for the effect of our manipulation on children's altruism is behavioral priming, similar to other investigations in this area (Carver et al., 1983; Loersch & Payne, 2011), and not the accumulation of moral credentials or credits (Cascio & Plant, 2015; Merrit, Efron, & Monin, 2010). Additionally, our results also highlighted an effect of priming children with their *concrete*, ethical prospective selves: comparing to the control

group (in Study 4), children assumed that their future moral selves would co-exist with future (more) moral others. More specifically, results from the fourth and fifth study revealed higher altruism after imagining distant moral behaviors, contrary to findings in adult samples, but only when concrete primes were used. Therefore, our data suggested that behavioral priming, instead of moral licensing, is the dominant effect in children in these circumstances, due to their lower abstraction abilities.

To summarize our findings from all five empirical studies, we can draw the following conclusions:

- children are more likely to assess moral rules as markers of morality, rather than conventional rules;
- girls are more likely to identify with care-oriented representations of morality;
- recalling immoral behaviors from the distant past activates the tendency towards moral cleansing in children, in contrast to the licensing effect (*i.e.*, lower altruism) found in adults who recall the same type of behaviors (Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006; Miller & Effron, 2010);
- the guilt experienced in the present towards the recalled behavior mediates the moral cleansing effect in children, in line with previous investigations on the effect of guilt on prosocial behaviors (De Hooge, Zeelenberg & Breugelmans; Keltner & Boswell, 1996);
- recalling distant immoral behaviors generates more intense guilt in children, compared to the recent ones, which further increases altruistic tendencies; in contrast, research on adults found the opposite effect;
- children's moral consistency was determined by priming their prospective moral selves, but only when priming was done with behaviors, not with personality traits; this suggests that the mechanism more plausible to be responsible for the effect of our manipulation on children's altruism was behavioral priming, similar to other investigations in this area (Carver et al., 1983; Loersch & Payne, 2011), and not the accumulation of moral credentials or credits (Cascio & Plant, 2015; Merrit, Efron, & Monin, 2010);
- children assumed that their future moral selves would co-exist with future (more) moral others, suggesting another effect of priming children with their *concrete*, ethical prospective selves; this finding is particularly important due to the potential

implications in children's moral education: believing in a future moral self generates moral optimism about others, as well: *If I will be a good, moral person, then others would be as moral as me.*

In a more general note, the present paper summarizes a series of novel approaches in the field of children's moral psychology. First, the results of the first study allowed a concrete measurement of how children spontaneously represent morality, and allowed the grounded extraction of a dependent variable to measure morality, as validated by children in the targeted age group. Second, the results from the second and third study allowed us to draw a series of preliminary conclusions related to the way moral licensing and cleansing mechanisms are activated (or not) in children, and how moral consistency in children's behavior can occur, compared to how the way they appear in adults. Our most important findings in this area are related to the differences between children and adults in terms of moral licensing and cleansing, and the way the temporal variability (through its high or low abstraction) and moral emotions (i.e., present and retrospective guilt) impacts children's altruistic behavior. Finally, we found that children's moral consistency was determined by priming their prospective moral selves, but only when priming was done with behaviors, not with personality traits, therefore reconfirming the importance of considering children's power to abstract, compared to adults.

Some important limitations for the current research need to be addressed. First of all, the environment in which the research was conducted was a conventional, formal one. School is generally considered to be a restraining, closed perimeter, governed by strict rules. Therefore, when asked about moral conduct, the need to express school-related norms comes naturally. Future research should explore children's spontaneous representations of morality in more neutral conditions, such as playgrounds or outside spaces. Second, within our first study, our analysis was limited to representations regarding the moral and conventional domains, as well as the care and justice dimensions, and generated differences in terms of gender.

Though our sample was balanced in terms of age and gender, we did not consider any age differences. Future studies may want to explore the age effect in children's moral representations in all the domains proposed within Turiel's framework. Third, the samples we used in all five studies were rather small. Further research would benefit from increasing the number of participants to identify a more explicit interaction between the temporal distance and the emotional valence of the recalled events.

An important observation is related to the cultural context in which our research took place. Our exploration was confined to Romanian children only, and we already know that morality (and moral licensing mechanism, implicitly) are culturally moderated (Blanken et al. 2015). As far as we know, at the present moment, no published studies are exploring the moral licensing effect within the Romanian population, which is a particular European group due to its communist reminiscences, which sharply contrasts its strong European character. Therefore, we do not have sufficient data to explore the cultural factor, which could contribute to the particularities of the moral licensing mechanisms.

Moreover, children's sharing decisions could have been biased by social desirability, although confidentiality was assured and tested in small groups across all studies. Additionally, our samples were drawn from predominantly middle-class families, which might limit the generalizability of our findings; future studies should consider children's sharing behaviors in moral licensing contexts in extended and more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Another significant limitation is related to the fact that we investigated the effects of concrete and abstract moral primes at only the high end of temporal abstraction, i.e., in the distant future. Results on the variations of children's behaviors following short term prospective thinking are needed to fully explore the effects of concrete versus abstract moral priming in children.

In the last two studies (i.e., Studies 4 and 5), we asked children either for future moral behaviors or to distinguish categorically between moral versus future immoral behaviors. A useful future research direction would be related to having children reflect upon future immoral behaviors. Given the fact that we already know the impact of the about positivity bias (i.e., people's tendency to report favorable views of reality, positive expectations, and to favor positive information in reasoning; Hoorens, 2014) it maybe not as surprising to find that children view themselves as being moral future beings. Therefore, future research may want to explore extended results by asking children to imagine likelihoods rather than categorical distinctions. Given that future selves are built on cumulative representations of the past and present self, an alternative approach may ask children to provide scaled input (very moral, mostly moral, neither moral nor immoral). Additionally, future studies might draw upon work related to the autobiographical memory literature, in order to further explain how the development of self-representations (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Spreng & Levine, 2006) impact the way children see themselves in the future, and where the construal theory fits into theories of the construction of the autobiographical past and future self.

Future studies might also benefit from exploring the role of parents and the specific parental practices they use on children's moral development. We already know that parents play a significant role in modeling their children's ethical behavior (e.g., Charalampous et al., 2018; Chen, Ho, & Lwin, 2016; Gómez-Ortiz et al. 2015; Larrañaga et al. 2018; Lester et al., 2017), but to our knowledge, no studies have yet explored this link within the moral licensing and cleansing mechanisms. Furthermore, we explored guilt and its impact on prosocial behavior (e.g., altruism) within the moral licensing process. However, previous research highlighted that pride also motivates further action in behavioral areas such as prosocial behavior (Williams & DeSteno, 2008). Future studies might want to extend the field of moral emotions and their impact within the moral licensing framework.

Our approach was cross-sectional in all five studies. As children's moral development and reasoning is a complex process, future studies might want to explore the moral licensing mechanisms using a longitudinal approach. Results from the current research suggest a lack of moral licensing in children, and instead, a moral cleansing process activated in the immoral distant conditions and subject to the impact of moral emotions (i.e., retrospective guilt). However, we do not know when and how moral licensing occurs during the developmental period. However, it is clear, given the growing research in the field that these licensing and cleansing mechanisms do appear, and that a repeated-measures design would provide a more unobstructed view on their emergence.

We considered donation behavior and the willingness to help a colleague in need as a measure of children's altruism. However, due to the complexity of altruistic behavior, future studies may want to explore different measurement techniques, such as scales and inventories (e.g., Ma & Leung, 1991; Turner, 1948), or another contextual measure of children's altruism (e.g., donating a prize (Rushton & Wiener, 1975); helping a class member (Hoffman, 1979); hypothetical moral scenarios implying helping behavior (Yarrow, Scott, & Waxler, 1973).

The explanations we presented for results in all five studies were related to the assumptions we made, in close connection with moral licensing, moral cleansing, and with moral consistency mechanisms. However, they are not exhaustive and do not cover the entire area of potential explanations. We consider that the following frameworks might provide additional information and future research directions, using their status as alternative explanations for our current results:

a. *The Temporal Self-Appraisal Theory* (Ross & Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2001) argues that individuals tend to subjectively perceive temporal distance from certain events, depending on the valence of the events recalled. The current evaluation of the self is thus influenced by the proximal temporal perception, that is, the contents perceived as being more recent, compared to those perceived as more distant. At the same time, Ross and Wilson (2002) confirmed that subjectively perceived temporal distance was smaller when participants recalled situations favorable to self-image, compared to those perceived when recalled events involved negative self-evaluations.

The theory developed by Ross and Wilson (2000, 2001) suggested that 1) when recalling positive events, people tend to reduce the temporal distance associated to them subjectively; 2) the autobiographical contents which involve a current negative evaluation of the self will be perceived or placed at a higher temporal distance from the moment of recollection; 3) positive autobiographical contents will have a higher impact on one's self-evaluation, comparing to the negative ones.

b. *The Fading Affect Bias* (Walker, Skowronski, Gibbons, Vogl, & Thompson, 2003) argues that the intensity of the emotions associated with self-related negative memories (evoked from autobiographical memory) decreases faster in time, compared to the intensity of negative emotions associated with positive memories. In other words, we feel less the negative emotions associated with unpleasant memories, when they are recalled, compared to the positive ones. The passage of time lessens the negative emotional intensity more quickly, while, the situations that have generated pleasant emotional experiences "dissolve" harder, over time. Emotions that imply a heightened self-awareness, such as guilt and shame, decrease in intensity with the psychological distance between the moment of remembrance and the moment when they occurred.

As a result, according to The Fading Affect Bias theory, the higher the distance - the lower the guilt or shame one feels at the present moment. However, research showed that shame is a more negative emotional experience, comparing to guilt, and therefore, according to Walker et al. (2003), we can assume that shame would have a lower emotional intensity than guilt, in the context of distant behaviors. The detailed qualitative analysis of children's responses regarding the moral representation of self and others (Study 4) confirmed results initially suggested in Study 1, with altruistic behavior (e.g., *Helping other people, Helping the poor, Helping the elderly*) as the most common example of moral behaviors.

c. *The better-than-average effect* (Alicke & Govorun, 2005)

Research shows that people usually overestimate their predictions in completing a task (Newby-Clark, Ross, Buehler, & Koehler, 2000). When asked to compare themselves to some average peers, they tend to place themselves above them. This effect was called *the better-than-average effect* (Alicke & Govorun, 2005) and two of the most influential explanations for it stated that 1) people select more inferior comparison targets (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986) and 2) people choose behaviors in which they usually perform better than others (Weinstein, 1980).

Consequently, we might expect that, when asked to engage in episodic future thinking and make judgments about their future moral selves, compared to others, children would activate the *better than the average* mechanisms, rating themselves as more future moral than others. As Alicke and Govorun (2005) suggested, this effect is thought to be larger on the ability than on moral dimension, an issue confirmed by Allison, Messick, and Goethals (1989). Specifically, people tend to believe they perform more moral behaviors than others, comparing to other tasks, such as intellectual behaviors. Moreover, the higher the ambiguity of the comparison, the more significant the effect.

d. *The End-Of-History Illusion* (Quoidbach, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2013)

Research showed that moral consistency in adults could be explained through the value they associate with a past action they associate with their present behavior. For example, if an adult recalls a negative distant past behavior, he or she would act in the present in the same consistent manner, therefore, in a negative way. Of course, the vice-versa is also available for the positive distant recalled behavior. With time-traveling into the future, though, things might get tricky if the *end-of-history illusion* (Quoidbach, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2013) reveals its mechanisms.

The *end-of-history* illusion suggests that people consider their present self as a fully developed, inalterable self, that cannot be different in the future. In other words, at any stage of development, adults consider their present, actual self, as a result of a series of past different and numerous changes that can no longer be subject to any other (major) changes. Consequently, adults' self-schemas are considered rigid and permanent. According to Quoidbach et al. (2013), "people may believe that who they are today is pretty much who they will be tomorrow, despite the fact that it isn't who they were yesterday" (p.96).

Our qualitative analyses suggested that children believe that people are incapable of change when considering their immorality ("*they will be bad in the future because they are bad even now*"). When they imagine themselves, however, they think that they will be better and because they will change, compared to the present moment. Therefore, future studies should deeper explore the way children are subject to the end-of-history illusion and the way this particular vision upon their moral history may influence their moral perspective.

To conclude, our research is the first to provide evidence for the understanding of moral licensing mechanisms in children, specifically for the role of temporal variability and guilt. Also, the present studies also extend the existing literature on children's moral behaviors, their findings holding potentially significant implications for educational programs, and parental practices. The moral life of children is complex and surprising, offering many opportunities for reflection and analysis of one's ethical behavior. The staged perspective of the development of morality and altruism may be useful for a deeper understanding of human behavior, as well as a basis for the development of strategies for educating morality, based especially on parental effort. The development of a superior moral judgment may be enhanced by explaining ethical behavioral landmarks, emotional support, conversations, and role-plays guided to cultivate positive moral emotions and, in general, training children's moral consciousness through positive role models. The novel research directions related to children's morality will certainly enrich the theoretical and methodological landscapes, with practical applications in the daily substantiation of children's moral reasoning, outlining new and rich analysis directions.