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The Representation of Altruism and Egoism in Children’s Books

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ABSTRACT
Although the social implications of children’s media have been a central public concern for millennia, there has been no systematic attempt to quantify the representation of other-versus self-serving values in children’s literature. A coding scheme based on the model of intuitive motivations and exemplars was applied to examine the representation of altruistic and egoistic motivations in popular children’s books. Echoing previous findings on the content of popular children’s songs and television programming, the current findings suggest that egoistic motivations were represented significantly more often than altruistic motivations. Examining differences by the target age of books revealed that altruistic motivations were more prominent in books targeted at younger children, whereas egoistic motivations became more prominent in content for older children. The fact that these findings replicated across several children’s media denotes the societal importance of these motivations and their representation. These findings are discussed in terms of their social import and note the particular need for future investigations into the exemplification of egoistic motivations, which have been overlooked in most previous content analyses of children’s media.

Researchers studying the influence of children’s narrative media have based their understanding of moral development on work by Piaget (1932/1965) and Kohlberg (1984). Both suggest that moral growth occurs as individuals learn to resolve conflict between their egoistic and altruistic motivations (i.e., intuitive drives associated with benefits to the self or others, respectively). However, neither body of work provided theoretical schemes for identifying and distinguishing the altruistic or egoistic motivations that underlie human behavior. Because these motivations are believed to be the foundation upon which moral attitudes and behaviors are based, and they seem to be particularly important during children’s moral development, a coherent understanding of the frequency and context under which they are represented in a child’s environment is critical. Until recently, research has lacked a theoretically based coding scheme capable of identifying motivational representations in media content.

The present study employs a coding scheme based on the model of intuitive motivation and exemplars (MIME; Tamborini et al., 2016a; see also Tamborini, 2013) to examine the prevalence of altruistic and egoistic motivations in popular children’s books, one of the
most influential conveyors of other- and self-serving values in a child’s environment. This article begins by discussing the importance of examining the content of children’s books. We go on to review the MIME as a guiding framework for our examination and discuss the utility of a MIME-based coding scheme for providing a more complete picture of how altruistic and egoistic motivations appear in children’s media. We then introduce a study examining the values represented in popular children’s books.

**Children’s Books as Purveyors of Values**

Children are heavy consumers of books, and the scope of their influence can be seen in the billions of dollars generated through the merchandising of their toys, clothing, and games (Orenstein, 2011). Concern over the influence literature has on young readers is almost as old as writing itself, with early scholars such as Plato making reference to the power it could wield over impressionable youth (Adam, 1902). These worries over content run so deep that the potential influence on children is one of the most cited reasons for censorship (Saltman, 1998).

The desire for guardians to expose children to information deemed appropriate and limit exposure to conflicting moral or self-serving paradigms transcends any particular ideology, with censored titles ranging from Leslea Newman’s *Heather Has Two Mommies* (for its positive portrayal of a homosexual relationship) to Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (for its reliance on “middle-class rabbits”; Saltman, 1998). The popularity of books as instructional tools used by adults to inculcate the types of values they wish their children to emulate underscores the need to understand the messages most often emphasized in bestselling books, a pervasive medium in the lives of many children from infancy (Scholastic Inc, 2019). The MIME provides a comprehensive scheme for organizing the types of other- and self-serving values that may be emphasized in books, and thus is useful for this investigation.

**The Model of Intuitive Motivation and Exemplars**

The MIME (Tamborini et al., 2016a; see also Tamborini, 2013) outlines a reciprocal relationship between media and audiences. Drawing on exemplification theory (Zillmann, 1999) and moral foundations theory (MFT; Haidt & Joseph, 2007), the MIME states that exposure to media representations of intuitive motivations (i.e., instinctive drives) leads motivations that are represented to become more salient in audiences’ minds. As a motivation becomes increasingly salient, audiences become more likely to seek and consume media related to that motivation. Subsequently, media writers and producers are more likely to create new content featuring the motivations sought by their audience. As a result, the MIME’s reciprocal relationship between audiences and the content they consume indicates that salient motivations are most likely to be portrayed in popular media, which will perpetually strengthen their salience in audiences’ minds over time.

**Intuitive Motivations**

The MIME’s logic regarding intuitive motivations is grounded in research on intuitive morality (Haidt & Joseph, 2007) and universal values (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Kenrick et al.,
These two fields similarly argue that humans have developed a series of gut-level motivational systems throughout evolution that are sensitive to behaviors driven by desires of preservation, survival, and well-being. Both claim that experiencing the satisfaction of intuitive motivations in one’s self, or witnessing this satisfaction in others, will automatically produce positive affect in an observer’s mind. Importantly, the intuitive motivations outlined by MFT (Haidt & Joseph, 2007) are argued to have evolved as a set of evolutionary adaptive sensitivities that are focused on ensuring the survival of society at large. That is, intuitive motivations identified by MFT focus on intentions to provide benefit to others, such as other individuals, groups, or broader social structures. On the other hand, positive psychology and research on universal values (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Kenrick et al., 2010; Schwartz, 1994) go beyond identifying motivations that provide benefit to others to distinguish intuitive motivations that focus on intentions to provide benefit to one’s self, outlining drives toward personal flourishing in the form of psychological and physical health.

In an attempt to provide a comprehensive framework of human intuitive motivations and distinguish between motivations that satisfy the needs of others versus the needs of one’s self, the MIME combines intuitive motivations identified by MFT, SDT, and Schwartz’s universal human values. In order to clarify their focus on providing benefit to others or one’s self, the MIME terms these separate domains of intuitive motivations as either altruistic or egoistic, respectively.

The MIME derives altruistic motivations from MFT’s list of five moral intuitions (Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Tamborini, 2013), which are conceptualized as drives for behavior that would provide benefit to individuals, groups, or broader social structures at a cost to one’s self. These include motivations for: care (representing feelings of compassion and concern toward others’ well-being), fairness (valuing justice, equality, and reciprocity), in-group loyalty (favoring ingroup members at the expense of outgroup members), authority (respecting and revering benevolent leaders), and purity (desiring nobility and cleanliness, and avoiding disease).

The MIME derives egoistic motivations from research on positive psychology and universal human values, which outlines motivations distinguished in their focus on providing benefit to one’s self. The first three egoistic motivations adopted by the MIME come from positive psychology’s self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT outlines three distinct universal psychological needs, including: competence (the desire for achievement), autonomy (the desire for control over one’s choices and actions), and relatedness (the desire for connection to others). MIME scholars then turned to broader research on universal human values (Schwartz, 1994) to identify three additional self-focused motivations not covered by MFT or SDT. These are: hedonism (pursuing pleasure), power (desiring control), and security (seeking safety). Taken together, the six egoistic motivations adopted by the MIME are conceptualized as drives toward self-sustenance in the form of well-being, physical health, and flourishing (Ryan, 2009), whereas altruistic motivations are conceptualized as drives to benefit others at a cost to one’s self (Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Tamborini, 2013).
Advantages of a MIME-based Perspective

Although the 11 intuitive motivations (often referred to simply as intuitions) adopted by the MIME were intended to provide researchers a comprehensive scheme that could be used to test the MIME’s content-audience interdependency claims and synthesize existing research on media selection, content, and influence, MIME logic does not hold this list to be exhaustive. Its logic leaves room for new motivations to be adopted or dropped as knowledge on universal human motivations advances. Nevertheless, the current categories of altruistic and egoistic motivations provide a useful framework for examining the extent to which media depictions of universal basal instincts can reciprocally influence these primitive concepts in audiences, regardless of medium (Tamborini et al., 2017, 2016a, 2016b), audiences’ culture (Prabhu et al., 2020) or age (Hahn, 2018), and narrative context (Tamborini et al., 2019). That is, emerging evidence suggests support for the MIME’s processes, irrespective of contextual factors such as cultural system (e.g., the US versus India), audience characteristics (e.g., adults versus kids), and normative perceptions of character actions as good or bad (e.g., Robin Hood’s acts of stealing versus Captain Hook’s acts of stealing). With its focus on universally shared intuitive motivations, the MIME provides an understanding of media influence that is not limited by the contextually variant normative perceptions of audiences.

In this sense, the focus on altruistic and egoistic motivations has proven useful for researchers examining the reciprocal influence between media content and audiences as well as for synthesizing and situating media research according to media’s portrayal of and influence on a coherent set of human motivations. For example, previous MIME research has determined that motivations are identifiable in media content (Bowman et al., 2014; Hahn et al., 2019, 2017; Lewis & Mitchell, 2014; Tamborini et al., 2017) and that exposure to depictions of these motivations can influence the short-term and long-term salience of those motivations in audiences’ minds (Eden et al., 2011; Tamborini et al., 2016a, 2016b), which may feed back to influence the motivations most often featured in content (Prabhu et al., 2020). Notably for the present study, the MIME’s processes are also apparent in child audiences.

Examining the MIME’s Processes in Children

With a lack of cognitive maturity and life experience, children are thought to be more susceptible to media influence (Potter, 2014). Although research on media influence agrees that children are more susceptible to media messages, the MIME diverges from the frameworks that consider media’s influence as a transfer of learned behaviors. Instead, the MIME suggests that exposure to messages emphasizing the importance of intuitive motivations can increase the salience of those motivations in audiences. Whereas previous understandings of media influence might predict that exposure to a book emphasizing the importance of honesty would teach the specific importance of telling the truth, MIME logic would suggest that exposure to the book would activate the fairness motivation in audiences, subsequently increasing that motivation’s weight in the audiences’ decision making and potentially leading to a whole host of fairness based judgments and behaviors that go beyond telling the truth in particular. Indeed, Hahn (2018) found that children who read a comic book highlighting an altruistic motivation later performed behaviors in line with that motivation. For example, children who read a comic book
with a storyline emphasizing the fairness motivation were more likely to donate equal shares of their belongings immediately following exposure than children who read about a different motivation or no motivation at all. The MIME claims that repeated exposure to such motivational representations would have a lasting impact on audiences’ values and behaviors. As a foundation for understanding how media may influence children’s values and behaviors in the long term, the present study focuses on identifying the frequency with which altruistic and egoistic motivations are portrayed in one of the most popular modern storytellers for young audiences: books.

**Altruistic and Egoistic Representations in Children’s Media**

Research examining moral representations in popular children’s media has typically examined a number of loosely-defined prosocial and antisocial behaviors, limited by a focus on specific actions such as “helping” or “aggression” (e.g., Coyne & Whitehead, 2008; Padilla-Walker et al., 2013). This research has predominantly found an abundance of antisocial and aggressive actions prevalent throughout popular media, raising concerns from social critics who worry children may reproduce these actions in real life.

Although examining the representation of prosocial and antisocial behaviors in children’s media is valuable in its own right, the ambiguity inherent in these terms is considerable. The conceptual and operational definitions used to represent these terms change repeatedly depending on narrative context and culture. This limits the field’s ability to integrate findings across the discipline, impeding advancement in the study of children’s media content and its effects. For example, previous research has often defined prosocial or altruistic behavior simply as helping or sharing (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Gentile et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2006), limiting the conception of prosocial and antisocial to behaviors rooted in care and fairness. Notably, while altruistic motivations in Western cultures seem to value care and fairness more than other intuitions, Easterners place greater importance on notions of ingroup loyalty, deference to authority, and social and religious holiness (Graham et al., 2011). This makes definitions based on helping or sharing seem incomplete and limited by culture. More recent examinations of popular children’s media have attempted to overcome these contextual and cultural limitations by applying a more comprehensive and theoretically driven coding scheme rooted in MIME logic (e.g., Hahn et al., 2017; Tamborini et al., 2017).

**A MIME-based Coding Scheme**

Although there is value in classifying specific behaviors as either prosocial or antisocial, the intentions behind these behaviors are often ignored. Determining the motivation behind behavior is crucial, as different intentions might lead audiences (and researchers) to interpret the same behavior as prosocial in one instance and antisocial in another. For example, if Katniss from *The Hunger Games* volunteers herself as tribute, it might be because she wants to save her sister’s life (an altruistic act of care) or because she wants the fame and fortune that come with winning the games (an egoistic act of power). Coding schemes that classify behaviors as only prosocial or antisocial leave an incomplete picture of the nature of self- and other-oriented media portrayals. In the example above, schemes focusing only on behavior constrain raters to code Katniss’s volunteering to save her sister’s life as a prosocial act (i.e., sacrifice) without consideration of intention. Importantly, Katniss
saves the lives of other characters in *The Hunger Games* series of books, but only the first time is her act motivated by selfless care considerations. The second act is motivated by selfish, security-based considerations, as she only shows compassion for Peeta to please observers and get the supplies she needs. Although both *behaviors* constitute caring and therefore would be deemed *prosocial* by traditional coding schemes, we contend that this label would be misleading for the second act, which was motivated by Katniss’ self-interest.

Employing a MIME-based coding scheme allows researchers to code for the impetus behind actions rather than the actions themselves, which captures the motivations of the behaviors, regardless of the behavioral context. Early versions of this scheme have proven useful in determining and differentiating altruistic motives embedded in prime-time television (Tamborini et al., 2016a, 2016b), newspaper articles (Bowman et al., 2014), and international soap operas (Tamborini et al., 2010). Particularly important for the present study, a more recent scheme that also includes egoistic motives has been applied to children’s television (Hahn et al., 2017; Lewis & Mitchell, 2014; Tamborini et al., 2017) and Grammy-nominated songs for adults and children (Hahn et al., 2019). Given the popularity of books among children, and adults’ reliance on literature as one of the earliest teachers of other- and self-sustaining values, we apply the MIME’s complete coding scheme to identify the altruistic and egoistic motivations that are emphasized in popular children’s books:

**RQ1:** How frequently do (a) altruistic and (b) egoistic motivations appear in popular children’s books?

Beyond our interest in the overall frequency with which these motivations appear, we also investigate motivations’ frequency by target age. Although many forms of media may appear to target different segments of the youth market, few overtly distinguish specific age groups for which they are targeted in the manner that books do. Perhaps for this reason, minimal attention has been paid to differences in content targeted at children of different ages. Some studies have investigated how age is related to children’s selective exposure to media (Kubey & Larson, 1990; Wright et al., 2001) as well as the effects of this exposure (see Cantor, 1996 for review; Oliver & Green, 2001). Other findings have suggested that young children may not consider the goals and motivations of narrative characters’ behaviors as much as adults (Van den Broek et al., 1996). Notably, MIME logic holds that repeated exposure to motivational exemplars can impact the salience of those motivations on a pre-conscious, gut-level, suggesting that comprehension may be a secondary consideration to intuitive motivation salience. This type of logic is in line with a large body of research from evolutionary psychology suggesting that even infants respond to narrative characters’ moral motivations (e.g., Hamlin et al., 2013). Although beyond the scope of the present study, research attempting to provide an understanding of the moderating influence of narrative comprehension on media’s ability to influence young children’s motivation salience is certainly warranted. The present descriptive study could lay the foundation for this type of inquiry, as to date research has failed to examine differences in the altruistic and egoistic motivations depicted in popular media content aimed at specific age groups.

Examining books provides a unique opportunity to make age-based comparisons because they are published for children of a particular age and are labeled accordingly. This leads to our second research question:
RQ2: Does the frequency of (a) altruistic or (b) egoistic motivations portrayed in popular children’s books differ according to the age groups for which they are targeted?

**Method**

A team of three coders, who received course credit for their work, participated in a three-month-long training course on the MIME coding scheme. Training consisted of reviewing the coding categories as a group, coding example content, and discussing coding discrepancies until agreement was reached.

**Sample**

To obtain a sample of popular books, we compiled a list of best-selling books based on sales figures provided by Publisher’s Weekly. For books published before 2000, we consulted a list of best-selling books provided by Publisher’s Weekly’s (2001). Hardcover books were included as a best-seller by Publisher’s Weekly if their sales exceeded 750,000 copies and paperback books were included if their sales exceeded 1,000,000 copies (to adjust for the fact that paperback books are cheaper than hardback books and thus sell more copies by nature). To include books in our sample that were published after 2000, we compiled a list of books that sold at least 350,000 copies between the years of 2000 and 2013. This resulted in a total of 742 children’s books published between the years of 1902 and 2013. For each of these books, and to provide a relatively equal age distribution in our sample to answer RQ2, we used Amazon.com to identify the age group for which each book was targeted. We then used a stratified sampling technique to randomly sample 35 books from each of Amazon’s six age categories; 0–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, 9–10, and 11 and up. Because some books were unavailable, this resulted in a final sample of 132 books: \( n_{age\ 0–2} = 17, \ n_{age\ 3–4} = 24, \ n_{age\ 5–6} = 23, \ n_{age\ 7–8} = 24, \ n_{age\ 9–10} = 17, \ n_{age\ 11\ and\ up} = 27. \)

As most children’s books are short, the entire book was coded in most cases; however, if the book was long enough to have chapters, we randomly selected one chapter for use in this study. Individual scenes in each book (or book chapter) served as our units of analyses. Scenes were denoted by separate coders any time there was a change in characters, setting, time, or focus of the story. In addition, these coders were instructed to record the primary protagonist and antagonist of each scene. This process resulted in 1,168 scenes in the final coded sample: \( n_{age\ 0–2} = 153, \ n_{age\ 3–4} = 208, \ n_{age\ 5–6} = 169, \ n_{age\ 7–8} = 199, \ n_{age\ 9–10} = 154, \ n_{age\ 11\ and\ up} = 285. \) On average, each book contained 8.85 scenes (\( SD = 6.37; \ median = 8; \ mode = 6; \ range = 1–38 \)).

**MIME-based Coding Scheme**

The present study used a MIME-based scheme developed by previous research to code altruistic and egoistic motivations exemplified in media content (Tamborini et al., 2017). Drawing its operational definitions from MFT (Haidt & Joseph, 2007), SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and Schwartz (1994) universal human values, the coding scheme was designed to classify 11 motivations for character behaviors (not the behaviors themselves). These
included the altruistic motivations of care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity, and the egoistic motivations of competence, autonomy, relatedness, hedonism, power, and security. For the operational definitions of each motivational coding category, see Appendix A here: https://osf.io/mtcqa.

**Coding Procedure**

The coders for motivations were instructed to evaluate the motivations of only characters identified as protagonists and antagonists. Specifically, they identified which one of the 11 individual motivations drove the behavior of each character in the scene. For instance, coders examining a scene in which Piglet helps Winnie-the-Pooh become unstuck from a doorway would code Piglet’s motivation as the altruistic drive for care, because he was motivated to provide benefit to Pooh in the form of help. Likewise, coders examining a scene in which Draco Malfoy tattles to his teacher about Harry Potter’s antics so that Gryffindor loses points in the House Cup, and Slytherin gains points, would code Malfoy’s motivation as the egoistic drive for power, because he was motivated by the desire to gain social standing (see https://osf.io/mtcqa for examples).

**Intercoder Agreement**

We intended to have at least two coders code every scene in this study. Because coders were receiving course credit for working as coders, their time was limited to one semester, during which they were able to finish coding only 70% of scenes ($n = 812$) in the sample. These scenes were divided into three portions. Each portion was coded by two independent coders, and the unassigned coder served as a blind referee. This resulted in three “teams” of coders for books. The criterion for intercoder reliability was set at 80% agreement (Neuendorf, 2002). Intercoder agreement associated with several individual motivation categories did not reach this criterion, so, in line with recommendations from Krippendorff (2004), we opted to collapse categories of individual motivations to instead examine our research questions using the broader categories of altruism and egoism. Intercoder agreement for both of the overarching altruistic and egoistic categories exceeded the 80% criterion (see Table 1).

We determined intercoder reliability using percent agreement instead of more common techniques such as Scott’s pi or Krippendorff’s alpha. This was compelled mathematically by the facts that (a) our coding scheme employed dichotomous variables (motivation present/absent) which resulted in a restriction of range and (b) even though at least one motivation was found in most scenes, none of the scenes contained all 11 motivations. This resulted in an inordinately high number of empty cells, which would skew traditional measures of reliability. For the operational definitions of each motivational coding category, see Appendix A here: https://osf.io/mtcqa.

### Table 1. Percent agreement for variables of interest in for Books.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Motivation</th>
<th>Coder Team 1 ($n = 355$ scenes)</th>
<th>Coder Team 2 ($n = 237$ scenes)</th>
<th>Coder Team 3 ($n = 220$ scenes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic Motivation</td>
<td>98% (12)</td>
<td>97% (19)</td>
<td>98% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egoistic Motivation</td>
<td>97% (20)</td>
<td>93% (34)</td>
<td>94% (27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because all scenes used to calculate reliability were coded by two of the three coders, we assessed reliability for each individual pair of coders (team). The number of agreements on motivations’ presence appears in parentheses.
(see Figure 4 in Krippendorff, 2004). This problem is common in content analyses that are large scale and multi-dimensional, and the approach that we have taken to resolve it has been noted in previous research (e.g., Hahn et al., 2019; Malik & Wojdynski, 2014). After assessing intercoder agreement for the book scenes that were coded by two coders, one coder coded the remaining 30% of the scenes ($n = 356$) during an independent study course.

**Results**

**RQ1: Frequency of Motivations**

Our first research question sought to determine the frequency with which altruistic and egoistic motivations appear in popular children’s books. Of the 1,168 scenes examined, 46.75% ($n = 546$) contained at least one motivation. To address the first research question, we conducted a one-way chi-square test. Results revealed that of the scenes featuring at least one motivation, there were significantly more scenes containing at least one egoistic motivation ($n = 452$ scenes, 82.78%) compared to those featuring at least one altruistic motivation ($n = 147$ scenes, 26.92%), $\chi^2(1, N = 599) = 155.30, p < .001, \Phi = .51$.

**RQ2: Differences in motivations according to age for books**

Our second research question asked whether the frequency of motivations portrayed in popular children’s books differed according to the age groups for which they are targeted. To address this research question, we conducted a 2 (altruistic/egoistic) x 6 (age group) chi-square test, $\chi^2(5, N = 599) = 11.65, p < .05, \text{Cramer's } V = .14$. Inspection of the adjusted standardized residuals for individual age groups revealed that altruistic motivations were overrepresented in books targeted at children ages 0–2 years old (adjusted standardized residual = 2.3), and egoistic motivations were overrepresented in books targeted at children 9–10 years old (adjusted standardized residual = 2.2). The complete coding manual, data, and analysis syntax used in this study can be found here: [https://osf.io/mtcqa](https://osf.io/mtcqa).

**Discussion**

This study set out to examine the altruistic and egoistic values represented in popular children’s books. Overall, our results revealed that popular children’s books featured more egoistic than altruistic motivations. When examining differences in books targeted at separate age groups, our results suggest that books targeted at children ages 0–2 years old were more likely to emphasize altruistic motivations, whereas books targeted at children ages 9–10 years old were more likely to emphasize egoistic motivations. As narrative media are thought to play a role in shaping children’s moral development (e.g., Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008; Jordan, 2004), understanding the altruistic and egoistic intuitive motivations that popular media emphasize is imperative. We begin this section by describing our findings and go on to discuss the advantages of a coding scheme based on intuitive motivations.

Research question one asked how altruistic and egoistic motivations were represented overall in children’s books. Our findings revealed a preponderance of egoistic motivations compared to altruistic motivations, which suggests that character motivations often focused
on self-interests rather than social interests. Although determinations of cause and effect are impossible from this content analysis alone, these patterns might suggest either that egoistic motivations are particularly appealing to adolescent audiences or that these motivations are highly valued within the culture that produced these media. Both contentions are consistent with MIME logic.

To address our second research question, we analyzed the frequency of motivation representations by books’ target age. Our analyses revealed that altruistic motivations were featured more often in books targeted at younger children, and egoistic motivations appeared more often in books for children aged 9–10. This echoes previous research that found a preponderance of egoistic motivations in television popular among older child audiences (Tamborini et al., 2017). According to the MIME, the increased representation of altruism at an early age might suggest a desire by content creators to inculcate the importance of altruism in young children, or that altruistic themes are popular among young children or those buying books for them (e.g., parents, teachers). At the same time, the overrepresentation of egoistic motivations at later ages might reflect a propensity for older children to seek exemplars that address self-needs.

This interpretation is consistent with expectations based on Erikson’s stages of development. According to Erikson (1968), most crises and conflicts faced by younger children are focused on altruistic needs related to trust and concern for social others. However, as children age, the challenges they face shift to egoistic needs related to developing an individual role-identity. An alternative explanation might be that children gain greater control over content choice as they age, whereas parents make these selections when children are younger. As such, the finding may reflect a difference between parents’ interests in the development of their children’s social sensitivities (altruism) and children’s self-interests (egoism).

Notably, a focus on egoism is not necessarily “bad” at face value. Motivations such as competence, autonomy, relatedness, and even security would likely be encouraged by positive psychologists looking to foster psychological well-being among young audiences (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985). As mentioned previously, one of the benefits of examining media content using a MIME coding scheme is the ability to avoid prescriptive labels based on normative, context-variant notions of “good” and “bad.” In fact, the MIME’s focus on diverse motivations for behavior that can benefit others versus one’s self may provide a useful scheme for parents and concerned publics attempting to determine what content they would like their children to consume based on the specific types of values they wish to inculcate in them.

This scheme also has pronounced implications for media scholars. Although previous research examining prosocial and antisocial behaviors in children’s media have provided valuable information, the ambiguous nature of their conceptual and operational definitions limits our ability to integrate findings across multiple studies. This limitation impedes advancements in the study of children’s media content and its effects. In previous research, “prosocial” behavior has been associated with acts such as sharing and helping (see Fisch, 2005). By contrast, “antisocial” behavior is often characterized by aggressive and violent acts (see American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Anderson et al., 2003; Mares & Braun, 2013; Paik & Comstock, 1994). Surprisingly, this research has garnered limited discussion regarding conceptual and operational definitions of prosocial and antisocial behaviors. This is especially noticeable given that context alters the manner in which behaviors might be
interpreted as prosocial or antisocial. For example, disloyalty to one’s group might be antisocial in some instances (e.g., misleading your group for personal gain), but prosocial in others (e.g., misleading your group to rectify an injustice to others).

The MIME examines motivational features of context, and uniquely builds on a coherent theoretical framework to provide stable conceptions of altruistic and egoistic drives. This marks an advance over past research, which typically started from a list of behaviors assumed to be identifiable as “prosocial” or “antisocial” without grounding the distinction in theory that can differentiate the two concepts and identify the behaviors that fall within them. Without discounting more traditional explanations of prosocial and antisocial behaviors, a MIME-based coding scheme can more clearly differentiate between motivations that would be considered beneficial to society or beneficial to the self.

**Limitations**

Several limitations exist. First, although we sampled a substantial number of books across several decades, future research on children’s media would benefit from examining a larger sample. Second, we did not examine books made for adult audiences, although children clearly consume them. Future research should investigate the content of such media and its popularity among young audiences. Third, traditional measures of intercoder reliability (e.g., Scott’s pi or Krippendorff’s alpha) may have been preferable to some. However, as discussed above, the restriction of range in coding categories and the inordinate number of scenes in which individual motivations were absent (compared to present) would distort these estimates.

Finally, although we set out to examine the presence of individual altruistic and egoistic motivations present in children’s books, our coders failed to reach acceptable levels of agreement on several of our individual motivation categories. As such, we were forced to collapse the individual motivation categories and base our analyses only on the broader categories of altruism and egoism, where our coders’ agreement exceeded the 80% criterion. Although the MIME codebook has been used successfully in the past to examine many forms of popular media, the intercoder agreement issues here highlight the importance of further developing the codebook to add to the instrument’s precision.

**Conclusion**

Our investigation of popular children’s books published over more than one-hundred years revealed two main findings: (1) overall, popular children’s books emphasize more motivations that are egoistic, or focused on providing benefit to one’s self, compared to those that are altruistic, or focused on providing benefit to others, (2) this emphasis changes when examining books targeted at very young children, as they tend to emphasize altruistic motivations most often. These observations are not only important in their own right, but also when considered in light of previous research. The findings of the present study are consistent with research on popular songs (Hahn et al., 2019) and children’s television programming (Hahn et al., 2017; Tamborini et al., 2017) which also showed that egoistic motivations were overrepresented. The fact that findings have been replicated across a range of children’s media points to the societal importance of these motivations, how they are represented, and the implications of their representation. Given that little attention has been
paid to egoistic motivations in most previous research on children, this suggests a need to further detail the representation of these motivations in media portrayals and understand the impact of different representations on young viewers.

Additional research is needed to examine both normative beliefs regarding the social value of different egoistic motivations, as well as the influence of their representations in media on children. At least as it applies to children, we might expect consensus regarding the social benefits of safety concerns and the egoistic drives identified by SDT (competence, relatedness, autonomy). In comparison, we might expect less consensus regarding the benefits of hedonism and power. If society wants to encourage hedonism and power in some circumstances but discourage them in others, when would encouraging these motivations be considered functional or dysfunctional? The answer might be found by considering how these motivations should be represented when they conflict with other motivations deemed more (or less) desirable. Logically, society may want to discourage some motivations when they are upheld at the expense of another that is more valued. By contrast, society may encourage the same motivation only when it does not come at the cost of upholding another that is more valued. At the very least, a MIME-based coding scheme may offer a useful tool for distinguishing these motivations and their relative importance to society.\(^1\)

**Note**

1. We also attempted to examine our main research question in a sample of children’s movies, as well as code whether the motivations represented in books and movies were depicted as desirable or undesirable through (A) the reward/punishment associated with the motivation exemplar and (B) whether the characters associated with the exemplar was affable or surly. However, reliability for our main variables in movies and the additional desirability categories fell below acceptable level of 80% agreement. Although data associated with these variables was presented in an earlier version of the paper that was presented at a conference, both the investigation into movies and the additional variables for books were dropped from consideration in the publication version of this paper and are not discussed further.

**References**


