ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

Prosocial Behaviour Towards Ingroup and Outgroup Members

Gil Diesendruck, PhD, Avi Benozio, MA, Doctoral student

Department of Psychology and Gonda Brain Research Center, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

May 2015

Introduction

Children currently live in social environments composed of individuals from diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Research reveals that from very early on children become aware of these distinctions,[1,2] and develop biased attitudes,[3] and firm beliefs about them.[4] The present chapter addresses whether children's behaviour is modulated by these social group concepts.

Subject

Recent developmental findings reveal that even 18-month-olds spontaneously help strangers achieve their goals, suggesting that altruism might be a natural bias.[5] The question we address here is whether children are prosocial towards all others, or are they biased in their prosocial tendencies to favor those who are similar to them?

Problem

Evolutionary scholars note that once human survival started depending on the existence of large cooperative groups competing for resources with other groups, humans had to develop mechanisms for cooperating with non-genetically related others.[6-9] In this context, having a biased predisposition to produce prosocial behaviour towards one's ingroup might have been evolutionarily advantageous. A problematic corollary potentially deriving from this same evolutionary pressure, is that humans might have also evolved a biased disposition to act antisocially towards outgroup members.[10]

Research Context

We examine the question of biased prosociality in the context of infants' and young children's interactions in, and reactions to, a variety of intergroup contexts – be them interactions with conventional or novel groups.

Key Research Questions

We divide the question of biased prosociality early on in development into two broad issues. First, we examine the evidence on the extent to which children behave differently when interacting with ingroup vs. outgroup members. Then we examine factors potentially explaining children's differential behaviour – such as self-identification, expectations of reciprocity, and reputation management.

Recent Research Results

Biased prosocial behaviour

Children's intergroup prosocial behaviour has been addressed mainly via resource distribution tasks. In these tasks, children are typically provided with a certain endowment, and are asked to distribute it to potential recipients. In extensive work on this issue, Fehr and colleagues have placed children in three different types of games: 1- Prosocial game, in which children had to choose between an egalitarian distribution (1 sticker for self and 1 sticker for recipient) or a selfish distribution (1 for self and 0 for recipient); 2- Sharing game (1,1 vs. 2,0); and 3- Envy game (1,1 vs. 1,2). Sometimes children played with recipients from their own school-class (ingroup) and sometimes with recipients from a different school (outgroup). Fehr and colleagues found that already at ages 3-4, children showed ingroup favoritism in some of these games. Moreover, boys showed strong aversion at being disadvantaged vis-a-vis outgroup recipients.[11] Lastly, biased

altruism towards the ingroup and spiteful behaviour towards the outgroup emerged simultaneously, but only around adolescence.[12] Using similar experimental games, Moore found that 5-year-olds favored a friend over a stranger in a game that held a cost to the distributor, but no discrimination was found in the absence of personal cost.[13] Similar findings were found with a third-party distribution task among 3.5-year-olds.[14]

A further important question is whether children manifest biased prosociality even when groups are defined in arbitrary ways. Dunham and colleagues found that although 5-year-olds privileged same-gender recipients in a resource distribution task, when group membership was determined minimally by arbitrarily assigning children to different color-groups, ingroup favoritism was negligible.[15] Also employing minimal-group assignment of membership, Benozio & Diesendruck did find ingroup favoritism in resource allocation, already by 3-4 years of age. Interestingly, the favoritism was apparent primarily amongst boys. In particular, boys tuned their distributive behaviour to match the personal preferences of an ingroup member who liked or disliked the stickers, but acted spitefully towards an outgroup member.[16] Similar results, with a compatible effect for gender, were recently demonstrated among 8-year olds while distributing positively and negatively valenced resources.[17]

In sum, under certain circumstances, even arbitrary color-groups suffice for children – especially boys – to act prosocially towards ingroup members and antisocially towards outgroup ones.

Potential explanations of biased prosocial behaviour

a. Self-identification: The extent to which children identify with a group, affects their attitudes and willingness to act prosocially.[18–20] Consistent with this notion, subtle reminders of affiliative social relations, or being mimicked by another person, increased helping behaviour in 18-month-olds.[21,22] Furthermore, one of the key precursors of prosocial behaviour is a recognition of a need in the other, and the potential positive affective response one's actions might have on the other – capacities commonly characterized as empathy.[23] And in fact, 8-year-olds who strongly identified with their ingroup showed a stronger empathy bias, feeling more sad about negative events that occurred to an ingroup than an outgroup member.[24]

b. Expectations of reciprocity: In typical inter-personal interactions, the extent to which an individual decides to collaborate with another is a function of a history of reciprocity, which in turn affect expectations about future reciprocation.[6,25–27] It has been suggested that group membership may serve as a shortcut for such a history – and a catalyst for prosociality – insofar as one can presuppose reciprocity by ingroup members even in the absence of any

previous encounters.[28] And indeed, 5-year-olds expect ingroup member to share with them, compared to an outgroup,[15] and 5- to 13-year-olds believe that people are more obliged to help racially-defined ingroup than outgroup members - and will feel happier doing so.[29] Strikingly, recent results suggest that expectations about ingroup favoritism might be present already in the first year of life.[30] Importantly, however, although children expect individuals to privilege their ingroup when distributing resources, they nonetheless evaluate more positively those who distribute resources equally between ingroup and outgroup members – a dissociation that expands from ages 4 to 10.[31] In a complementary fashion, although children expect group members to abide by group norms, when the norm is unfair – e.g., unequal resource distribution – then violators are regarded positively.[32] Thus, moral considerations of fairness may take precedence over group loyalty, especially as children mature.

c. Reputation management: Concern with reputation is also regarded as one of the driving forces in maintaining group cohesion and loyalty.[28] In fact, recent findings suggest that children's prosocial acts may be driven more by concerns about reputation, than commitment to fairness.[33] In particular, children seem to be especially concerned about how ingroup members evaluate their reputation, thus acting more generously in a resource distribution game when watched by an ingroup than by an outgroup member.[34]

Research Gaps

There are a number of issues that need to be further examined with regard to children's biased prosociality. One issue is that in order to achieve a more comprehensive assessment of the links among concepts, attitudes, self-identify, and behaviour, there needs to be more systematic examination of how children respond to various types of groups – familiar vs. novel, self-related vs. self-unrelated, negatively vs. neutrally valued, and groups viewed as fundamentally and inherently different ("essentialized") vs. those viewed as more arbitrary and dynamic ("non-essentialized"). In this latter regard, in particular, it would be valuable to conduct direct examinations of children's prosocial behaviours towards racially or ethnically defined social groups. A second important direction for future research, is to investigate children from diverse cultures,[35] variable in their normative endorsement of prosocial behaviour, importance of reputation, and centrality of group identity.[36] A third, more methodological issue, is to employ and compare different types of tasks (e.g., helping, cooperation), in addition to distributive ones. Finally, in order to track the development of children's biased prosociality, and the factors potentially influencing it, systematic comparisons across age groups are needed.

Conclusions

Although there are many gaps in the research findings to provide a definitive picture, there is nonetheless accumulating evidence that from a young age, children selectively act prosocially towards those who are members of their group – even if the groups are arbitrarily defined – and in some cases, act anti-socially towards members of other groups. Children might not be selfish, but they seem “groupish”. There is also mounting evidence for different underlying reasons why children might develop such biased dispositions, having to do with self-identity, expectations of reciprocity, and reputation management. Although these conclusions reinforce evolutionary-based theoretical claims about the origins of such biases, there are reasons to believe the cultural context in which children develop likely plays a critical role in the establishment and manifestation of these biases. In particular, cultures identify the relevant social groups in children’s environment, determine the degree of emphasis on group membership and loyalty, and define norms for regulating pro- and anti-social behaviour in different contexts.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Children are evidently not totally naïve about their social environment. Rather, from a fairly young age, they recognize different social groups, and develop robust attitudes and beliefs about these groups. Most critically from a practical perspective, these social concepts have direct consequences to the ways in which children interact with others. One of the implications of the above portrayal of children to educators is that, if we leave children to figure out the social world on their own, they might end up developing fairly discriminatory and biased dispositions. In other words, educators need to actively engage in curbing children’s predisposed biases. A second important implication is that, by understanding the underlying motives fueling these biases, we might be able to design better interventions. In particular, the redefinition of social groups so as to include “others”, might lead to the application of the processes of self-identification, expectations of reciprocity, and reputation onto a much broader social circle.

References

1. Bar-Haim Y, Ziv T, Lamy D, Hodes RM. Nature and nurture in own-race face processing. *Psychol Sci*. 2006;17(2):159-163.
2. Kinzler KD, Dupoux E, Spelke ES. The native language of social cognition. *Proc Natl Acad Sci.* 2007;104(30):12577-12580.
3. Dunham Y, Baron AS, Banaji MR. The development of implicit intergroup cognition. *Trends Cogn Sci*. 2008;12(7):248-253.
4. Diesendruck G, Goldfein-Elbaz R, Rhodes M, Gelman S, Neumark N. Cross-cultural differences in children’s beliefs about the objectivity of social categories. *Child Dev.* 2013;84(6):1906-1917.
5. Warneken F, Tomasello M. The roots of human altruism. *Br J Psychol.* 2009;100(3):455-471.

6. Nettle D, Dunbar RI. Social markers and the evolution of reciprocal exchange. *Curr Anthropol.* 1997;38(1):93-99.
7. Tomasello M, Vaish A. Origins of human cooperation and morality. *Annu Rev Psychol*. 2013;64:231-255.
8. Richerson PJ, Boyd R. *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*. University of Chicago Press; 2008.
9. Cosmides L, Tooby J, Kurzban R. Perceptions of race. *Trends Cogn Sci.* 2003;7(4):173-179.
10. Choi JK, Bowles S. The coevolution of parochial altruism and war. *Science*. 2007;318(5850):636-640.
11. Fehr E, Bernhard H, Rockenbach B. Egalitarianism in young children. *Nature*. 2008;454(7208):1079-1083.
12. Fehr E, Glätzle-Rützler D, Sutter M. The development of egalitarianism, altruism, spite and parochialism in childhood and adolescence. *Eur Econ Rev*. 2013;64:369-383.
13. Moore C. Fairness in children's resource allocation depends on the recipient. *Psychol Sci.* 2009;20(8):944-948.
14. Olson KR, Spelke ES. Foundations of cooperation in young children. *Cognition*. 2008;108(1):222-231.
15. Dunham Y, Baron AS, Carey S. Consequences of "minimal" group affiliations in children. *Child Dev.* 2011;82(3):793-811.
16. Benozio A, Diesendruck G. Parochialism in preschool boys' resource allocation. *Evol Hum Behav*. 2015:in press.
17. Buttelmann D, Böhm R. The ontogeny of the motivation that underlies in-group bias. *Psychol Sci.* 2014;25(4):921-7.
18. Bigler RS, Liben LS. Developmental Intergroup Theory: Explaining and Reducing Children's Social Stereotyping and Prejudice. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci.* 2007;16(3):162-166.
19. Nesdale D, Flesser D. Social identity and the development of children's group attitudes. *Child Dev.* 2001;72(2):506-517.
20. Paulus M. The emergence of prosocial behavior: Why do infants and toddlers help, comfort, and share? *Child Dev Perspect.* 2014;8:77-81.
21. Over H, Carpenter M. Eighteen-Month-Old Infants Show Increased Helping Following Priming With Affiliation. *Psychol Sci.* 2009;20(10):1189-1193.
22. Carpenter M, Uebel J, Tomasello M. Being mimicked increases prosocial behavior in 18-month-old infants. *Child Dev*. 2013;84(5):1511-1518.
23. Batson DC. *Altruism in Humans*. New York, NY: Oxford Univercity Press, Inc.; 2011.
24. Masten CL, Gillen-O'Neel C, Brown CS. Children's intergroup empathic processing: the roles of novel ingroup identification, situational distress, and social anxiety. *J Exp Child Psychol.* 2010;106(2-3):115-128.
25. Yamagishi T, Jin N, Kiyonari T. Bounded generalized reciprocity: Ingroup boasting and ingroup favoritism. *Adv Gr Process.* 1999;16(1):161-197.
26. Kanngiesser P, Warneken F. Young Children Consider Merit when Sharing Resources with Others. *PLoS One.* 2012;7(8):e43979.
27. House B, Henrich J, Sarnecka B, Silk JB. The development of contingent reciprocity in children. *Evol Hum Behav*. 2013;34(2):86-93.
28. Nowak M a, Sigmund K. Evolution of indirect reciprocity. *Nature*. 2005;437(7063):1291-1298.
29. Weller D, Lagattuta KH. Helping the in-group feels better: children's judgments and emotion attributions in response to prosocial dilemmas. *Child Dev*. 2013;84(1):253-268.
30. Hamlin JK, Mahajan N, Liberman Z, Wynn K. Not like me = bad: Infants prefer those who harm dissimilar others. *Psychol Sci.* 2013;24(4):589-594.
31. Dejesus JM, Rhodes M, Kinzler KD. Evaluations versus expectations: Children's divergent beliefs about resource distribution. *Cogn Sci.* 2014;38(1):178-193.

32. Killen M, Rutland A, Abrams D, Mulvey KL, Hitti A. Development of intra- and intergroup judgments in the context of moral and social-conventional norms. *Child Dev.* 2013;84(3):1063-1080.

33. Shaw A, Montinari N, Piovesan M, Olson KR, Gino F, Norton MI. Children develop a veil of fairness. *J Exp Psychol Gen*. 2014;143(1):363-375.

34. Engelmann JM, Over H, Herrmann E, Tomasello M. Young children care more about their reputation with ingroup members and potential reciprocators. *Dev Sci*. 2013;16(6):952-958.

35. Graham J, Haidt J, Koleva S, et al. Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. *Adv Exp Soc Psychol*. 2013;47:55-130.

36. House B, Silk JB, Henrich J, et al. Ontogeny of prosocial behavior across diverse societies. *Proc Natl Acad Sci*. 2013;110(36):14586-14591.