ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Prosocial Behaviour Towards Ingroup and Outgroup Members

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Introduction

Children currently grow up in social environments composed of individuals from diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups. Research reveals that from early in development, children become sensitive to such social distinctions[1–3] and develop biased attitudes[4,5] and firm beliefs about them[6,7]. The present chapter addresses whether children's behavior is modulated by these emerging 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[8,9]. 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?

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Problem

Evolutionary accounts propose that as human survival increasingly relied on cooperation within large groups of non-kin, individuals evolved mechanisms that support collaboration with unrelated others.[10-13] In this context, having a biased predisposition to produce prosocial behavior 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 tendency to act antisocially towards outgroup members.[14]

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 – whether 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 extent to which young children behave differently when interacting with ingroup vs. outgroup members. Second, we consider which factors may explain these differences, including social identification, expectations of reciprocity, reputation management, and contextual factors such as cost, group salience, and intergroup contact.

Recent Research Results

Biased prosocial behavior

Children's intergroup prosocial behavior has been studied across several domains, including sharing, helping, and regulating.

Sharing typically involves a personal cost and has been widely examined. Studies using resource-distribution tasks typically show children take into account relational affiliations, namely, higher sharing toward friends over strangers[15], same-school over different-school peers[16], and even toward peers assigned arbitrarily to minimal color-based groups[17,18]. Notably, in these arbitrary group studies, boys sometimes show strong parochialism. They give desirable resources to ingroups to increase their well-being, and undesirable resources to outgroups to decrease their well-being. These early patterns suggest that children are naturally inclined to

favor members of their own group, even before they have learned much about social categories5. Nevertheless, the magnitude and expression of this predisposition in real-world group contexts, such as ethnic distinctions, are highly sensitive to children's social ecologies and to the quality of intergroup relations they regularly experience[19]. This sensitivity illustrates that parochial tendencies are not fixed but shaped to some extent by children's everyday environments.

Helping. Helping is one of the most widely studied forms of prosocial behavior, yet much less work has examined how helping varies as a function of group membership.[20,21] In real-world contexts, White children have been shown to help same-race adults more readily[22], and children are more willing to help their friendship group over non-friends[23]. In contrast, in minimal-group paradigms, helping often shows little or no ingroup advantage, with children commonly assisting both ingroup and outgroup peers[24,25]. Despite holding more negative attitudes toward outgroups, children sometimes help outgroup peers more, especially when they view the outgroup as less competent or more in need, suggesting that specific stereotype content can guide prosocial responses toward outgroup members[26,27]. This domain, therefore, highlights the role of children's fairness and need-based concerns in moderating ingroup bias.

Regulation. Prosociality is not only about giving and helping, but also about how children enforce fairness and manage moral norms within and across groups. In these contexts, children regulate both their own and others' behavior in group-biased ways, especially when loyalty obligations collide with moral rules. When confronted with the "whistleblower's dilemma", 5-year-olds readily report mild transgressions by both ingroup and outgroup members, yet become significantly less likely to expose ingroup wrongdoers when the offence is severe, indicating that loyalty can override justice concerns when group reputation is threatened[28]. Similarly, children may give up rewards to protect a secret shared by children from their own group, but are more willing to reveal a secret belonging to children from another group[29]. By late childhood, they even selectively tell prosocial lies to protect or advantage ingroup peers, and judge such dishonesty as more acceptable when it benefits the ingroup[30]. Finally, when an authority figure (i.e., teacher) explicitly endorsed withholding resources, boys were relatively reluctant to act against ingroup peers but readily applied this permission to disadvantage outgroup members, suggesting that normative approval amplifies parochial bias[31]. Together, these findings reveal that children's self-regulation and norm enforcement are strategically attuned to safeguarding the ingroup, balancing fairness and honesty with a motivated commitment to group loyalty.

In sum, group membership shapes the extent to which children extend prosocial behavior across social boundaries, with the strength of bias varying by domain and context. Recent developmental accounts, therefore, argue that children come to treat group boundaries as moral boundaries, influencing who is seen as deserving of help, inclusion, and fair treatment[32].

Potential explanations of biased prosocial behavior

Social identification: The extent to which children identify with a social group shapes both their attitudes and their willingness to act prosocially toward its members[9,33,34]. One of the key precursors of prosocial behavior 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[35]. 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[36]. In this regard, once empathic understanding is induced experimentally, children show equal helping intentions toward both groups, regardless of the recipient's need level or children's own perspective-taking skills[23]. A different manipulation, such as making a common identity salient, reduced negative intergroup attitudes among both Jewish and Arab children. In contrast, emphasizing ingroup or outgroup identities had different effects, as majority (Jewish) and minority (Arab) children responded differently when group boundaries were highlighted[37]. Overall, the findings indicate that intergroup attitudes in childhood are influenced by how social identities are framed.

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 affects expectations about future reciprocation[10,38,39]. 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[40,41]. And indeed, 5-year-olds expect ingroup members to share with them, compared to an outgroup[42], 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[43]. However, recent research highlights important boundary conditions. When reciprocity involves real risk, as in trust-based economic games, young children sometimes show no ingroup bias and trusted ingroup and outgroup partners equally to reciprocate investments or to act generously, despite exhibiting clear ingroup preferences in their social evaluations[44]. Moreover, although children expect group members to adhere to collective norms, they approve of norm violations when those norms are

unfair – for example, when they disadvantage another group[45] – and they increasingly evaluate egalitarian resource distributions as more morally virtuous than ingroup favoritism across development[46]. Together, these findings suggest that although reciprocity expectations initially support parochial prosociality, concerns about fairness and cooperative efficiency can override group boundaries, especially when children face genuine uncertainty or moral trade-offs.

Reputation management: Concern with reputation is also regarded as one of the driving forces in maintaining group cohesion and loyalty[40]. Recent findings suggest that children's prosocial acts may be driven more by concerns about reputation than commitment to fairness[47]. 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[48,49].

Research Gaps

Although recent research has made important progress, several gaps remain in understanding how group membership shapes young children's prosocial behavior. First, future work needs to examine a wider range of social groups. Children interact with groups that differ in many ways, such as familiar versus unfamiliar, personally meaningful versus less relevant, positively versus negatively viewed, and groups perceived as fixed and "natural" versus those seen as flexible. To better understand how these distinctions shape behavior, it will be important to more directly study prosocial behavior toward real-world groups such as racial and ethnic groups[19]. Second, much of our current evidence comes from Western, industrialized societies. Studies with children from diverse cultural settings, varying in how much they value group loyalty, fairness, reputation, and cooperation, are essential for understanding which patterns are universal and which depend on social norms[50]. Third, most developmental work has focused on sharing tasks. A fuller picture requires comparing multiple types of prosocial action, such as helping, cooperating on joint goals, and enforcing rules in group-relevant ways. Finally, systematic comparisons across age groups are needed to clarify how biases change over development and how early predispositions interact with children's experiences in families, schools, and communities. Together, these directions will help explain not only when group biases emerge, but also how they can be reduced.

Conclusions

Despite ongoing questions, a clear picture is emerging regarding young children's prosociality in intergroup contexts. From a young age, children do not treat all others equally. They often act more kindly and generously toward members of their own group, even when group boundaries are newly created, and may at times behave unfairly toward children from other groups. In that sense, children are not simply selfish, but rather "group-minded". Multiple developmental processes contribute to these tendencies, including children's growing sense of belonging to social groups, their beliefs about who will return favors, and their concern for how others view them. At the same time, children's fairness concerns and responses to others' needs can limit or override group preferences. Although such early biases align with evolutionary perspectives on human cooperation, cultural environments play a powerful role in shaping whether these tendencies are strengthened or reduced. Societies define which group distinctions matter, how important loyalty is, and what counts as fair or cooperative behavior. Thus, children's prosocial biases are not fixed, but develop in response to the social worlds they inhabit.

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 for how 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 social identification, expectations of reciprocity, and reputation onto a much broader social circle.

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