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, and develop biased attitudes, and firm beliefs about them. 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. 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?
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. 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.

**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. Lastly, biased
altruism towards the ingroup and spiteful behaviour towards the outgroup emerged simultaneously, but only around adolescence. 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. Similar findings were found with a third-party distribution task among 3.5-year-olds.

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. 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. Similar results, with a compatible effect for gender, were recently demonstrated among 8-year olds while distributing positively and negatively valenced resources.

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. Consistent with this notion, subtle reminders of affiliative social relations, or being mimicked by another person, increased helping behaviour in 18-month-olds. 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. 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.

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. 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
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, variable in their normative endorsement of prosocial behaviour, importance of reputation, and centrality of group identity. 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


