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Cheating in the name of others: Offering prosocial justifications promotes unethical behavior in young children



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ABSTRACT

The current research examined whether young children engage in unethical behavior to a greater extent when they have a prosocial justification for doing so. Participants (3- and 5-year-olds, $N = 240$) played a guessing game in which they were tempted to cheat to win a prize after promising not to do so. In Study 1, children were randomly assigned to either an experimental *prosocial* condition in which they were told that the prize would be given to a child who was unable to play the game or a *control* condition in which they were told that they would get to keep the prize for themselves. The 5-year-olds, but not the 3-year-olds, were more likely to cheat in the prosocial condition than in the control condition. Studies 2a and 2b revealed that older children's tendency to engage in prosocial cheating was driven by their concern with signaling to others that they are prosocial. These findings suggest that the tendency to act unethically to benefit others emerges early in development and that this tendency may reflect children's interest in prosocial signaling.

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Introduction

Cheating is typically a selfish behavior in which, by acting dishonestly, people obtain things they could not obtain when playing by the rules. However, some forms of cheating may be seen as having positive consequences for others (Wiltermuth, 2011), and there is evidence that adults are more willing to engage in unethical behavior when it can be justified in terms of serving goals that are viewed as morally positive such as gaining benefits for others (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013; Wiltermuth, 2011). The current research examined whether any such tendencies to behave unethically in the presence of prosocial justifications are also present early in development.

Whether young children would be willing to cheat if only others would benefit is an open question. It is possible that they would not be willing to do so given that they often put their own interests above those of others (Buckley, Siegel, & Ness, 1979; LoBue, Nishida, Chiong, DeLoache, & Haidt, 2011; Sheskin, Bloom, & Wynn, 2014; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). For example, 3- to 5-year-olds react negatively when they receive less of a desirable gift than their peers (LoBue et al., 2011). In addition, 5- and 6-year-olds, unlike older children, will give up resources to ensure that they have a relative advantage over others (Sheskin et al., 2014). Alternatively, young children may be willing to cheat to benefit others because they see helping as a justifiable reason to commit transgressions or because by doing so they can signal to others that they are prosocial.

In the current research, we examined whether 3- and 5-year-old children would be willing to break a promise not to cheat when doing so could benefit another child. Addressing this issue has the potential to shed light on assertions that people commit transgressions when the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs (Allingham & Sandmo, 1972; Becker, 1968; Hill & Kochendorfer, 1969; Loewenstein, Thompson, & Bazerman, 1989; Michaels & Miethe, 1989).

To assess cheating behavior, we made use of a peeking paradigm that has been widely used in previous research (e.g., Ding et al., 2014; Evans, O'Connor, & Lee, 2018; Fu, Heyman, Qian, Guo, & Lee, 2016; Heyman, Fu, Lin, Qian, & Lee, 2015; Talwar & Lee, 2002; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002; Zhao, Heyman, Chen, & Lee, 2017, 2018). In this paradigm, children are given the opportunity to win a prize in a guessing game where they are asked to promise not to cheat but must cheat nevertheless if they want to win. Cheating is defined as any form of obvious peeking, as recorded by a hidden camera.

We randomly assigned children to either an experimental *prosocial* condition in which they were told that another child would receive the prize or a *control* condition in which they were told that they themselves would receive the prize. Of interest was whether they would be more willing to engage in cheating that benefits others or for their own benefit. Based on existing, albeit limited, findings regarding young children's use of cheating for personal gain (e.g., Evans et al., 2018; Fu et al., 2016; Heyman et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2017, 2018), we hypothesized that both 3- and 5-year-olds would cheat for their own benefit. Given the evidence of increased prosocial behavior at around 5 or 6 years of age (see Shaw, Descioli, & Olson, 2012; Shaw & Olson, 2012; and Takagishi, Kameshima, Schug, Koizumi, & Yamagishi, 2010, for evidence regarding fairness), we also hypothesized that 5-year-olds would be more likely than 3-year-olds to cheat for another child.

Study 1

Participants (3- and 5-year-old children) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions that were identical except for what children were told about the fate of any prizes that might be won. In the experimental *prosocial* condition children were informed that another child who was unable to play the game would get the prize, and in the *control* condition children were informed that they themselves would get the prize. Of interest was whether children would be willing to cheat in the prosocial condition and whether they would cheat more than their counterparts in the control condition.

Method

Participants

We tested 160 children, with 40 in each combination of condition by age group, a number that was predetermined based on prior work using the peeking paradigm, including Fu et al. (2016), Heyman

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