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Brief Report

Enhancing behavioral control increases sharing in children



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ABSTRACT

Young children endorse norms of fairness but rarely act on them. We investigated whether a failure of behavioral control can partially explain why children do not share more generously than they do. We experimentally manipulated behavioral control and observed its effects on sharing in 120 children aged 6–9 years of age. Using a between-participants design, we presented children with stories in which a protagonist either exerted behavioral control in an unrelated context or not. Following this, children engaged in a sharing task. We found that children who had been read a story promoting behavioral control shared more than children who had been read a neutral story. This effect held over two different types of instruction. Perceptions of fairness, on the other hand, were identical across conditions. These findings speak to the importance of behavioral control in prosocial behavior, and specifically sharing, during middle childhood.

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Introduction

Prosocial behavior is crucial for initiating and sustaining interpersonal relationships (Over, 2016; Steinbeis, Bernhardt, & Singer, 2012). Children help (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), share with (Benenson, Pascoe, & Radmore, 2007; Harbaugh, Liday, & Krause, 2003; House et al., 2013; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011) and comfort others (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992)

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from early in development. Whereas the occurrence of prosocial behavior early in development is uncontested, there is much less agreement regarding its underlying mechanisms. This is a crucial topic for empirical research because if we can understand the mechanisms that influence prosocial behavior, then we can help to support and encourage its development. It has been shown that mechanisms underlying prosocial behavior early in development do not necessarily correlate with those later in development (Paulus et al., 2015) and that individual differences in various types of prosocial behavior (i.e. helping, sharing and comforting) do not correlate with each other (Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011). This suggests a potential multitude of different mechanisms operating in support of prosocial behavior throughout development. Here we focused on the role of behavioral control as a potential mechanism underlying sharing during middle childhood, an age when children reliably show sharing behavior (Benenson et al., 2007; Blake, Piovesan, Montinari, Warneken, & Gino, 2015; Smith, Blake, & Harris, 2013).

When considering the development of prosociality, it is necessary to consider both children's knowledge about social norms and their actual behavior (Blake, McAuliffe, & Warneken, 2014). Previous research has shown that children demonstrate sensitivity toward fair (equal) distributions from around 16 months of age (Geraci & Surian, 2011). From at least 3 years of age, children explicitly endorse fairness norms, stating that they ought to share equally (Smith et al., 2013). Infants also engage in some sharing behavior themselves, but they typically share considerably less than half of the resources they have available (Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011). Sharing of valuable resources, such as sweets and stickers, undergoes considerable development from then onward, increasing with age (Benenson et al., 2007; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Harbaugh et al., 2003; House et al., 2013) and taking several years until it conforms to explicitly held norms regarding how much should be shared (Smith et al., 2013). Thus, there is an interesting discrepancy between the very early onset of fairness sensitivities during infancy and the much later development of acting in accordance with ideas of fairness. This so-called knowledge–behavior gap has been argued to decrease with age (Smith et al., 2013). This leaves us with an important question: Why do children not share more generously than they do?

One important candidate for enabling children to share more generously and align their behavior with explicitly endorsed norms is behavioral control (Steinbeis, 2016; Steinbeis et al., 2012). Especially when resources are valuable, behavioral control could allow children to curb the temptation to keep more for themselves than is dictated by their stated fairness norm. Behavioral control refers to the ability to align behavior with one's goals (Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Miller & Cohen, 2001). It comprises the control of both thoughts and actions and is thus closely related to the concept of self-regulation (Rothbart, Sheese, Rueda, & Posner, 2011). Sharing has been shown to correlate with independent measures of behavioral control (Blake et al., 2015), which would predispose such a mechanism to aligning behavior and goals. The evidence however is contradictory. In a recent study children aged 3–8 years stated that they themselves should share equally but failed to engage in equal sharing until around age 7 or 8 years (Smith et al., 2013). A concomitantly acquired experimental task of behavioral control (i.e., bear–dragon task) failed to explain this behavioral discrepancy. As a result, it was concluded that increasing willpower and behavioral control were not responsible for closing the knowledge–behavior gap (Blake et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013). More recently, however, it was shown that other measures of behavioral control (i.e., parental questionnaires of self-regulation) could account for age-related changes in closing the knowledge–behavior gap (Blake et al., 2015). These discrepancies in previous research might be due, in large part, to different methodologies employed and the use of correlational rather than experimental research designs. We sought to provide an experimental test of the relationship between behavioral control and sharing behavior through an experimental manipulation.

Behavioral control is not easy to manipulate in laboratory settings (hence the dearth of experimental research on this topic). Priming paradigms offer a potential solution to this problem. By randomly assigning children to hear content that activates the mental representation of interest, in this case behavioral control, researchers can gain understanding of the role it plays in determining a particular social behavior (Stupica & Cassidy, 2014). Previous research has shown that social priming can influence children's eating behavior (Harris, Bargh, & Brownell, 2009), emotional responses (Cortez & Bugental, 1995), and self concept (Bryant-Tuckett & Silverman, 1984). More recent research has shown that goal priming influences children's tendency to wait for a large reward or to choose an

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