Journal of Experimental Child Psychology 150 (2016) 16–30

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp

Children's evaluation of public and private generosity and its relation to behavior: Evidence from China

Gail D. Heyman [a,b,*], Genyue Fu [c], David Barner [b], Hu Zhishan [a], Lixia Zhou [a], Kang Lee [a,d]

[a] Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang 321004, China
[b] University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA
[c] Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang 311121, China
[d] University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5R 2X2, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 31 May 2015
Revised 19 April 2016

Keywords:
Child attitudes
Social cognition
Reputation
Impression management
Age differences
Social behavior

ABSTRACT

This research examined children's evaluation of public and private prosocial giving and whether such evaluation would predict actual behavior. We tested children between 6 and 12 years old (N = 192) in China, where children are socialized not to call positive attention to themselves. In Study 1, a significant age-related change was found; younger children evaluated public acts of prosocial giving more favorably than private acts, whereas older children showed the opposite pattern. Study 2 not only replicated the findings of Study 1 but also showed that children's evaluation of public versus private giving predicted their actual behavior in communicating about their own prosocial giving. These findings are the first to show that age-related changes in children's understanding of generosity predict reputation management behavior.

Introduction

Humans are fundamentally social beings who care deeply about how they are viewed by others. One way individuals can enhance how they are viewed is by giving to others as a means to

* Corresponding author at: University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA.
E-mail address: gheyman@ucsd.edu (G.D. Heyman).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2016.05.001
0022-0965/

demonstrate their altruistic tendencies (Pfuhl, Haghish, & Biegler, 2013). Because generous gifts can be costly, individuals may seek to maximize the reputational gains of giving by making their acts known to others. However, this strategy carries risks; if an act of giving is perceived as a transparent effort to manipulate the giver's reputation, it may be discounted, which can lead to negative evaluations (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013; Pfuhl et al., 2013).

Recent research provides evidence of audience effects on children's behavior (Shaw et al., 2014; Takagishi et al., 2015). Children as young as 5 years steal, cheat, and lie less often and share more often when someone is watching than when they are alone (Engelmann, Herrmann, & Tomasello, 2012; Fu, Evans, Xu, & Lee, 2012; Piazza, Bering, & Ingram, 2011; see also Bucciol & Piovesan, 2011). Five-year-olds are also more generous when recipients are visible than when they are not (Leimgruber, Shaw, Santos, & Olson, 2012) and when recipients are in a position to reciprocate later (Engelmann, Over, Herrmann, & Tomasello, 2013). When children believe that they have a good reputation among their peers, they are less likely to cheat in order to win a desirable prize (Fu, Heyman, Qian, Guo, Lee, 2016). Additional research suggests that young children also have some awareness of the ways that people can strategically communicate based on the characteristics of their audience (Banerjee, 2002; Gee & Heyman, 2007). For example, 6-year-olds have some appreciation that a child moving into a new neighborhood might have more social success by describing himself or herself in a way that takes into account audience preferences.

Heyman, Barner, Heumann, and Schenck (2014) examined whether U.S. children's reasoning about reputation and generosity changes over time by comparing their evaluation of individuals who intentionally give publicly (so that others can witness their generosity) with their evaluation of individuals who intentionally give privately (so that their generosity is clearly not motivated by a desire to enhance reputation). This logic was based on the framework of Kelly (1973), according to which the role of one cause in producing a particular effect should be discounted when other plausible causes are also present (see also Miller & Aloise, 1990). Thus, the attribution of generosity should be discounted when giving is done in public, where the giving behavior might be motivated not only by a desire to benefit the recipient but also by the desire to enhance one's own reputation. Thus, giving in public can undermine the very information that the giver is attempting to convey (i.e., generosity; see Berman, Levine, Barasch, & Small, 2015, for a related argument about the effects of bragging about generosity).

Heyman and colleagues (2014) found that, in contrast to the reasoning of older children and adults, children younger than 8 years tended to infer that people who give publicly and seek approval for their generosity should be given more credit than people who give privately. In that study, younger participants (ages 6 and 7 years) and older participants (ages 9 and 10 years) were asked to judge the generosity of children who offered a gift to a needy peer. The key contrast concerned whether the giver offered the gift in the presence of an audience of classmates (consistent with an effort to enhance one's reputation) or offered the gift privately (inconsistent with an effort to enhance one's reputation). Older children showed an adult-like pattern in which they judged the private giver to be nicer. In addition, more than 80% of the older children justified their responses with reference to the giver's desire to create a favorable impression. For example, one older child justified his preference for private givers by saying that the private giver "gave it without being a show-off." In contrast, the predominant pattern observed in younger children was to rate public givers as nicer than private givers. Younger children often justified these ratings in terms of the public giver's desire to create a favorable impression, with many appearing to equate niceness with concern for one's social reputation. For example, one younger child explained that the public giver was nicer because he "wanted to show his friends he was a good person." This result, as well as similar results from earlier studies (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1970; Butzin & Dozier, 1986; Karniol & Ross, 1976; Leahy, 1979), suggests that for older children, but not younger ones, ulterior motives raise questions about the presence of prosocial motives.

Why is it the case that younger children believe that those who give in public are more generous than those who give in private? One reason may be that younger children have particular difficulty in understanding the implications of ulterior motives due to domain-general cognitive constraints. For example, young children may find it difficult to spontaneously infer that people who give publicly could be motivated by a desire for self-promotion but may still understand the implications of the