



Do young children accept responsibility for the negative actions of ingroup members?



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether young children accept responsibility for the negative actions of ingroup members. Five-year-old children watched a transgressor break someone else's valued possession. Depending on condition, this transgressor either belonged to the same group as the child or a different group from the child. Coding of children's non-verbal behaviour indicated that they displayed more signs of guilt (but not other negative emotions) when the transgressor belonged to their own group than the other group. Furthermore, when the transgressor belonged to their own group, children were more likely to say that their own group should apologise for the damage and that they themselves should try to repair the broken object. Children's connections to their groups are thus so profound that they appear to feel responsible for the negative actions of their group members even when they had no personal involvement in the harm those actions caused.

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1. Introduction

Human evolution has been marked by an ever-increasing dependence of individuals on one another, from cooperative foraging to group defence (Boyd, Richerson, & Henrich, 2011; Brewer, 2007; Tomasello, Melis, Tennie, Wyman, & Herrmann, 2012). As a result of this dependence, individuals feel profound connections to their social groups. These connections are so powerful that individuals are often willing to make phenomenal sacrifices for their group members, sometimes even being willing to give up their own lives to protect them (Swann, Gomez, Dovidio, Hart, & Jetten, 2010). Humans' connections to their social groups also have a darker side, however, as they can lead to prejudice and discrimination against members of other groups.

The depth of our connections to our social groups is shown very strikingly in emotions such as collective pride and collective guilt. Pride and guilt are typically thought of as responses to individuals' own actions (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005). The experience of guilt, for example, is often conceptualized as an aversive emotion that follows the realization that one has harmed another person or the group (Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Research in social psychology, however, has demonstrated that we sometimes report feeling guilty for the negative actions of our ingroup members when we played no personal role in the harm those actions brought about.

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An important consequence of guilt is that it leads us to accept responsibility and, in doing so, seek to compensate for the damage that has been caused (de Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2007; Ketelaar & Au, 2003; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, *in press*). Testing the consequences of collective guilt, Doosje, Branscombe, Spears and Manstead (1998) asked Dutch adults to read either an unfavourable description of their country's imperial past (emphasising the bloodshed in Indonesia and exploitation of labour) or a favourable description of this period (emphasising the education and infrastructure the Dutch brought to the area). Participants who heard the unfavourable information subsequently tended to more strongly endorse items measuring the extent to which they thought they and the Dutch government ought to compensate the Indonesians for the effects of colonialism.

Accepting responsibility and seeking to compensate for the negative actions of ingroup members is thought to serve important functions in human social life. For example, doing so can reduce the probability that the victims will retaliate against the individual who accepts responsibility, or against that individual's group (Lickel, Schmader, & Barquissau, 2004). It can thus reduce the likelihood that intergroup conflict will escalate to dangerous levels (Boehm, 1984). It may, therefore, allow for the regulation of group life in a similar way that the acceptance of personal responsibility for one's own wrongdoing allows for the regulation of more intimate relationships (Lickel et al., 2004).

Despite the importance of collective responsibility to our understanding of human social life, relatively little is known about this phenomenon in young children. Certainly, the origins of intergroup bias appear very early in development. Even infants prefer to learn and take toys from individuals who speak their own language than from individuals who speak a different language (Buttelmann, Zmyj, Daum, & Carpenter, 2013; Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007). Older children are able to accurately categorise themselves as belonging to some groups and not others (e.g., Aboud, 1987, 2001; Bennett & Sani, 2008) and explicitly prefer members of their own group, even when those groups are artificially created in the lab (e.g., Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011).

The developmental foundations of collective responsibility, however, have not yet been widely investigated. What is reasonably well established is that by around the age of two or three years, children tend to accept responsibility for damage they have caused themselves and try to repair it (e.g., Barrett, Zahn-Waxler, & Cole, 1993; Kochanska, Gross, Lin, & Nichols, 2002; Vaish et al., *in press*). However, to our knowledge, only one study so far has investigated children's tendency to accept *collective* responsibility. Bennett and Sani (2008) mention a study that was designed to test whether children accept responsibility for the negative actions of their ingroup members. The authors asked 5-, 7- and 9-year-old children to imagine a scenario in which either they themselves or someone else from their school broke a window at another school. Results showed that the 7- and 9-year-old children reported that they would want to apologise in both cases. Five-year-olds, on the other hand, reported that they would only want to apologise when they themselves had broken the window. Although these results are suggestive, they are difficult to interpret for two reasons. First, the argument that older children accept collective responsibility is based on a null result – these children's responses did not differ when they were asked about themselves and when they were asked about an ingroup member. Second, and relatedly, in order to make the argument that children accept responsibility for the actions of their ingroup members, it is critical to show not only that they accept responsibility for their ingroup members' negative actions but also that they accept responsibility more often for the negative actions of ingroup members than for the negative actions of outgroup members. Bennett and Sani's results leave open the possibility that the older children did not accept collective responsibility for ingroup member's actions, but rather that they had learned to apologise more often and in more situations than younger children regardless of who performed the negative action.

In the present study, we built on this previous research in order to investigate whether children are more likely to accept responsibility for the negative actions of ingroup members than for the negative actions of outgroup members. In order to do this, we created a scenario in which a valued object was broken either by the child's ingroup member or the child's outgroup member. We then investigated children's acceptance of collective responsibility through a number of different measures. First, we coded children's displays of emotion. We predicted that children would display more signs of guilt when the valued object had been broken by an ingroup member. In order to ensure that the effects were specific to guilt, we also coded children's displays of other negative emotions, more specifically, embarrassment, sadness and fear. We predicted that displays of these other negative emotions would not differ between conditions. Next, we asked children two explicit questions relating to repairing the damage caused by the negative event. The first question we asked children was who should apologise for the negative event – their own group or the other group. This question was designed to check whether children understood the general situation and were able to answer questions about group level responsibility. We predicted that children would be significantly more likely to answer that their own group should apologise when the object was broken by an ingroup member. The second question we asked children was who should try to repair the broken object, themselves or an individual from the other group. This second question was an important addition because neither individual actually broke the object. We predicted that children would report that they themselves ought to repair the object more often when it was broken by an ingroup member than an outgroup member. Finally, we also investigated whether children would be more likely to spontaneously try to repair the object when it had been broken by a member of their own group.

We chose to investigate these questions with five-year-old children rather than the somewhat older children who showed signs of collective responsibility in Bennett and Sani's (2008) study. We reasoned that, by creating a situation in which a valued object was actually broken, rather than using a hypothetical scenario, we might be able to detect signs of collective responsibility even in these younger children. Many of the pre-requisites for collective responsibility seem to be in place by five years of age: we know from previous research that children of this age categorise themselves as belonging to some groups and not others (Aboud, 2001) and that they are sensitive to even artificially created groups (e.g., Dunham et al., 2011; Nesdale

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