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Brief Report

Memories of good deeds past: The reinforcing power of prosocial behavior in children



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ABSTRACT

Does considering one's past prosociality affect future behavior? Prior research has revealed instances in which adults engage in additional prosocial behavior—moral reinforcement—as well as instances in which adults engage in worse behavior—moral licensing. The current study examined the developmental origins of these effects by testing whether 6- to 8-year-old children ($N = 225$) are more or less generous after recalling their own good deeds. Children were asked to recount a time when they were nice, were mean, or watched a movie. Children behaved more generously after recalling a time when they were nice. We show that this boost in generosity was not simply the result of instructing children to consider nice behavior; children's giving did not increase after recalling others' good deeds. We also show that, even after recounting multiple instances of their past goodness, children continue to behave more generously. These findings suggest that doing good leads to more good in children.

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Introduction

During recent years, the question of why people behave prosocially has been of much interest to psychologists; indeed, a burgeoning literature has investigated the role of one's past good deeds in promoting future good deeds. A number of studies have demonstrated that instructing adults to

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recount their prior good deeds increases their subsequent prosocial behavior, an effect known as *moral reinforcement* (Nelson & Norton, 2005; Stone & Cooper, 2001; Young, Chakroff, & Tom, 2012). These studies suggest that reflecting on one's past positive behavior leads to further positive behavior, perhaps because people perceive themselves as "do-gooders". However, a parallel line of research has uncovered instances of *moral licensing*; in some cases, adults feel licensed to behave badly when reminded of their previous good deeds (Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva, Ilic, & Medin, 2009). Specifically, this work indicates that people show less moral striving after they confirm their goodness through recalling past good deeds. Several accounts have been offered for when and why reinforcement versus licensing occurs (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Cornelissen, Bashshur, Rode, & Le Menestrel, 2013; Gneezy, Imas, Brown, Nelson, & Norton, 2012; Mullen & Monin, 2016), but surprisingly little is known about the developmental origins of these effects.

The study of children provides an important window into this debate for several reasons. As previous researchers have argued, understanding children's behavior could constrain theorizing concerning adults' behavior (Dunham & Olson, 2008; Olson & Dunham, 2010). Moreover, work in this domain has important, everyday implications. Understanding how children behave after recalling their past good deeds will not only contribute to current theorizing and research but also inform approaches for eliciting moral behavior from an early age.

Is there any reason why children would behave more or less generously after recalling past good deeds? Previous research indicates that children actively manage their moral identities (Bryan, Master, & Walton, 2014). In particular, children were introduced to the idea of "being a helper" or "helping" following previous work documenting that a noun wording (e.g., helper) compared with a verb wording (e.g., helping) invokes a person's identity (Gelman & Heyman, 1999; Walton & Banaji, 2004). In this research, activating children's moral identity by exposing them to the idea of "being a helper" led to greater moral motivation. Given these findings, it may be that reflecting on one's past good deeds leads children to perceive themselves as do-gooders, as has been argued with adults, which in turn motivates them to behave more generously. Alternatively, children may behave more selfishly after reflecting on their past good deeds and the "moral currency" they have accrued over the years. From an early age, children routinely engage in positive behaviors. For example, during the first few years of life, children share their toys (Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011) and help others to achieve their goals (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). Given the early emergence of human prosociality, it may be that individual children are able to reflect on the moral credit they have gained, feel confident in their moral goodness, and consequently use their past good deeds to justify selfish behavior, as in previous work in adults (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010).

Here, we focused on 6- to 8-year-olds given that children of these ages show flexibility in their moral behavior. For example, children between the ages of 6 and 8 voluntarily incur costs to avoid unfairness (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Shaw & Olson, 2012), yet they will behave unfairly when no one is watching (Shaw et al., 2014). Thus, 6- to 8-year-olds are motivated to do good but are willing to do otherwise if given the opportunity, inviting the question of whether children at this age engage in additional good behavior or bad behavior after reflecting on their past prosociality.

The current study

In the current study, children were assigned to one of five conditions. One of these conditions (*baseline*) served as a baseline measure of children's generosity, in which children were asked to recount a time in the past when they watched a movie. Three of these conditions, in which children were instructed to recall moral memories, served as key tests of our hypotheses; children were asked to recall (a) a time when they were nice to someone (*nice*), (b) a time when they were mean to someone (*mean*), or (c) three different times when they were nice to someone (*moral credit*). We included the moral credit condition following work in adults showing that people behave particularly stingily after they accrue a surplus of moral credit (Merritt et al., 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010). Thus, if children were to show effects of moral licensing, then they should be especially likely to do so in the moral credit condition because they would accumulate three times the amount of moral credit as in the nice condition. Finally, we included a condition in which children were asked to recount a time in the past

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