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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

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

Feel good, do good? Subjective well-being and sharing behavior among children

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 October 2017

Revised 16 August 2018

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Prosocial behavior development

Subjective well-being

Sharing behavior

Children's decision making

Dictator game

Perceived obligation

ABSTRACT

The current study examined the association between children's subjective well-being (SWB) and their sharing behavior. School children (second and fifth graders) were interviewed in private and had an opportunity to share candy with a recipient under one of two between-participants conditions: Perceived-High Obligation (a recipient in poverty) and Perceived-Low Obligation (a temporarily needy recipient). Results provide initial evidence of an increased association between SWB and sharing decisions with age; whereas SWB was not significantly correlated with the incidence of sharing by younger children (second graders), it was a positive predictor of sharing behavior among fifth graders. Manipulating the perceived obligation to share (by emphasizing the causes beyond the recipient's need), we found that higher levels of SWB were linked to sharing only in the Perceived-Low Obligation condition. Children with lower SWB behaved as expected by the norm and shared to a similar degree as children with higher SWB when sharing felt obligatory. However, when sharing was less obligatory, higher levels of SWB were linked to higher levels of sharing.

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Introduction

The popular phrase “Be good, do good” may reflect our intuitive belief that doing good is linked to feeling good. Indeed, the nature of this link between people’s subjective well-being (SWB) and prosociality has been extensively studied by researchers during the past decade in an effort to establish its nature and the conditions in which it exists.

Subjective well-being, or a similar concept such as happiness or life satisfaction, is defined as “a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life” (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002, p. 63). Research into the link between SWB and prosocial behavior among adults suggests that happy people are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior (e.g., Aknin, Dunn, & Norton, 2012; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). For example, Aknin et al. (2013) examined the correlation between charitable giving and happiness in 136 countries. In 120 of these countries, they found a positive correlation between giving and happiness—even when controlling for income and other demographic variables. Similarly, in their longitudinal study of volunteering behavior (as opposed to monetary donations), Thoits and Hewitt (2001) found that people with higher levels of SWB spend more time volunteering. In their study, they found that the inverse association was also true—namely, that volunteering enhances well-being over time. Many researchers describe the associations between SWB and prosociality as a virtuous circle; happy people engage more in prosocial behaviors, and doing good deeds enhances their well-being. For example, Meier and Stutzer (2008) and Plagnol and Huppert (2010) found such an association in experimental and correlational studies, respectively, in the context of volunteering behavior. Aknin et al. (2012) found it too in an experimental context of monetary spending; namely, prosocial spending increased happiness, which in turn encouraged future prosocial spending.

Although this literature offers convincing evidence of a bilateral link between SWB and prosociality among adults in various behaviors, the question as to whether or not this association also exists among children (and, if so, the age at which it emerges) has not yet been examined despite extensive research into the development of prosocial behavior in children.

In the following sections, we describe the developmental pattern of prosociality in children and the main factors involved, children’s motivations to help, and the possible associations between these and children’s SWB.

The development of prosociality in children

Research during recent decades has suggested that behavior in aid of others appears even in infants and toddlers (e.g., Liszkowski, 2005; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2007). For example, children under 2 years of age show concern when someone appears to be upset or in pain (e.g., Nichols, Svetlova, & Brownell, 2009) and voluntarily share food and toys with others (Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O’Connell, & Kelley, 2011), although there are important open questions about the nature of the motivations for these behaviors (e.g., Carpendale, Kettner, & Audet, 2015). However, when it comes to sharing valuable resources with another at a cost to themselves, even children between 3 and 6 years of age are relatively selfish and the proportion of children who share resources with others increases with age (e.g., Blake & Rand, 2010; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008). Although research on third-party allocations has shown that children as young as preschool age are aware of the social norm that resources should be shared equally (e.g., Rakoczy, Kaufmann, & Lohse, 2016), when given the chance to do so with someone else, young children may share some of their endowment yet still favor themselves in their allocations—until around 7 years of age (Benenson, Pascoe, & Radmore, 2007; Kogut, 2012; Smith, Blake, & Harris, 2013).

At around 8 years of age, children not only are concerned with being fair but also exhibit greater understanding and sensitivity to ulterior motives through fairness and sharing behaviors (e.g., a desire to appear fair to others: Shaw et al., 2014; the giver’s reputation: Heyman, Barner, Heumann, & Schenck, 2014). This understanding increases with age and represents an important developmental transition that occurs between 8 and 10 years of age in children’s motivations, reasoning, and judgments of prosocial behaviors.

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