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Preschoolers' group bias in punishing selfishness in the Ultimatum Game



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that both adults and children tend to favor members of their own group and expect reciprocity of such in-group privilege. If a person is treated unfairly by an in-group member, a conflict arises between the tendency of in-group favoritism and the desire to punish violators of in-group norms. How do children solve the conflict at different points in development? We compared how preschoolers punished in-group and out-group members (marked by color preference) for selfishness in the Ultimatum Game. We found that (a) 3- to 6-year-old Chinese children rejected selfish allocations more often than fair ones, showing a robust preference for fairness; (b) 3- and 4-year-olds showed no group differences in their punishment behavior, suggesting that second-party punishment of selfishness is not biased during early childhood; (c) 5- and 6-year-old girls were more likely to punish selfishness of in-groups than of out-groups, illuminating an early sign of maintaining group-based fairness norms even at a personal cost; and (d) 5- and 6-year-old boys, however, punished in-groups and out-groups equally often and punished out-groups more often than did girls. These age and gender differences in children's punishment imply that socialization may play an important role in showing group bias when enforcing fairness norms.

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Introduction

Groups are vital to social life. When group membership is identified, people usually tend to have positive preferences and attitudes toward their in-groups. This pattern of *in-group favoritism* underlies most forms of intergroup bias (Balliet, Wu, & De Dreu, 2014; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; McAuliffe & Dunham, 2016). In addition to favoring in-groups, people may also expect reciprocity of such preferential treatment (McLeish & Oxoby, 2011; Mendoza, Lane, & Amodio, 2014; Yamagishi, Jin, & Kiyonari, 1999). An intriguing question thus arises: If people are treated unfairly by an in-group member, what will they do? Are people more tolerant of in-group members' selfishness because of in-group favoritism or less tolerant due to the violation of expectation?

Two hypotheses have been proposed to answer the above questions: the mere preference hypothesis and the norms-focused hypothesis (McAuliffe & Dunham, 2016). The mere preference hypothesis argues that individuals usually value things that are linked to the self in a positive and distinctive way. As the social identity theory posits, people are motivated to maintain a positive self-identity, including social identity with the group with which they are associated; therefore, they are motivated to positively evaluate members from their group (e.g., Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, 1982). Such "in-group attachment and positivity" (Brewer, 2007) may drive one to be more tolerant of an in-group member's selfishness relative to an out-group member's selfishness.

By contrast, the norms-focused hypothesis proposes that within-group interactions are guided by social norms that coordinate individuals' behaviors to maintain group cohesion (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). As stated by the bounded generalized reciprocity model, people typically expect to be favorably treated by in-group members but not by out-group members (Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000; Yamagishi et al., 1999). Children as young as 3 years view people as obligated to in-group members (e.g., being friendly, not causing harm) but not to out-group members (Rhodes & Chalik, 2013). If such an expectation is violated, an in-group member's violation will be highly noticeable and intolerable (McAuliffe & Dunham, 2016). This is in line with studies on the "black sheep effect," which shows that in-group members who violate group norms receive more derogation than out-group members (e.g., Abrams, Palmer, Rutland, Cameron, & Van de Vyver, 2014). Accordingly, one will punish an in-group member for being unfair more harshly than an out-group member.

Studies have started to test these two hypotheses by examining individuals' reactions to unfairness in the Ultimatum Game. The Ultimatum Game is widely used to study the enactment of fairness norms in both children and adults (for a review, see McAuliffe, Blake, Steinbeis, & Warneken, 2017). In this game, a proposer splits resources between himself/herself and a recipient, who then makes decisions about whether to accept or reject the offer. If the recipient accepts it, each player will receive the proposed payout; if the recipient rejects it, both players get nothing. Therefore, rejecting the proposed offer can be viewed as punishing the proposer with a sacrifice to the recipient (if the proposer offers some rather than none). In this sense, the Ultimatum Game is considered as a second-party punishment game. Because the proposer and the recipient can be from the same or different social groups, it provides a social context to examine how children make decisions about fairness during intragroup or intergroup interactions. The Ultimatum Game thus provides an interesting conflict to explore how individuals reconcile their self-interest with a desire for fairness and a tendency for in-group favoritism.

Using the Ultimatum Game, previous research in adults has shown mixed results in supporting the above two hypotheses. Some studies found that adults were more lenient with in-group members' selfishness (Kubota, Li, Bar-David, Banaji, & Phelps, 2013; Valenzuela & Srivastava, 2012). However, others found that adults were more punitive when the *marginally* unfair offers came from in-group members than from out-group members, but no group bias was found for very unfair offers (Mendoza et al., 2014). In addition, adults expected higher offers in the Ultimatum Game from in-group members than from out-group members (McLeish & Oxoby, 2011).

These mixed results suggest tension in adults between in-group favoritism and enforcement of an in-group cooperative norm, which makes the directionality of the group bias fluctuate. These adult responses might be influenced by their extensive group experiences and social cultural processes. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study how children weigh these competing motivations of in-group bias

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