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## Brief Report

# Preschoolers' social experiences and empathy-based responding relate to their fair resource allocation



Markus Paulus<sup>a,\*</sup>, Miriam Leitherer<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 80802 Munich, Germany

<sup>b</sup> State Institute of Early Childhood Research (IFP), 80797 Munich, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Although the development of fairness has become a topic of wide interest, little is known about the correlates and factors that relate to the early ontogeny of fairness-related decision making in preschoolers. The current study assessed 5-year-old children's consideration of existing inequalities in their resource allocation decisions, that is, their tendency to allocate more resources to poor others than to rich others. In addition, children's prosocial responding toward others in pain, the amount of their social interaction experiences, and their social-cognitive abilities were assessed. The results provide evidence that children's early social interaction experiences and empathy-based prosocial responding relate to their fairness-related decision making, supporting a relational systems approach to early prosocial and moral development.

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## Introduction

The question of how to distribute scarce resources is a pivotal aspect of human life. It concerns decisions at a macroscopic level (e.g., social welfare programs) as well as at a personal level (e.g., sharing goods with friends and colleagues). Consequently, the ontogeny of the principles underlying resource allocation decisions has been of great interest for developmental psychology (e.g., Damon,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [markus.paulus@lmu.de](mailto:markus.paulus@lmu.de) (M. Paulus).

1977). One principle that has received considerable attention in the developmental literature across the entire life span concerns the principle of charity. The term *charity*, as used in this article, refers to the extent that people try to rectify inequalities, that is, allocating more resources to poor others than to rich others.

Developmental research has provided converging evidence that charity starts to play a role in children's resource allocation and sharing decisions by 4 or 5 years of age (e.g., Li, Spitzer, & Olson, 2014; Malti et al., 2016; Paulus, 2014; Rizzo & Killen, 2016), although in younger children this aspect might not be very strong and is often overshadowed by other factors (e.g., Elenbaas, Rizzo, Cooley, & Killen, 2016; Kienbaum & Wilkening, 2009; Paulus, 2016). Even though the general developmental trend has been well established, very little is known about the factors that are related to children's emerging charitable resource allocation. This lack of information is unfortunate because knowledge about the correlates of charity could inform us about potential mechanisms underlying charity and could point to factors that may promote its development. Moreover, knowledge about the correlates provides an excellent test case for theories as different approaches make different predictions on the developmental basis of charity. In the following paragraphs, we review relevant theoretical accounts.

One central point concerns empathy-based prosocial responding to others' needs. It has been suggested that people have the ability to share others' emotional states, experience sympathy for them, and act prosocially in order to relieve others (Batson, 2011; Eisenberg, 2000). Indeed, already toddlers show empathy-based prosocial behavior if they witness another person being hurt (e.g., Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013). Thus, one could hypothesize that children's emerging tendency to give more to poor others than to rich others might be related to their empathy-based prosociality.

Another influential account of early prosocial and moral development is the social interactionist or relational developmental systems approach (e.g., Carpendale, Hammond, & Atwood, 2013; Carpendale & Lewis, 2004). According to this approach, prosocial and moral development is fostered by social interactions in which children learn to coordinate their needs with others' needs. More precisely, it is assumed that children articulate their needs and interests (e.g., for equal treatment) in social interactions. To maintain their relationships with each other, children need to acknowledge these aspects in their behavior toward others and, consequently, find solutions to resource allocation problems. Consequently, through social interaction, children progressively acquire more complex principles that guide their resource allocation decisions (cf. Carpendale & Müller, 2004). If this were true, one would predict relations between children's social experiences and their emerging charitable sharing.

From a social-cognitive point of view, several approaches have stressed the impact of perspective-taking skills on the ontogeny of prosocial and moral behavior. Indeed, developmental research provided evidence that children's theory-of-mind (ToM) development is related to their moral judgment (Sodian et al., 2016) and prosocial behavior (Caputi, Lecce, Pagnin, & Banerjee, 2012). Moreover, children's representations of others' perspectives and feelings (which should be differentiated from direct, emotionally based reactions) predict their generosity toward other persons (Paulus & Moore, 2015). Therefore, one could hypothesize that advanced perspective-taking skills might be related to children's charitable sharing.

Finally, social skill theory could provide another useful theoretical framework. From a social problem solving perspective, children's behavior in a resource conflict context could be conceived of as an aspect of more general social problem solving skill. That is, children need to learn how to deal with controversial situations and to find socially acceptable solutions (Merrell & Gimpel, 2014). Indeed, deficits in children's social skills have been related to problematic peer relationships; conversely, social skill trainings have been shown to improve prosocial responding (Merrell & Gimpel, 2014).

Taken together, the different theoretical frameworks allow for different—yet not mutually exclusive—predictions on the developmental correlates on charitable sharing in preschoolers.

### *The current study*

This study tested the predictions derived from these frameworks and examined the correlates of charitable resource allocation decisions in preschool children. To this end, the following variables were assessed. We investigated children's resource allocation behavior by means of a resource allocation paradigm in which children could distribute resources between a poor child and a rich child

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