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Affiliation affects generosity in young children: The roles of minimal group membership and shared interests



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ABSTRACT

Young children's willingness to share with others is selective, and is affected by their level of affiliation with the recipients of their generosity. We explored affiliation's impact on sharing behavior with two experiments comparing the effects of two distinct affiliative cues—minimal group membership and shared interests. Children (4- to 6-year-olds) completed a resource allocation task, making forced-choice decisions as to how to distribute stickers between themselves and others. In Experiment 1, the sharing partners were minimal in- and out-group members; in Experiment 2, they differed in their opinion of the participants' interests. Both experiments' manipulations affected feelings of affiliation, as indicated by children's stated friendship preferences and perceptions of similarity. More notably, both minimal group membership and interests affected sharing behavior. Children made fewer generous allocations toward out-group members than toward in-group members. Similarly, children made fewer generous allocations when recipients disliked their interests than when recipients shared those interests or when their opinions were unknown. Across experiments, the recipient manipulations' effects on generosity were similar in their pattern and magnitude despite fundamental differences between the two affiliative cues. These findings highlight the broad impact of affiliation on young children's sharing behavior.

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Introduction

Sharing is a form of prosocial behavior that plays an important role in children's development and social relationships. A willingness to share resources emerges during toddlers' second year of life (e.g., Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009), with developmental shifts occurring in their sharing behavior into the preschool years and beyond (e.g., Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008). Yet crucially, children's generosity when sharing is selective; among other things, it is affected by characteristics of the sharing partners (see Kuhlmeier, Dunfield, & O'Neill, 2014, for a review). One such characteristic is the degree of affiliation that exists between children and the recipients of their generosity.

A clear demonstration that affiliation affects sharing comes from a study by Moore (2009). When asked to make forced-choice decisions about how to distribute stickers between themselves and another child, 4- to 6-year-old children made more generous allocations toward classmates they identified as friends than toward ones they identified as nonfriends. This was true whether or not there was a cost to making the generous choice (i.e., whether generosity required children to give up a sticker for themselves). This finding has been replicated several times, beginning at age 4 years (e.g., Paulus, Becker, Scheub, & König, 2016; Paulus & Moore, 2014), and the pattern of selective generosity that it reflects speaks to the possibility that sharing plays a role in maintaining existing social relationships.

Yet children's generosity also extends to unknown peers, at least under some circumstances. In Moore's (2009) study, when there was no cost to sharing, children were as generous toward strangers as they were toward friends (although on cost trials strangers were treated like nonfriends). When considering children's interactions with strangers or new acquaintances, Moore noted that cooperative relationships must begin with a positive gesture by one party—for instance, an act of generosity. In that light, children's willingness to share with unknown peers may help them to form productive social bonds.

Notably, however, children might be more inclined to share with some strangers than with others. Children express varying degrees of affiliation toward strangers, with the strength of those feelings being influenced by a range of interpersonal and group-based cues (e.g., Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011; Fawcett & Markson, 2010). However, questions remain as to whether those differences in affiliation lead to differences in children's willingness to share with strangers. Exploring this issue is important for several reasons. On a basic level, it tells us about the factors that shape children's social preferences and biases, providing a window into how children view their social worlds. It provides a strong test of affiliation's effect on sharing, because affiliation toward strangers is not shaped by an existing interpersonal history. In practical terms, understanding the factors that affect children's sharing decisions may help to encourage their generosity in social situations.

In the current study, we focused on two affiliative cues: minimal group membership and shared interests. For our purposes, they offer an interesting contrast; minimal group membership is an arbitrary point of similarity based on randomly assigned, value-neutral teams (Dunham et al., 2011), whereas shared interests are a specific point of common ground (e.g., a favorite toy or game) that might serve as the basis for an interpersonal relationship (Rekalidou & Petrogiannis, 2012). Despite these differences, there are reasons to suspect that both might influence children's sharing behavior.

Group affiliation: Minimal group membership

Group membership appears to be a salient affiliative factor for children, with a recognition of, and preference for, in-group members compared with out-group members emerging from a young age. In one study, 14-month-old infants were more likely to copy an unfamiliar action performed by an in-group member (a speaker of the infants' native language) than by an out-group member (a speaker of a language unknown to the infants) in an imitation task (Buttelmann, Zmyj, Daum, & Carpenter, 2013). As suggested by the authors, these findings indicate that group membership can influence how children learn about the world, with even infants preferentially learning from in-group members. An in-group preference is also seen in young children's sharing behaviors. For example, Fehr et al.

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