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Brief Report

The impact of choice on young children's prosocial motivation



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ABSTRACT

The current study explored how freedom of choice affects preschoolers' prosocial motivation. Children (3- and 5-year-olds) participated in either a choice condition (where they could decide for themselves whether to help or not) or a no-choice condition (where they were instructed to help). Prosocial motivation was subsequently assessed by measuring the amount children helped an absent peer in the face of an attractive alternative game. The 5-year-olds provided with choice helped more than the children not provided with choice, and this effect was stronger for girls than for boys. There was no difference between conditions for the 3-year-olds. These results highlight the importance of choice in young children's prosocial development.

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Introduction

Children display remarkable prosocial tendencies from an early age. The ontogenetic development of such prosocial behavior has now been thoroughly established empirically (for an overview, see [Martin & Olson, 2015](#)). At approximately 14 months of age, infants engage in spontaneous instrumental helping ([Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011](#); [Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2007](#)). By 18 months infants start comforting others in distress ([Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010](#); [Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992](#)), and by 2 years toddlers begin sharing resources ([Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009](#)).

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In the majority of these studies, children could choose freely whether to help or not. Whereas children regularly make such decisions in their daily lives, there are also instances when caregivers instruct them in how to act. For example, a parent might direct a child in how and when to help a peer in need. Children are helpful in multiple contexts, but little is yet known about the effects of such external constraints on children's prosocial behavior.

It has been argued that children's prosocial behavior is in part driven by an intrinsic motivation to help (Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, & McShane, 2006; Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2013; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008; Wynn, 2008). Experimental studies supporting this claim are grounded in an interesting feature of intrinsically motivated behavior, namely that it is undermined by extrinsic rewards (the so-called overjustification effect; Deci, 1971; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). Offering extrinsic rewards in exchange for helping reduced subsequent helping in school-aged children (Fabes, Fultz, Eisenberg, Mayplumlee, & Christopher, 1989) and in toddlers as young as 20 months (Warneken & Tomasello, 2008). This decrease in prosociality suggests that rewards supplant an intrinsic motivation for prosocial behavior. Helping is rewarding in itself, but this inherent satisfaction is lost once rewarded externally.

According to self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is dependent on having the choice to act or not (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b). An individual must perceive oneself as the initiator of one's actions and thus believe one's actions to be self-determined. By this account, choice represents the means by which self-determination is expressed. Several studies have found a positive effect of choice on intrinsic motivation in both adults and children (for a meta-analysis, see Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). For example, school-aged children's motivation for drawing was higher when they were able to choose a drawing game themselves compared with children who were instructed as to what to do by an adult (Swann & Pittman, 1977).

Assuming (a) that children show a general intrinsic inclination for prosocial behavior and (b) that the provision of choice is essential for intrinsic motivation to manifest, one might argue that choice is relevant to children's prosocial drive. Directed helping performed for extrinsic reasons (i.e., following a command) rather than for intrinsic reasons might lose its inherent satisfaction, possibly resulting in diminished prosocial motivation.

An interaction between freedom of choice and motivation can arise only when individuals are aware of their own agency. Therefore, it is crucial to determine to what extent young children understand freedom of choice. Research has shown that children develop a concept of choice early in life. Evidence from observational data indicates that children invoke their freedom of choice with regard to personal matters and that most mothers grant their children choices by 3 years of age (Nucci & Weber, 1995). Furthermore, interview studies suggest that by 4 years children endorse freedom of choice in situations where actions are unconstrained (i.e., not constrained by physical laws), when they observe others' actions (Chernyak, Kushnir, Sullivan, & Wang, 2013), and when they act themselves (Kushnir, Gopnik, Chernyak, Seiver, & Wellman, 2015).

Recent studies extend these findings to the moral domain. Results suggest that preschool-aged children distinguish freely chosen moral behavior from forced moral actions and treat them differently. This sensitivity is apparent when children reflect on their own behavior and when they judge the moral behavior of others. At around 4 years of age, children take choice into account when evaluating observed immoral behavior. Children protest more when they witness an actor transgressing a moral norm by choice compared with when they witness an actor breaking the moral norm under physical constraint (Josephs, Kushnir, Gräfenhain, & Rakoczy, 2016). In addition, 4-year-olds are also sensitive to choice when reflecting on their own moral behavior. In a study by Chernyak and Kushnir (2014), children could choose to act either morally or immorally (choice condition) or were instructed to act morally (no-choice condition). After this manipulation, children were interviewed about their freedom of choice. Only those children who had been provided with choice stressed that it was their decision, again demonstrating awareness of freedom to choose.

Although young children clearly give value to free choice in prosocial behavior, more research is needed to illuminate the effect of having choice on preschoolers' own behavior. Do young children act differently depending on whether their actions were freely chosen or carried out in response to adult instruction? The current study addressed the question of the role of free choice in children's prosocial motivation.

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