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Learning about social category-based obligations

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ABSTRACT

Two studies tested how children ($N = 196$) use a framework theory of the social world to (a) shape their expectations of and (b) guide new learning about social behaviors. In Study 1, when introduced to two novel social groups, children predicted that an agent would preferentially harm members of the other group, be friends with members of their own group, and save members of their own group from harm. In Study 2, 4-year-old children who had been shown evidence of prior inter-group and intra-group interactions predicted that future behaviors would match the evidence they were shown only if the interactions they observed were consistent with their expectations of how members of groups should relate to one another. Thus, children use their framework theory to predict social behaviors and guide new learning about the social world.

1. Introduction

To navigate the world, children must observe, interpret, and make use of evidence across a range of domains. They do so by identifying the causal-explanatory mechanisms that produce events in their environment, and organizing these mechanisms into abstract theories—known as framework theories—that can be used to apply existing knowledge to novel events (Gopnik & Wellman, 2012; Wellman & Gelman, 1992). For example, children use a framework theory of biology to specify biological inheritance as the causal mechanism that makes animals hold the properties that they do; a child can thus infer that if one animal has a dangerous property—a bee with a stinger, for example—then other animals of the same type, who have biologically inherited that same property, will also be dangerous. These theories are domain-specific; when considering an object in a different domain, such as an artifact, children cannot focus on biological processes as causal mechanisms. Instead, to understand an artifact, they might appeal to a theory of psychology, by which the mental state of the artifact's creator is the causal force that gives rise to the artifact's properties (e.g., a fork has prongs because the person who made the fork wants to use it to pick up food). Critically, all of these theories guide children's attention to the causal mechanisms that act in the world, allowing children to focus on information that they can use to facilitate predictions and learning.

Children also hold framework theories about the structure of the social world, by which they attend to the causal mechanisms that guide human behavior in social contexts (Gelman, 2003; Hirschfeld, 1996; Rhodes, 2013). Quite early in childhood, children use such a theory to specify social obligation as a causal mechanism that constrains social relationships and interaction (Chalik & Rhodes, 2014; Rhodes, 2012, 2013; Rhodes, Hetherington, Brink, & Wellman, 2015; Shutts, Pemberton Roben, & Spelke, 2013). As evidence for this proposal, Rhodes and Chalik (2013) found that, by age 4, children viewed people as intrinsically obligated not to harm members of their own social groups (and thus evaluated instances of such harm negatively in all contexts), but did not view people as

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intrinsically obligated not to harm members of other groups (and thus they evaluated instances of intergroup harm more leniently when they were told that there were no rules in place prohibiting the specific harmful actions). Furthermore, as early as age 3 and across childhood, children predict that a member of a novel social category is more likely to harm a member of another group than a member of their own (Chalik & Rhodes, 2014; Rhodes, 2012). Children also explain harmful intergroup behaviors as having occurred *because* of category memberships (Rhodes, 2014) and evaluate intergroup harm as less bad than intragroup harm (Rhodes & Chalik, 2013). Thus, children's framework theory of the social world—that social group members are obligated toward one another—guides their understanding of how social behaviors play out in intergroup contexts.

What is the nature of children's belief that social category members are obligated toward one another? One possibility is that these beliefs are narrowly centered around expectations of harm. Because of either the specific importance of intergroup conflict throughout the course of human evolution (e.g., Cosmides, Tooby, & Kurzban, 2003) or more general threat-detection mechanisms in social perception (e.g., Baltazar, Shutts, & Kinzler, 2012; Kinzler & Shutts, 2008), children's early-emerging beliefs about groups and social interaction could be centered on the belief that people are obligated to avoid harm toward ingroup members (and thus, in cases where harm does occur, to direct harm toward outgroup members). Consistent with this possibility, although children begin to systematically predict that intergroup harm is more likely to occur than intragroup harm by age 3, children at this age do *not* reliably hold expectations about behaviors that do not involve harm; children only begin to hold these expectations (e.g., predicting that people will direct prosocial behaviors toward fellow group members) later in childhood, by age 6 (Rhodes, 2012).

Another possibility is that children's inferences are motivated by a broader belief that social category members are obligated to protect and affiliate with one another. By this account, younger children fail to hold reliable expectations about prosocial behaviors not because their beliefs only center around harm, but rather because the prosocial actions tested in prior work have not adequately tapped into their beliefs about obligation. From the perspective of moral philosophy, acting prosocially toward others (e.g., lending emotional support, sharing resources, and so on), while valuable, is not necessarily obligated in the same manner as avoiding harm (Knobe, 2003; Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006). Thus, if young children view social categories as marking people who hold special obligations toward one another, perhaps young children in previous work reliably predicted intergroup harm but not intragroup prosociality because they saw *not harming* as obligatory, but did not view the prosocial actions that were tested in the same manner.

The present work seeks to tease apart the above two possibilities. If children's framework theory centers around the obligations that social category members hold toward one another (beyond directing harm away from fellow group members), then it should include expectations about certain types of intragroup relations and behaviors. There are, indeed, things that group members might be obligated to do for one another, such as affiliating with one another (e.g., in the context of friendship) and protecting one another from harm, that have not been tested in prior work. One set of studies by Shutts et al. (2013) did find that by age 4, children use gender and racial categories to guide their inferences about which individuals will be friends with one another (e.g., a girl will be friends with another girl rather than with a boy). Yet, the extent to which children's inferences about these categories have reflected their abstract expectations about the social world is unclear—children might believe that a girl will be friends with another girl not because of the structure and function of social categories, but simply because they have seen many girls be friends with one another in their everyday lives. Furthermore, some work testing adults' beliefs about who people should save from harm has shown that individuals are more likely to offer aid to ingroup members than to outgroup members during events involving physical violence (Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, & Reicher, 2002) and following natural disasters (Levine & Thompson, 2004). Yet, this work cannot speak to the childhood origins of beliefs about how people should protect fellow group members. Thus, it remains unclear whether children's abstract understanding of social categories supports predictions of these types of behaviors. Study 1 seeks to resolve this open question by testing children's predictions of a wider range of behaviors than has been tested in prior work.

In Study 2, we test for evidence that children's framework theory even generates predictions of the prosocial behaviors tested in prior work, under the right conditions. Because framework theories generally support learning, here we assess whether children can more easily learn to predict patterns of social interaction that are consistent with the belief that group members are obligated to one another. In particular, if children's beliefs about social obligation go beyond expectations of harm, children should more easily learn to predict patterns where prosocial behaviors are directed toward fellow group members, rather than toward members of another group. Furthermore, consistent with prior work, children should more easily learn patterns where harmful behaviors are directed toward outgroup members, rather than toward ingroup members.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we tested the extent to which children use social categories to predict a range of social interactions, including harmful behaviors, prosocial but non-obligatory behaviors, patterns of friendship, and more obligatory prosocial behaviors (saving someone from harm). If children's abstract beliefs about the social world center around identifying harmful situations, then they should only hold systematic expectations about harmful behaviors. If, however, children view social categories as marking people who hold a broader set of obligations toward one another, they should reliably predict that agents will direct harm towards members of other groups, be friends with someone from their own group, and save someone from their own group from harm. On both of these accounts, children should not have reliable expectations about positive, but less obligatory, prosocial interactions.

For this study, we intended to test children at the age at which their systematic expectations about these types of behaviors first emerge. Thus, we focused mainly on 3-year-olds (the earliest age at which predictions of intergroup harm have been documented; Rhodes, 2012). However, asking questions about saving others from harm caused us to use test items that were longer and more complex than those used in prior work, possibly introducing increased memory and processing demands. Thus, for questions about saving only, we tested both 3- and 4-year-old children. Note that in Rhodes (2012), children ages 3–5 all predicted intergroup and

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