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## Costs of helping only influence children's intention to help ethnic out-group peers

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### ABSTRACT

Studies show that children are often inclined to help less when the costs of helping increase. However, these studies do not take into account *who* children are helping. Yet, developmental intergroup research has shown that the intergroup context influences children's reasoning about helping behavior. Two experimental vignette studies are presented that examined the influence of the costs of helping on children's (8–13 years) intention to help in an ethnic intergroup context. Study 1 ( $N = 320$ ) showed that the costs of helping reduce children's willingness to help ethnic out-group peers but do not influence children's intention to help ethnic in-group peers. Study 2 ( $N = 166$ ) replicated the results of Study 1 for a different ethnic out-group context. Moreover, children's reduced willingness to help ethnic out-group peers when costs increase was not contingent on their ethnic in-group or out-group evaluation or their age. Taken together, this research shows, for the first time, that the costs of helping reduce children's willingness to help ethnic out-group peers but not ethnic in-group peers.

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### Introduction

Children strongly value helping others (e.g., Killen & Turiel, 1998; Smetana et al., 2009). At the same time, children's helping and reasoning about helping is selective and is influenced by the costs of helping (e.g., Eisenberg & Shell, 1986; Sierksma, Thijs, Verkuyten, & Komter, 2014d) and the

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intergroup context (e.g., Sierksma, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2015; Weller & Lagattuta, 2013). How the costs of helping influence children's willingness to help, thus, might depend on *who* the recipient of help is. Therefore, the current experimental vignette research examined how the costs of helping influence children's (8–13 years) intention to help ethnic in-group and out-group peers. Discrimination and prejudice early in life can have detrimental effects on children's social and academic development and can perpetuate social inequality. Therefore, understanding when and how the group context and costs affect children's prosocial cognition is crucially important to foster helping across group boundaries.

### Costs of helping

Helping behavior is defined as voluntary behavior that is intended to benefit another person (Eisenberg, 1986), for example, by helping a peer with homework or assisting a peer with finding a lost key. Helping can involve different levels of costs such as the level of effort, the amount of time, and the particular rewards forgone. In general, research shows that adults' intention to help depends on costs. When costs of helping increase, it becomes less likely that people want to help (for a review, see Dovidio, Piliavin, Gaertner, Schroeder, & Clark, 1991). Likewise, children consider refusing to help in low-cost situations as very blameworthy, but when helping involves high costs for the helper this is evaluated as an acceptable reason to refuse help (Sierksma et al., 2014d). Moreover, children expect peers to feel worse when they are unable to reciprocate high-cost help compared with low-cost help (De Cooke, 1997), and children consider their own needs more when helping involves high costs compared with low costs (Eisenberg-Berg & Neal, 1981). In addition, young adults reason that helping is more obligated than fulfilling personal desires (Neff, Turiel, & Anshel, 2002). One study (Eisenberg & Shell, 1986) also demonstrated that costs influence children's helping in an actual (peer) encounter. Preschoolers were given the opportunity to help create a game for poor children in a hospital. They were either asked to help (i.e., low costs) or asked to choose between helping and playing with toys (i.e., high costs). Results showed that more children helped in the low-cost condition compared with the high-cost condition.

Although few studies have focused on how costs influence children's helping, more studies have examined children's sharing and distributing behavior. These studies typically ask children to allocate resources when this is either costly or noncostly for the participating children (i.e., giving away resources that either are or are not owned by the children). There are some key differences in the costs involved in sharing and helping. For example, helping others almost always involves some costs to the self (e.g., time, effort), whereas distributing resources can be noncostly to the self (e.g., Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Paulus & Moore, 2014). In addition, the costs involved in sharing are often clear-cut such as giving up one or two stickers or pieces of candy. In contrast, the costs involved in helping are less tangible because the amount of effort might depend on the person and the type of help. Moreover, the psychological mechanisms that underlie sharing and helping behavior likely differ in many other aspects as well (see Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Sierksma & Thijs, 2017). However, both are considered to be prosocial behavior; therefore, studies on the role of costs and the group context in children's sharing and distributing behavior are also discussed here.

Many studies that focused on sharing and the distribution of resources show that children are less likely to share when it is costly compared with noncostly (e.g., Benozio & Diesendruck, 2015; Eisenberg-Berg, Haake, Hand, & Sadalla, 1979; McGuigan, Fisher, & Glasgow, 2016; Paulus, Becker, Scheub, & König, 2016; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010). However, there are also studies showing that children are willing to incur some costs when sharing (e.g., Hay, Caplan, Castle, & Stimson, 1991; Thompson, Barresi, & Moore, 1997), and some studies find no influence of costs whatsoever (Chernyak & Kushnir, 2013; Williams, O'Driscoll, & Moore, 2014). These studies suggest that when children share or distribute resources, they sometimes take costs into account, but other times costs are less of a consideration. Therefore, it is important to understand the mechanisms underlying costly and less costly prosociality because such insight might allow us to better understand the inconsistent findings and uncover methods to stimulate prosocial behavior in children even in high-cost scenarios. One such mechanism pertains to *who* the recipient of the prosocial act is.

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