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Expectations about recipients' prosociality and mental time travel relate to resource allocation in preschoolers



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have revealed that preschoolers selectively allocate their resources based on their social relationship with recipients such as friendship. In this investigation, we investigated how expectations about recipients' prosociality and the ability of future thinking relate to the selective allocation of resources. In Study 1, participants aged 3.5–6 years chose how to allocate resources from two ways (selfish allocation, where only the participants could receive stickers, and equal allocation, where the participants and recipients receive get the same number of stickers) in costly and non-costly situations with three recipients (friend, peer, and stranger). Participants were asked to state which alternatives the recipients would choose if they were given a choice. The results showed that children aged 5 and 6 years tended to choose equal allocation of resources when they expected the recipients to do the same both in costly and non-costly situations. This tendency was not observed in children aged 3.5 and 4 years. In Study 2, the relationships between selectivity in non-costly allocation and two facets of future thinking (delay of gratification and mental time travel) were investigated in children aged 5 and 6 years. The results suggested that children with a higher mental time travel ability tended to be more selective in allocating resources based on social relationships; they tended to allocate more resources to the friend and fewer to the peer. Our findings suggest that expectations about a

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recipient's prosociality and the ability of mental time travel affect selectivity of resource allocation in children aged 5 and 6 years.

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Introduction

Children begin to share their resources with others during the second year of life (Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Rheingold et al., 1976). During this period, they allocate their resources in response to others' expression of their desires (Brownell et al., 2009; Dunfield et al., 2011) and allocation is not affected by the social relationship (e.g., friendship). In contrast, during the preschool period, allocations become selective depending on the social relationship with the recipient. For example, preschoolers may allocate more resources to individuals similar to them such as members of the same gender, race (Renno & Shutts, 2015), and in-group (Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008).

Friendship is one of the social relationships that can affect preschoolers' resource allocation (Berndt, 1981; Birch & Billman, 1986; Garon, Johnson, & Steeves, 2011; Lu & Chang, 2016; Moore, 2009; Paulus, 2016). Moore (2009) studied resource allocation among children aged 4.5–6 years who were given two alternatives to choose concerning how to allocate stickers among a friend, a non-friend, and a stranger. *Friend* was defined as a classmate with whom the participant often played, and *non-friend* was defined as a classmate with whom the participant did not like playing. The first alternative was that of selfish allocation, where only the participant could get stickers and the partner could not. The other one was that of equal allocation, where both the participant and partner get the same number of stickers. Moreover, in Moore's study, there were two types of games: prosocial and sharing. In the prosocial game, the participant's gain remained constant in both alternatives (e.g., 1 for the participant and 1 for the partner, 1 for the participant and 0 for the partner). Therefore, there were no costs to choosing equal allocation. On the other hand, in the sharing game, the participant could obtain more rewards by choosing the selfish alternative (e.g., 1 for the participant and 1 for the partner, 2 for the participant and 0 for the partner). Moore reported that children were more likely to choose equal allocation when the partner was a friend or stranger than when the partner was a non-friend in the prosocial game. In the sharing game, the child was more likely to choose the equal allocation when the partner was a friend than when the partner was a non-friend or stranger. These results showed that the social relationship with the recipient affected resource allocation in preschoolers.

Moore (2009) discussed this selective allocation from the viewpoint of reciprocity. In other words, children selectively allocated resources to friends rather than to non-friends because they expected friends to reciprocate compared with non-friends. According to the theory of reciprocity, it is important to be selectively prosocial to individuals who are likely to reciprocate the prosociality (Trivers, 1971). If children decide how to allocate resources based on expectations of others' reciprocation to themselves, it can be considered a behavior based on reciprocity.

In a representative experiment of reciprocal allocation, children take turns playing games of resource allocation with other children or adult experimenters. Studies using this method have revealed that allocations were affected by recipients' previous allocation in children aged 5–7.5 years, but not in children aged 3 and 4 years (House, Henrich, Sarnecka, & Silk, 2013; Sebastián-Enesco, Hernández-Lloreda, & Colmenares, 2013; Sebastián-Enesco & Warneken, 2015). In the study by House et al. (2013), pairs of children aged 3–7.5 years took turns playing the prosocial game. The results showed that children aged 5–7.5 years tended to choose equal allocation rather than selfish allocation when the recipients had chosen equal allocation in the previous trials. In children aged 3 and 4 years, on the other hand, there was no clear relationship between previous recipients' allocation and the participants' consequent choice. These studies show that reciprocal allocation based on previous experience is acquired by 5 years of age.

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