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Children's expectations about conventional and moral behaviors of ingroup and outgroup members

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ABSTRACT

Although children demonstrate robust social preferences for ingroup members early in ontogeny, it is not yet clear whether these preferences are based on children generally liking people who are more familiar or on children holding specific biased beliefs about people in their ingroup as compared with people in their outgroup. Here, we investigated the origins of humans' propensity to link ingroup members with positive behaviors and outgroup members with negative behaviors by asking whether linguistic group membership influences children's expectations of how people will act. Our findings indicate that the effect of group membership on children's expectations about other people's actions varies across both domain (moral and conventional) and age. Whereas all children in our study (3- to 11-year-olds) expected ingroup members to be more likely to conform to social conventions and expected outgroup members to be more likely to break conventional rules, only older children (7- to 11-year-olds) used social group membership to form expectations about which people would be more likely to act morally versus immorally. Thus, younger children do not automatically form biased character judgments based on group membership, although they do understand that social group membership is particularly relevant for reasoning

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about which people will be more likely to act in line with social norms.

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Introduction

The ability to categorize others into social groups is an invaluable tool that allows humans to make myriad inferences about their social world (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Uleman, Adil Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2008; Zebrowitz, Bronstad, & Lee, 2007). Although social categorization can increase an individual's level of self-esteem (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988), and can help people to make important decisions such as who to befriend and with whom to share resources (e.g., Brewer, 1999), social categorization can also lead to negative consequences such as prejudice and discrimination against outgroup members (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). In addition to holding stereotypes against and inferring negative qualities for outgroup members (e.g., Doise et al., 1972), adults are more likely to view a single negative behavior done by someone in an outgroup as indicative of a trait-level character flaw of other members of that social group, a bias known as the "ultimate attribution error" (e.g., Hewstone, 1990; Pettigrew, 1979). Here, we investigated the origins of humans' propensity to link ingroup members with positive behaviors and outgroup members with negative behaviors by asking whether children demonstrate a tendency to associate outgroup members with negative actions and character traits.

Although a large body of research suggests that children and infants display explicit and implicit social preferences for people who are similar to themselves (e.g., Aboud, 2003; Baron & Banaji, 2006; Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011; Dunham, Chen, & Banaji, 2013; Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007; Mahajan & Wynn, 2012), these preferences could arise based merely on familiarity and do not necessarily indicate abstract reasoning that outgroup members have negative qualities. Specifically, it is possible to prefer people who are relatively more familiar, or similar to the self, because they feel socially safe, without expecting people who are dissimilar or unfamiliar to be fundamentally worse people with negative character traits. That is, ingroup love may arise separately from outgroup derogation (e.g., Brewer, 1999). On the other hand, some research suggests that children do form positively biased associations toward their ingroup and negatively biased associations toward the outgroup; they are better at recalling positive actions associated with ingroup members and negative actions associated with outgroup members (e.g., Corenblum, 2003; Dunham et al., 2011), and they are more likely to interpret an ambiguous action as negative when the perpetrator of the action is an outgroup member (e.g., Dunham & Emory, 2014). In these cases, when children are given the same information, group membership appears to bias children's construal of, and memory for, events. However, in all of these instances children were exposed to information about how the ingroup or outgroup members *actually acted*, meaning that these studies do not indicate whether people evaluate the ingroup as positive and the outgroup as negative in the absence of any information.

Recent work has asked children to make action attributions in the absence of concrete evidence in order to more directly ask whether children inherently attribute positive features to ingroup members and negative features to outgroup members. In these paradigms, children are introduced to an ingroup target and an outgroup target, are told that one of the targets engaged in a valenced (e.g., positive or negative) activity, and are then asked to guess which target was involved in the activity (e.g., "Who helped clean up spilled milk?" [see Baron & Dunham, 2015]). Results suggest that by 6 to 8 years of age, children tend to associate positively valenced information with ingroup members over outgroup members (e.g., Baron & Dunham, 2015; Dunham et al., 2011), whereas younger children (3- to 5-year-olds) are less likely to make these types of behavioral or trait attributions based on group membership (e.g., Patterson & Bigler, 2006; Richter, Over, & Dunham, 2016). However, even in studies where children demonstrate a bias, children were given trials that conflated different types of valenced

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