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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp



Children's beliefs in reciprocation of biases and flexibility



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 August 2014

Revised 23 February 2015

Keywords:

Attractiveness

Gender

Race

Bias

Flexibility

Reciprocation

ABSTRACT

Children display positive and negative biases based on peers' attractiveness, gender, and race, but it is unclear whether children who associate positive attributes with certain peers also believe those peers think positively of them. In each domain (attractiveness, gender, and race), we measured 3- to 11-year-olds' ($N = 102$) biases and flexibility and their beliefs in reciprocity of bias and flexibility by asking who would think positively of them. Children could choose one of two unfamiliar peers (forced choice assessment) or had the additional options of choosing both peers or neither peer (non-forced choice assessment). We found that children often displayed beliefs in reciprocation, with beliefs in positive bias reciprocation from attractive girls showing the largest effect sizes. These beliefs were significantly correlated with and were predictive of children's positive and negative biases and flexibility. The duality of children's beliefs may contribute to strengthening their biases and segregating social groups.

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Introduction

As young as 3 or 4 years, children display positive and negative biases based on a person's attractiveness, gender, and race (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 1993; Dion, 1973; Powlisha, 1995). Although peers, parents, teachers, books, and the media can all contribute to developing these biases

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(e.g., Baker-Sperry, 2007; Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Hilliard & Liben, 2010; Li-Vollmer, 2002; McGlothlin & Killen, 2010), developmental intergroup theory proposes that children play a constructive role in developing their beliefs and attitudes toward social groups in each of these domains (Bigler & Liben, 2006). Evidence for development of these constructivist beliefs and attitudes is quite strong based on studies assessing children's biases in tasks involving actual and novel social groups (e.g., Bigler, 1995), but it is unclear whether children also construct beliefs about the reciprocity of these biases. In other words, if children typically associate positive attributes with high-attractive, same-sex, or majority race peers (Dion, 1973; Powlishta, 1995; Williams, Best, & Boswell, 1975b), do they also believe that these same peers are likely to think positively of them? To our knowledge, no one has assessed such reciprocity in biases, but clearly children think positively of certain peers based on their attractiveness, gender, and race (e.g., Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Langlois & Stephan, 1977; Martin, 1989) and may believe that those positive attributions are reciprocated. This study sought to investigate this possibility in these three domains.

If children differentially assign positive and negative attributes to members of different social groups and believe in positive attribute reciprocation from particular social group members, this duality of beliefs may contribute to strengthening and maintaining their biases. Beliefs about positive attribute reciprocation may also contribute to group segregation. There is evidence in the gender domain that pre-adolescent and adolescent children have differential beliefs regarding their efficacy in interacting with same- and other-sex peers. The lower their beliefs in other-sex interaction efficacy, the less they thought they would be included in other-sex groups and the fewer other-sex friendships they had (Zosuls, Field, Martin, Andrews, & England, 2014). These differential perceptions may stem not only from forming positive biases for their in-group earlier in development (Powlishta, 1995) but also from forming early beliefs that an in-group member would think more positively of them than an out-group member.

The proposal that children should believe in positive attribute reciprocation stems from social projection theory, which states that individuals believe that others will respond in a similar manner, particularly others from the same social group (Robbins & Krueger, 2005). Children as young as 5 or 6 years can reliably answer how others of the same ethnicity, a different liked ethnicity, or an arbitrarily created in-group or out-group feel about same and different group members (Aboud & Mitchell, 1977; Abrams, 2011; Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001). To our knowledge, however, no one has examined children's responses to such questions in which the target is oneself. Based on the social projection framework and relevant developmental literature, however, we predicted children would believe that a peer they viewed positively would reciprocate such beliefs (*positive bias reciprocation*).

The bias individuals display is affected by the situation (Biernat, 2003), such as whether there are limits on the behavior or decision being made (e.g., only one peer can be chosen) or no limits (e.g., more than one peer can be chosen). Such differences are apparent when assessing children's bias in forced choice tasks compared with non-forced choice tasks (Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001; Doyle, Beaudet, & Aboud, 1988; Powlishta, Serbin, Doyle, & White, 1994; Serbin & Sprafkin, 1986) and could potentially manifest when assessing children's beliefs in positive bias reciprocation. Therefore, we included both forms of assessment in our study.

The two types of assessment can elicit differential responses because non-forced choice methods permit children to display flexibility—an understanding that members of different social groups can possess similar attributes (Powlishta et al., 1994; Serbin & Sprafkin, 1986). Social projection theory proposes that individuals believe that others will respond similarly (Robbins & Krueger, 2005), so it is plausible that children who show flexibility believe that others will display such flexibility regardless of social group membership. Therefore, we examined whether children who showed flexible thinking in their assignment of positive attributes to peers from two different social groups also believed that both peers would reciprocate those attributions (*positive flexibility reciprocation*).

To measure children's beliefs in positive bias reciprocation and positive flexibility reciprocation, and to determine whether those beliefs were related to their biases and flexibility, we had 3- to 11-year-olds assign positive and negative attributes to unfamiliar peers differing in attractiveness (high or low), gender (female or male), and race (African American or European American). Children participated in either a forced choice assessment, in which they needed to choose one of two pictured peers to answer the questions, or a non-forced choice assessment, in which they had the additional options

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