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Stick with your group: Young children's attitudes about group loyalty



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ABSTRACT

For adults, loyalty to the group is highly valued, yet little is known about how children evaluate loyalty. We investigated children's attitudes about loyalty in a third-party context. In the first experiment, 4- and 5-year-olds watched a video of two groups competing. Two members of the losing group then spoke. The disloyal individual said she wanted to win and therefore would join the other group. The loyal individual said she also wanted to win but would stay with her group. Children were then asked five forced-choice questions about these two individuals' niceness, trustworthiness, morality, and deservingness of a reward. The 5-year-olds preferred the loyal person across all questions; results for the 4-year-olds were considerably weaker but in the same direction. The second experiment investigated the direction of the effect in 5-year-olds. In this experiment, children answered questions about either a loyal individual, a disloyal individual, or a neutral individual. Children rated both the loyal and neutral individuals more positively than the disloyal individual across a number of measures. Thus, whereas disloyal behavior is evaluated unfavorably by children, loyal behavior is the expected norm. These results suggest that, at least from 5 years of age, children understand that belonging to a group entails certain commitments. This marks an important step in their own ability to negotiate belonging and become trustworthy and reliable members of their social groups.

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Introduction

As adults, loyalty to the group is very important to us. We stick with our group even when it costs us to do so and, at least at times, we punish individuals who leave harshly (e.g., by executing deserters during times of war). Both of these things can be explained by the fact that successful cooperation within a group can take place only if group members can trust and rely on each other (Tomasello, Melis, Tennie, Wyman, & Herrmann, 2012). Furthermore, each group member contributes to the functioning of the group with his or her skills, knowledge, and work, and every defecting group member harms the group by taking these valuable resources with them (and maybe even contributing them to another group) (Levine & Moreland, 2002). Consequently, the loyalty of every member is important for the survival of the group as a whole. Haidt and Graham (2007) even described loyalty as one of the five psychological foundations of morality (see also Haidt, 2007). Thus, group members are expected to follow the norm of staying with the group even when they need to sacrifice personal goals in order to benefit the group (Levine & Moreland, 2002). Indeed, Brewer and Silver (2000) described loyalty as the “willingness of group members to exert effort, pay costs, or sacrifice personal benefits on behalf of the group as a whole” (p. 162). Although it is also possible to feel a sense of loyalty to the group without making any such sacrifice, in fact without engaging in any overt behavior at all, the definition above describes a situation in which loyalty is visible in a particularly strong form.

Despite the importance of loyalty to successful group functioning, there has been surprisingly little developmental research on this topic and no research at all on young children’s judgments of people who leave their groups. The few studies on related topics investigated children’s reactions to group members who play with or say positive things about members of their own group versus other groups. Castelli, De Amicis, and Sherman (2007), for example, found that 4- to 7-year-old White children prefer White children who play with an in-group member (i.e., a White child) to White children who play with an out-group member (i.e., a Black child). In a related series of studies, Abrams and colleagues asked 5- to 12-year-old children to judge their in-group and out-group peers according to their normative versus deviant statements (i.e., saying positive things only about the in-group vs. saying positive things about both the in- and out-groups). The authors found that in general children favored normative in-group members to deviant ones (Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003a; Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Ferrell, 2007; Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Marques, 2003b; Abrams, Rutland, Ferrell, & Pelletier, 2008; Abrams, Rutland, Pelletier, & Ferrell, 2009). However, none of these studies examined loyalty in the sense of staying with the group and, thereby, paying a cost for the sake of the group (i.e., staying even when leaving would be beneficial for the individual). In addition, in most of these studies, children belonged to the groups themselves (see Abrams et al., 2009, for an exception), and therefore it is possible that they were responding based simply on their positive feelings for their own groups rather than based on an understanding of loyalty more generally.

Work from other areas has shown that preschool-aged children understand something about norms of conduct in social situations, including norms about leaving. For example, children realize that when one is committed to participating in a collaborative activity with someone else, one cannot just leave in the middle of it without taking leave or making some excuse and, more generally, they expect collaborative partners to stick with each other until the activity is finished (Gräfenhain, Behne, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009; see also Gräfenhain, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2013). Other research from Hamann, Warneken, and Tomasello (2012) found that 3.5-year-old children stick to a collaborative activity until both collaboration partners have received their reward. These findings suggest that young children have some understanding of the commitments inherent in some types of dyadic interactions. However, commitments that come with dyadic interactions might be easier to understand than similar types of commitments at the group level (Tomasello et al., 2012).

In the current study we tested 4- and 5-year-old children’s understanding of loyalty to the group more directly than has been done previously, following the strict definition of Brewer and Silver (2000), in which loyal behavior involves a personal sacrifice for the benefit of the group. In addition, to rule out the possibility that children were responding based on their own positive feelings about their group, and to tap into children’s abstract moral reasoning about loyalty in an agent-neutral

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