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Friendship trumps neediness: The impact of social relations and others' wealth on preschool children's sharing



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ABSTRACT

Recent work has suggested the presence of a variety of motives and mechanisms that affect young children's sharing decisions. Yet, little is known about the relative impact of these motives. In three experiments with 3- to 6-year-old children (total $N = 140$), the current study contrasts two important recipient characteristics that have been suggested to play a major role in early sharing; the positive social relationship between children and recipients and the differences in recipients' wealth. To this end, children could allocate resources to a friend who already possessed a lot of them and to a nonfriend (Experiments 1 and 2) or a stranger (Experiment 3) who owned only very few resources. Across age, children showed a preference to share more with their rich friend, although this tendency was stronger in the older preschool children. The findings are discussed with respect to theoretical accounts on the psychological basis of early sharing.

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Introduction

Young children start to share their goods with significant others as well as strangers from early on (e.g., Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009; Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Rheingold, Hay, & West, 1976). Recently, developmental psychology started to examine the motivational and cognitive factors that affect early sharing and resource allocation in greater detail (e.g., Baumard, Mascaro, & Chevallier,

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2012; Rochat et al., 2009; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010). This growing interest was sparked by findings indicating an important role of prosocial orientations for social and cognitive development (e.g., Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). This work on early sharing has provided evidence for a variety of factors that affect early resource allocation and sharing decisions. Yet, it has also led to an intense debate on the nature of early sharing and the primary motivations that subserve young children's sharing decisions (e.g., Dunfield, 2014; Hammond, 2014; Hay & Cook, 2007; Killen & Smetana, 2006; Martin & Olson, 2015; Paulus, 2014b; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009).

One central theoretical issue pertains to the question of whether young children's sharing behavior is primarily motivated by genuinely moral concerns or whether it is based on a social (yet not genuinely prosocial) motivation. That is, on the one hand, it has been argued that early prosocial behavior is rooted in an altruistic motivation and builds on early developing concerns for needy others (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). On the other hand, it has been proposed that giving and taking of resources develops out of playful interactions with significant others (Carpendale, Hammond, & Atwood, 2013; Hay & Murray, 1982; Rheingold et al., 1976) and that its main function may be to maintain and regulate social relationships and mutual enjoyment with close others. The current study aimed at contributing to this theoretical debate by directly comparing these two aspects with each other.

In the following paragraphs, we first review findings on the early ontogeny of sharing behavior. Then, we expand on the literature on preschool children's sharing with needy others and recipients with whom they have different kinds of social relationships. Thereafter, we introduce the main aim of the study in greater detail.

Research has provided evidence that infants already engage in simple forms of sharing behavior when handing over valuable resources to others (e.g., Cowell & Decety, 2015; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011). These tendencies are complemented by infants' expectations that others will share fairly (e.g., Meristo & Surian, 2013) and a tendency to select social partners on the basis of their fairness (Burns & Sommerville, 2014). The early forms of sharing are often based on direct verbal or gestural requests (Paulus, 2014b). Two-year-old toddlers will share in a non-costly situation when the other person at least verbalizes his or her desire (Brownell et al., 2009). By 3 years, children readily share windfall resources with others even in costly situations (Thompson, Barresi, & Moore, 1997).

In resource allocation tasks, where children's own interest is not at stake, preschool children seem to have a strong bias for egalitarian resource divisions (e.g., Baumard et al., 2012; Kenward & Dahl, 2011; Olson & Spelke, 2008). Yet, when children's own interest is at stake and sharing is costly (i.e., when they are to divide resources between themselves and others), this tendency is reduced. For example, Smith, Blake, and Harris (2013) demonstrated that 3- and 4-year-olds hardly engage in equal sharing with an anonymous other, 5- and 6-year-olds are more ready to do so, and only 7- and 8-year-olds showed equal sharing. Most interesting, this was the case even though all age groups were able to report that they should engage in equal sharing with the other. Likewise, Fehr, Bernhard, and Rockenbach (2008) demonstrated in a mini-dictator game that 3- and 4-year-olds showed strong selfishness, whereas 7- and 8-year-olds showed strong inequality aversion, even avoiding advantageous inequality. Moreover, the effect was modulated by group membership; children were more generous to a known in-group member than to an anonymous out-group member. Notably, in situations where children directly interact with the other person, they show a greater propensity to share equally (Paulus, Gillis, Li, & Moore, 2013; Warneken, Lohse, Melis, & Tomasello, 2011). Overall, these findings point to a strong tendency for equal sharing in young children but also to a reduction of sharing when it is costly for them. Although these studies highlight important factors that affect children's sharing decisions, they leave open the question of why children actually engage in sharing behavior. Two major approaches to this question are considered in the following.

Numerous studies have examined the impact of social relationships on early sharing and other forms of prosocial behavior (e.g., Fehr et al., 2008; Weller & Lagattuta, 2013). Given that young children already react differently to friends than to mere acquaintances (e.g., Costin & Jones, 1992), developmental researchers have been particularly interested in how ties of friendship affect sharing decision—that is, whether children treat friends differently than nonfriends or strangers. Several studies have provided converging evidence that by 3 or 4 years of age children are more generous toward friends and, when they are to distribute resources between friends and others, that they allocate more

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