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Brief Report

How do young children judge intentions of an agent affecting a patient? Outcome-based judgment and positivity bias



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ABSTRACT

Using situations where an *agent* can affect a *patient*, previous studies have examined children's judgment of the intention of the patient. Because the intention of the agent plays an important role in determining the response to that agent, this study examined children's judgment of the agent's intention. In situations where the agent potentially affected the patient, young children ($N = 56$, $M_{\text{age}} = 5$ years 7 months in Experiment 1; $N = 50$, $M_{\text{age}} = 5$ years 8 months in Experiment 2) and adults ($N = 26$, $M_{\text{age}} = 21$ years 1 month in the [supplementary experiment](#)) judged whether or not the agent affected the patient intentionally (e.g., intentionally destroyed the patient's block castle). The results indicated that children, but not adults, judged the agent's intention based on outcome (e.g., whether or not the block castle was destroyed). Moreover, children, but not adults, judged the agent's intention favorably (e.g., the agent did not intend to destroy the castle), indicating the presence of positivity bias. Implications of positivity bias in intention judgment for social adjustment and trait inference are discussed.

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Introduction

Because our responses to other people are largely affected by our evaluation of their intentions (Smith, 1978), intention judgment is a crucial factor in social behaviors such as helping (Swap,

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1991), moral judgment (Piaget, 1932; Powell, Derbyshire, & Guttentag, 2012), and blame (Zelazo, Helwig, & Lau, 1996). For example, whether an agent should be blamed depends on whether the agent behaves intentionally or unintentionally. Given the great importance of intention judgment, many previous studies have investigated how children judge intention in social interactions. Although there are mixed findings concerning the age at which children show an understanding of intentionality, likely due to methodology and context (18 months of age in Meltzoff, 1995; 13 months of age in Le-grain, Destrebecqz, & Gevers, 2012), children under 7 years of age have been shown to judge intention based on outcome¹ (Feinfield, Lee, Flavell, Green, & Flavell, 1999; Montgomery & Montgomery, 1999; Schult, 2002; Shultz & Wells, 1985). Consider a scenario in which a girl who wishes to finish building a castle made of blocks places a block on the castle, but a boy knocks the castle over. Because the girl actually performs the action that achieves her intention of placing the block, she should be judged as having achieved her intention (Astington & Lee, 1991). However, young children judge that the girl's intention is not achieved because the outcome (i.e., a broken castle) is not what she desired (Schult, 2002). A similar judgment tendency also occurs when the person's desire is not obvious from his or her actions. If the girl is standing near the block castle and it blows over, the appropriate judgment would be that she did not intend to destroy the castle because she did not take the corresponding action. However, young children consider the outcome (i.e., a broken castle) to be what was intended (Feinfield et al., 1999). Although the underlying process remains elusive (Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009), the evidence indicates that young children judge a person's intention based on outcome.

This judgment tendency of young children, *outcome-based judgment*, has been revealed in situations where they judge the intention of a *patient* (i.e., the girl in the above example) rather than the intention of an *agent* (i.e., the boy). However, children may understand the mental states of agent and patient in different ways (Arsenio & Kramer, 1992), and in social interactions it is the intention of the agent (who affects the patient) that plays an important role in determining the response to that agent (Malle & Knobe, 1997). Thus, it is important to investigate how young children judge the intention of the agent (i.e., the boy in the above example). In addition, judging the intention of an agent based solely on outcome may have consequences for interpersonal relationships of children. In the above example, children make the outcome-based judgment that the boy intended to destroy the castle because the outcome (i.e., a broken castle) is judged to be what the boy intended. If, in fact, he only stumbled and fell onto the castle, this intention judgment would be overly hostile to the boy. A hostile interpretation of a peer's intention may lead to an aggressive response such as an inappropriate accusation (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002), which in turn may result in interpersonal difficulties (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). Thus, outcome-based judgment could be a factor that leads to hostile intention judgment, aggressive behaviors, and social maladjustment.

Although young children have a tendency to make outcome-based judgments, not all young children are classified as aggressive (McGuire, 1973). This raises the possibility that judgment of an agent's intention involves another bias that prevents hostile interpretations of intention and consequently aggressive behaviors. Some intervention research has shown that aggressive behaviors toward peers are mitigated by positive interpretations of the peers' intentions (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Hudley & Graham, 1993). Thus, children should have a tendency to judge the intention of the agent favorably. Indeed, studies of trait inference have revealed that young children tend to evaluate others favorably, a tendency known as *positivity bias* (Boseovski, 2012; Boseovski, Shallwani, & Lee, 2009; Lockhart, Chang, & Story, 2002; Plumert, 1995; Sears, 1983); for example, children believe that a person who says unkind things to others will become a better person in the future. This bias should make children judge the agent favorably (e.g., the agent who intentionally disrupted the patient is judged to have behaved unintentionally). These theoretical considerations suggest that positivity bias also is involved in judging the intention of the agent. Therefore, the current study examined whether young children judge intention of the agent based on positivity bias as well as outcome.

¹ This is different from the question of whether children consider intention when they evaluate social behavior (Boseovski, Chiu, & Marcovitch, 2013; Heyman & Gelman, 1998; Nelson, 1980; Zelazo et al., 1996).

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