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RUNNING HEAD: Group membership and prosociality

The influence of group membership on young children's prosocial behaviour

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Abstract

Young children can be extremely prosocial - willing to help and share with others and comfort them in distress. However, the origins of social problems like prejudice and discrimination also appear early in development. In this paper, I discuss research investigating how group membership affects children's tendency to be prosocial. Existing research on this topic has focused primarily on sharing behaviour and shown that, in general, children allocate more resources to members of their own groups. After reviewing this important literature, I make the case for extending research with young children to other forms of prosociality. This has the potential to inform our understanding of the mechanisms behind ingroup favouritism in prosociality and help us understand routes towards interventions to encourage more egalitarian behaviour.

The influence of group membership on young children's prosocial behaviour

Young children can be very prosocial [1]. With some regularity, they engage in behaviours that are intended to benefit others (at times with a cost to themselves). This prosocial drive manifests itself in behaviours such as helping, sharing and comforting [2]. From as young as 14 months, and more robustly from 18 months, infants will help an experimenter with every day tasks such as fetching out of reach objects, opening doors and pointing out the hidden but useful properties of objects [3, 1]. Toddlers will show empathy for individuals in distress and sometimes seek to comfort them [4] and two-year-olds will share food with an individual who expresses a desire to obtain it [5]. Importantly, these prosocial behaviours are not limited to close kin, but extend to individuals with whom they only have the merest acquaintance [6].

Research on intergroup cognition and behaviour suggests an important boundary condition to young children's prosociality. The origins of the group divisions that plague adults' relationships and political dialogue are seen early in development [7, 8, 9]. In the first few years of life, children show explicit and implicit preferences for members of their own language group [9], gender [10] and race [11]. As early as 3, and more robustly from 5, children show preferences for minimal groups that have been created in the lab and are based on arbitrary criteria such as shirt colour [12, 13]. How do these intergroup divisions influence young children's prosocial behaviour?

Ingroup favouritism in children's prosociality

A relatively small but growing body of research has investigated how group membership influences prosociality in development. Much of this research has focused on children's sharing of resources. These studies have typically measured children's behaviour in non-costly situations where children distribute resources they are unable to keep for themselves between members of different groups. In general, these studies suggest that young children distribute more resources to members of their own group than to members of others groups. For example, in relation to groups based on familiarity, Olson and Spelke (2008) found that 3-year-old children direct a puppet to give more resources to their friends than to strangers [14]. In relation to the influence of social categories on non-costly sharing, Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke (2012) found that 2.5 year-old children are more likely to give a toy to a native language speaker than to a foreign language speaker [15] and Renno and Shutts (2015) found that 3- to 5-year-old children distribute more resources to members of their own gender and race [16]. Finally, Dunham et al. (2011) investigated the influence of membership in artificial groups created in the lab and found that children give somewhat more resources to members of their own minimal groups [12]. The

strength of these effects depends on both the particular group in question and the age of the child. For example, for children under the age of four or five, gender is a considerably more salient social category than is race [17, 10].

When considering prosociality, an important question is whether children are willing to sacrifice their own resources in order to assist members of their social groups. Studies on costly sharing in relation to group membership are somewhat less common within the literature. Benozio and Diesendruck (2015) [18] asked 3- to 5-year-old children to play a dictator game in which they could allocate 10 stickers between themselves and an ingroup member or an outgroup member. An interesting gender difference in prosociality emerged. Whereas boys shared more with ingroup members than with outgroup members, girls did not. Furthermore, the younger boys in the sample (3- and 4-year-olds) showed some evidence of outgroup negativity, being more likely to allocate resources to an outgroup member if they knew the outgroup member would dislike receiving them. Gummerum, Takezawa and Keller (2009) investigated a similar question in somewhat older children. They asked 7- and 11-year-olds to play a dictator game using monetary resources and found that older children allocated significantly more resources to members of their own group [19]. Related to these findings, Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach (2008) investigated costly sharing in the context of groups based on school attendance and found that 3- to 8-year-old children are more likely to sacrifice personal gain in order to share equally with members of their own school [20].

Other studies have focused on children's helping behaviour rather how willingly they share material resources. Katz, Katz, & Cohen (1976) found that 5- to 10-year-old white children are more likely to help members of their own racial group [21]and Sierskma, Thijs, and Verkuyten (2015) found that 8- to 13-year-old Dutch children are more likely to offer help to members of their own friendship group [22]. Looking beyond helping and resource distribution to other types of costly situations, Misch, Over, & Carpenter (2016) investigated loyalty within a minimal group context and found that four- and five-year-old children are more likely to sacrifice their own resources to keep the secrets of their own group [23]. The existing data, however, present a complex picture. Bigler, Jones and Lobliner (1997) found no moderating influence of group membership on children's helping behaviour in a novel group context [24] and Sierskma, Thijs, and Verkuyten (2014) found that there are certain situations in which older children are actually more willing to help a member of a national outgroup [25] (see [26] and [27] for more extensive reviews of this topic).

Taken together, these data suggest that, at least at times, children preferentially direct their prosocial behaviour towards members of their own groups. They do so despite having no personal history with the recipients of their prosociality,

and in the absence of immediate opportunities for reciprocity and reputational gain. Why might this be?

Explanations for ingroup favouritism in children's prosociality

Multiple explanations have been brought to bear on the question of why children are (sometimes) more prosocial towards members of their own group. Here I highlight three potentially important factors. One important factor may be children's preferences. According to this argument, children prefer members of their own groups to members of other groups and discriminatory behaviour follows from these preferences [28, 29]. Closely related to this, the influence of group membership on prosociality could, under certain circumstances, be driven by dislike for outgroup members rather than liking for ingroup members. To the extent that outgroup members are disliked, and seen as a threat, they are less likely to benefit from prosociality [30, 31]. Consistent with the importance of this motivation, Buttelmann and Boehm (2014) [32] and Benozio and Diesendruck (2015) [18] have shown that children sometimes seek to enact behaviours that will distress outgroup members.

Other theoretical perspectives emphasise the influence of learned social norms and moral rules on children's prosocial behaviour [26, 33]. According to this view, children may expect that ingroup members are more likely than are outgroup members to cooperate with them and reciprocate favours and thus feel obligated to assist them. This claim is compatible with evidence from studies using third party observation paradigms showing that children perceive people to be intrinsically obligated to avoid harming members of their own group (Rhodes & Chalik, 2013) [34] and with research showing that children are sensitive to the norms of the particular groups to which they belong [26].

A tendency to 'dehumanise' the outgroup may also contribute to reduced prosociality towards members of these groups. Dehumanisation is the tendency to attribute fewer uniquely human capacities, including uniquely human emotions, to members of perceived outgroups [35, 36]. Theorising from social psychology has suggested that members of dehumanised outgroups are excluded from moral consideration and, as a result, are less likely to be the recipients of help and more likely to be the recipients of harm [37]. Recent research with children has shown that the origins of dehumanisation appear relatively early in development. From at least the age of six, children perceive outgroup members' faces to be appear less human [38] and attribute fewer mental states to them as well [39]. To date, the relationship between the tendency to dehumanise outgroup members and to refrain from prosocial actions towards them has not been directly investigated in children. However, research on prosocial behaviour more generally has shown that helping and sharing are associated with mental state attribution [5, 22].

Explanations based on preferences, social norms and dehumanising biases are not mutually exclusive and may each explain a proportion of the variance in children's prosocial behaviour in different intergroup contexts. This is a point I return to below.

Conclusions and priorities for future research

This brief review points towards a number of important directions for future research. First, it will be important to conduct empirical research into the relative contribution of preferences, norms and dehumanising biases to children's ingroup favouritism in prosociality in different situations. To this ultimate end, it will be informative to investigate the influence of group membership on a wider range of prosocial behaviours. To date, the majority of developmental research has focused on children's resource distribution decisions. However, we know from research in other areas of social cognitive development that children engage in a wide range of prosocial behaviours including comforting individuals in distress, informing them of relevant information, and assisting them in satisfying their material desires [2]. Understanding the ways in which these other forms of prosociality are influenced by group membership will inform our understanding of the mechanisms that drive ingroup favouritism in different contexts. For example, it may be that differences in some forms of prosocial behaviour (such as resource distribution) are closely related to learned social norms relating to fairness [26]. Differences in others forms of prosocial behaviour (such as comforting others in distress) may be more closely related to empathic responding and, by extension, to dehumanisation [35, 39].

A related priority for future research is to investigate the contribution of learning to children's ingroup favouritism in prosocial behaviour. Some forms of ingroup favouritism may be more strongly under environmental control than others. In this context, cross-cultural research may be particularly informative. The majority of research on children's social cognitive development has been conducted within WEIRD cultures (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic; [40]). However, recent work has done much to elucidate cross-cultural differences in helping and sharing [41, 42, 43]. Combining this cross-cultural focus with research on intergroup cognition could inform our understanding of how the different types of cultural input children receive influence their prosocial responding towards members of different groups. Related to this, it will be important for future research to further investigate prosociality among children from different groups within Western cultures, for example, children from groups with minority as well as majority status.

Understanding the mechanisms behind ingroup favouritism in prosociality offers an important first step towards designing research-led interventions to encourage more positive intergroup relations [44]. Future research should seek to determine which interventions are most effective in encouraging prosocial responding towards members of perceived outgroups across a range of different contexts. The relative ease and effectiveness of intervening to reduce negative intergroup attitudes, ameliorate dehumanisation and modify social norms is an important topic in social psychology [45]. Understanding the points of flexibility at which children's behaviour can be most easily modified has the potential to contribute to this important applied area.

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