Preschoolers Expect In-Kind Reciprocity

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Introduction

- Adults often adhere to a norm of reciprocity: If someone gives something to us, we feel obligated to return the favor, often with something of similar value.
- Our instinct to give back is thought to have played an important role in the development of human culture--enabling cooperation, the division of labor, and smooth social exchange (Cialdini, 2006).
- Preschoolers understand explicit agreements to reciprocate: When two characters agree to trade toys, children expect both to hold up their end of the bargain (Harris et al., 2001).
- They are also more likely to direct a protagonist to share resources with dolls who have previously shared with the protagonist than dolls who have previously shared with someone else (Olson & Spelke, 2008).
- Here, we focused on the nature of the reciprocal act, asking whether 4- and 5-year-olds (N = 57) expect recipients to return favors in kind even when there has not been an explicit agreement to do so.

Method: 4 trials as below

Giving condition (n = 26):
One day, Eli has a bunch of marbles. Eli sees Sophie, says hello, and Eli gives Sophie some marbles.

Control condition (n = 31):
One day, Eli has a bunch of marbles. Eli sees Sophie and says hello.

This is Eli, and this is Sophie.

The next day, Sophie has a bunch of crayons, and Eli still has a bunch of marbles. What happens next?

This is Eli, and this is Sophie.

Will Sophie give Eli some crayons, or will Sophie give Eli a thumbs-up? Do you like Sophie better if she gives some crayons, if she gives a thumbs-up, or do you like Sophie the same in both endings?

Results

- Children in both conditions favored the ending involving object-giving over the one involving a positive greeting. But those in the Giving condition did so more often.

- Children in the Giving condition liked [Sophie] best in the object-giving ending; those in the Control condition liked [Sophie] the same in the object-giving and greeting endings.

- Preschoolers expect recipients to reciprocate in kind, and like them better when they do so.

References


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