Prospective thinking and decision making in primary school age children

Elisabetta Lombardi,*, Cinzia Di Dio, Ilaria Castelli, Davide Massaro, Antonella Marchetti

Abstract

In this study, we seek to widen our understanding of the developmental processes underlying bargaining behaviour in children addressing the concept of prospective thinking. We argue that the emergence of the capacity to think prospectively about future outcomes or behaviours in response to current actions is a required precedent to strategic decision making. To test this idea, we compared 6, 8 and 10 years old children’s performance on three tasks: the ultimatum game assessing fairness/inequality aversion, the marshmallow task, an intertemporal choice task evaluating the ability to delay gratification, and the dictator game assessing altruism. The children’s socio-demographic and cognitive variables were also evaluated. We hypothesized that development of strategic thinking in the ultimatum game is related to an increased ability to delay gratification – given that both tasks require looking at prospective benefits – and, crucially, not to altruism, which benefits from immediate selfless reward. Our results confirmed our hypothesis suggesting that increased strategic planning with age would also stem from the development of competencies like prospective thinking.

Keywords: Psychology, Education
1. Introduction

Fundamental to the development of social competencies is understanding that behaviour is continuously modulated by mental states such as intentions, desires, beliefs and that it is strictly related to the system of social norms and values in everyday life (Bosacki and Astington, 1999; Caputi et al., 2012). One of the most significant aspects among several social competencies is the capacity to make decisions. Decision-making does not only imply the analysis of evaluative and deliberative aspects of situations, but also of psychological components such as emotions (Van’t Wout et al., 2006), mentalising or the Theory of Mind (Marchetti et al., 2008; Takagishi et al., 2014; Cowell et al., 2015; Schug et al., 2016) and the sensitivity to social and moral norms (Bicchieri, 2006; Marchetti and Castelli, 2012). The developmental trajectory of decision-making processes, so as known in literature, can be synthetically described as the evolution of behaviour in a continuum from “homo oeconomicus” in the earliest age, aimed to maximise one’s own profit, to the periods of childhood and then adolescence, which involve the development of different psychological components, from simple motivation to maximisation gain (e.g., Castelli et al., 2010). The study of decision-making during development has commonly addressed the constructs of fairness and altruism. These two aspects share − although to different degrees − several competencies (e.g., the sense of reciprocity and inclination to pro-sociality) and still diverge, particularly in late childhood, to some extent. Differences between altruistic and fair behaviour associated with age increase may account for the emergence in late childhood of specific competencies. In this respect, our proposal is that increased cognitive abilities (e.g., Mischel et al., 1989; Posner and Rothbart, 2007; for review, see Duckworth and Kern, 2011) as well as, importantly, the emergence of prospective thinking abilities emerging at around 8–10 years may account, at least in part, for the development of fairness, distinguishing it from altruism.

Altruism stems from reliance on current behaviour and related consequences and is much related to one’s predisposition to pro-sociality. In this respect, a large body of work shows that children help and share with others already during the second and third years of life (Warneken and Tomasello, 2006; Melis et al., 2006; Jensen et al., 2007; Warneken and Tomasello, 2008, 2009b), independently of the parents’ desire or material rewards (Warneken and Tomasello, 2013). These findings support a “nativist” conception associated with the development of human altruism (Warneken and Tomasello, 2009a, b) that emerges as an unconditional prosocial tendency and develops into the adoption of reciprocal strategies in later life. Reinforcing this finding, using a physiological measure of children’s arousal, Hepach et al. (2012b) found that 2-year-olds are not motivated primarily by a need to help a person themselves (and thus to benefit themselves via reciprocity or an improved reputation) but rather by a need just to see the person helped (for review, see Tomasello and Vaish, 2013). Propensity to altruism appears thus to emerge
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