



The development of trust and altruism during childhood



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ABSTRACT

Knowing when to trust is an essential skill, but little is known about its cognitive development. No previous studies have examined the development of trust while controlling for age differences in altruism. We hypothesized that older children are more likely to trust, and that this age-related increase is not due to an increase in altruism. In two experiments, we compared the choices of kindergarten (4–5 years) and elementary school (9–10 years) children in economic games. Age was positively related to both trust and altruism, but more strongly to the former. The age difference in trust was robust when we controlled for partner age and the ability to delay gratification. We further hypothesized that older children are more attuned to the probability of reciprocity. Indeed, older children were more sensitive to changes in the game's structure and the trustee's characteristics, suggesting that they are not only more trusting, but more discerning in their decisions of when to trust.

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1. Introduction

One of the most important problems in social decision-making is knowing when to trust. Dilemmas of trust come in many forms, and they affect consumers, organizations, and close relationships (Rotter, 1970). Trusting someone requires the abilities to forego an immediate reward or payoff and to accurately predict how a stranger, the trustee, will react. Effectively managing trust requires complex cognitive skills, including perspective-taking (Davis, 1983) and the ability to delay gratification (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999). Researchers across the social sciences have identified trust as an important topic (Luhmann, 2000; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), but relatively little is known about its cognitive development. The present research addresses this issue by examining the social decision-making of children.

1.1. Trust

Most research on interpersonal trust has focused on adults (Evans & Krueger, 2009), but it is also important in the lives of children, who must decide how to spend their pocket money, whether to trade or lend toys, and choose which peers to

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collaborate with in games and school projects (Webley, 2005). Across these contexts, trust is defined as the willingness to accept vulnerability based on a positive expectation of another person's behavior (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). An act of trust involves the consideration of potential outcomes, what may be gained or lost from trusting, and the estimation of the probability with which those outcomes will occur. That is, the trustor must predict whether the other person is trustworthy.

The economic trust game is a widely accepted tool for the measurement of trust (see Fig. 1a for an example). This game involves two individuals with distinctive roles. First, the trustor chooses between the *status quo* and trust. The choice of the *status quo* amounts to an act of distrust, and the interaction ends with the trustor receiving a modest, but guaranteed outcome. The alternative response, trust, can yield a better or a worse outcome than the *status quo*, its value depends on how the second party reacts. When trust occurs, the trustee has a choice between an equitable, mutually beneficial outcome (reciprocity) and an inequitable, personally advantageous outcome (betrayal). For the trustor, reciprocity is the best possible outcome, whereas betrayal is the worst. The dilemma is that a decision must be made without knowing the trustee's future response. There are legitimate reasons for the trustor to be skeptical of the trustee, whose best possible outcome is betrayal.

Not surprisingly, acts of trust are more common within positive interpersonal relationships (Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, & Soutter, 2000) or when third-party information suggests that the other party is trustworthy (Bolton, Katok, & Ockenfels, 2004). However, even when these factors are absent—as they are when strangers interact—adults show moderate levels of trust (Berg, Dickhaut, & McCabe, 1995; Johnson & Mislin, 2011). It remains controversial whether this finding is evidence that people trust too much or too little. Normative game theory asserts that rational behavior is strictly self-interested, and that therefore any expectation of reciprocity is groundless (Binmore, 2007). From this perspective, any act of trust is irrational. By contrast, sociological norm theory (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990) asserts that many, if not most, people respect the norm of reciprocity and that trustors can anticipate this respect (Bicchieri, Xiao, & Muldoon, 2011). Comparing empirical data with maximum possible outcomes, some psychologists have argued that the irrationality lies in people not trusting enough (Evans & Krueger, 2011; Fetchenhauer & Dunning, 2010).

In the present paper, we investigate how children make decisions in anonymous dilemmas of trust. Our first hypothesis is that children are predominantly distrusting until they develop the cognitive skills necessary to find value in trust (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Specifically, we expect that trust depends on perspective-taking (Epley, Morewedge, & Keysar, 2004), abstract reasoning (Piaget, 1977/2001), and the ability to delay gratification (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999). We hypothesize that cognitive development generally improves the value of trust relative to the *status quo*, as the benefits of trust are uncertain, delayed, and contingent on the behavior of an unknown partner. Younger children, who prefer immediate rewards and lack the ability to predict the trustee's future response, prefer the *status quo*.

Two previous studies investigated the development of trust in children. Harbaugh, Krause, Liday, and Vesterlund (2003) compared economic trust across four age groups (ranging from 3rd to 12th graders). Overall, older age groups did not show higher levels of trust. As the experimenters noted, however, the complexity of the experimental design could have been responsible for these null results. Rather than playing a binary choice trust game, such as the one depicted in Fig. 1a, the children played an investment game that required them to decide how many tokens to invest. In addition to being easier for children to understand, the binary choice game also enables experimenters to manipulate structural aspects of trust, such as the trustee's temptation not to reciprocate.

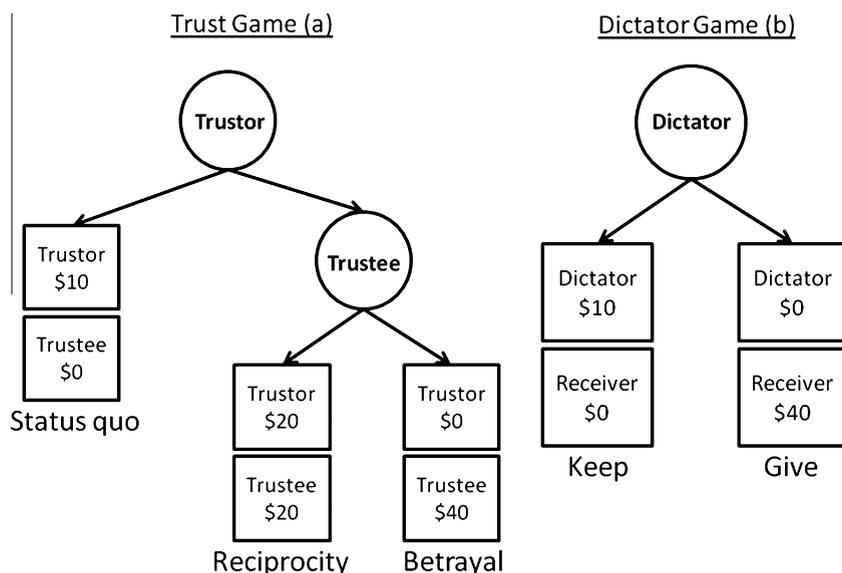


Fig. 1. The economic trust game (a) and the dictator game (b).

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