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You and me: Investigating the role of self-evaluative emotion in preschool prosociality



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ABSTRACT

Self-evaluative emotions depend on internalized social standards and motivate social action. However, there is a lack of empirical research documenting the impact of self-evaluative emotion on 3- and 4-year-olds' prosociality. Extant research relates children's experiences of guilt to empathetic concern and making amends. However, the relationship between guilt and both concern and making amends is potentially reductive. Empathetic concern involves similar bodily expressions to guilt, and amend making is used to distinguish guilt from shame in children. This is the first study to relate the development of both positive and negative self-evaluative emotions to empathetic concern and prosocial choice (making amends and spontaneous help). Results confirm that the broad capacity for self-evaluative emotion is established during the preschool years and relates to empathetic concern. Moreover, these social emotions can be used to predict prosocial choice. Making amends was best predicted by empathetic concern and by children's responses to achievement (pride following success and lack of shame following failure). Alongside moral pride, pride in response to achievement and resilience to shame was also the best predictor of spontaneous help. The data support the idea that young children's prosocial choices may be partially driven by the affective drive to maintain an "ideal" self. Psychologists have emphasized that in order to be adaptive, self-evaluative emotion should be guilt oriented rather than shame oriented. However, the adaptive role of pride has been neglected. We call on future research to redress the focus on negative self-evaluation in moral development and further explore the prosocial potential of pride.

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Introduction

For humans, positive social interactions are a necessity for psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In keeping with this, the tendency to attend to the needs of others (behave prosocially) is nascent. From birth, infants resonate with the emotions of others, reacting to others' distress signals with personal distress (Dondi, Simion, & Caltran, 1999; Geangu, Benga, Stahl, & Striano, 2010). As infancy ends, emotional contagion begins to be replaced with other-focused responses (Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). For example, infants as young as 12 months spontaneously help others to retrieve an accidentally displaced object (Liszowski, Carpenter, Striano, & Tomasello, 2006; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2007), and 2-year-olds will often attempt to repair harm they have caused (Barrett, Zahn-Waxler, & Cole, 1993; Kochanska, Gross, Lin, & Nichols, 2002). Although the early development of prosocial behavior is well established (see also Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011), the mechanisms that drive the maturation of prosocial behavior beyond infancy are unclear (Paulus & Moore, 2012). Taking Hoffman (1975, 2000) influential theory of moral development as a starting point, the current study aimed to address this gap in the literature. In doing so, we provide novel evidence to substantiate the idea that self-evaluative emotions such as guilt and pride may act as the emotional successors of empathy, motivating the child to take a prosocial stance.

Hoffman (1975, 2000) theory of moral development argues that in addition to parental encouragement and modeling, age-related skills such as self-other differentiation, self-control, and cognitive perspective taking are all necessary to transform emotional contagion into other-focused helping. To move beyond emotional contagion, the infant needs to distinguish between own and others' distress, prioritize others' perspective over own, and identify a potential solution. By this account, the infant learns to alleviate innate empathetic distress or concern for others' goals by addressing others' needs instrumentally. In support of the suggestion that helping behavior has a self-regulatory function, 2-year-olds' affective arousal (as measured by pupil dilation) has been shown to increase on witnessing another person's need and to decrease when the need is resolved (Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2012). This occurs even when the person in need shows no distress. The idea that natural representation of others' goals or feelings provides the motivation for human prosociality is at the center of most modern accounts of moral development (see Paulus, 2014, for a review). However, the developmental mechanisms that transform prosociality from basic affective arousal to other-focused helping are still poorly understood (Paulus & Moore, 2012). Hoffman (1975, 2000) theory offers an intuitive starting point to address this gap in knowledge and has a growing evidence base.

The level of arousal produced by others' need appears to be heritable (Fortuna & Knafo, 2014). Nevertheless, other-focused responses may depend on parental modeling (Pettygrove, Hammond, Karahuta, Waugh, & Brownell, 2013). Although requests and rewards for prosocial behavior are not always successful in increasing prosocial choices (Eisenberg, Wolchik, Goldberg, & Engel, 1992; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008), authoritative, warm, mind-minded parenting is positively associated with prosocial behavior (Farrant, Devine, Maybery, & Fletcher, 2012; Padilla-Walker, 2014). Moreover, children as young as 3 years express socially learned normative rules concerning the desirability of prosocial action (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). These results imply that socialization plays a role in the appearance of other-focused responses. Links between children's prosocial choices and the cognitive developments identified by Hoffman (1975, 2000) have also been reported.

Positive relationships have been reported between mirror self-recognition and the tendency of 18- to 24-month-olds to help a person in distress (Bischof-Köhler, 1991; Johnson, 1982; Kärtner, Keller, & Chaudhary, 2010; Nichols, Svetlova, & Brownell, 2009; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992), and inducing self-focus in 3- and 4-year-olds is associated with increased compliance and prosociality (Ross, Anderson, & Campbell, 2011). Kochanska and colleagues have published a number of studies arguing that effortful control is involved in the internalization of prosocial standards, as evidenced by positive associations between preschoolers' compliance and moral cognition (see Kochanska & Aksan, 2006, for a review). Researchers have also reported a positive relationship between children's self-control and sympathetic dispositions, suggesting that the move from personal distress to other-focused response

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