IN-GROUP BIAS IN CHILDREN’S HELPING CAN BE OVERPOWERED BY INDUCING EMPATHY

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MAIN AIM

Is inducing empathic understanding an effective intervention to overpower peer group boundaries in children’s intention to help?

- Children: aged 8 to 13 years (N = 401)
- Empathy: grasping another person’s distinct emotional perspective
- Group boundaries: Peer group friends
- Boundary conditions: Recipient’s need & social perspective taking abilities
• negative attitudes toward out-groups already at age 3

• changing children’s ethnic prejudice ineffective in 50% of the cases studied (1980-2010), and 10% even resulted in more negative behavior

• Instead of changing negative attitudes, promoting positive behavior across group boundaries?

¹Hailey & Olson, 2013 ²Aboud et al., 2012
• Promoting helping by inducing empathy?

• Very little experimental work \(^1,^2\)

• Empathic understanding might trigger a concern for the welfare of the person in need

• This concern might overpower group boundaries

• There is some evidence for this in adults \(^3\)

\(^1\) Eisenberg et al., 2010 \(^2\) Davis & Maitner, 2010 \(^3\) see Batson, 2011
Children read 2 stories matched to their gender:

“After school Sara comes walking towards you. Sara is one of your friends / not one of your friends. She tells you that it’s her turn to clean up the classroom. But she wants to go home to watch a fun movie. She asks you to help her”

• Moderate need: ‘she wants to go home soon because her mum is quite ill’

• Design: 2 (in-group/out-group) by 2 (inducing empathy yes/no) by 2 (moderate need/low need)
METHODOLOGY

Inducing empathic understanding

• “How do you think *name recipient* feels?”:
  Sad? Upset? Down? ‘a little bit’ (1) to ‘very strongly’ (5).

• Children in the control condition did not rate emotions

Intention to help

• Would you help *name recipient*?
  ‘No, absolutely not’ (1) to ‘Yes, absolutely’ (5)
METHOD

- Social perspective taking ability: Theory of Social Mind Task

“Thomas and Stefan see each other for the first time and they are playing a game together. Thomas really likes the game and has a lot of fun. Then he leaves the room to go and get something to drink in the kitchen. While Thomas is gone, Stefan steals a toy of Thomas and hides it in his pocket. Before Thomas returns to the room and is still in the kitchen with his mother, his mother asks him whether he likes Stefan” - “What do you think that Thomas will tell his mother?”

45.4 % gave a correct answer, 40.6 % gave inaccurate explanation, 14 % gave an incorrect answer

1Abrams, Rutland, Pelletier, & Ferrell, 2009
RESULTS

No empathy

Inducing empathy

Multilevel analysis controlled for gender
RESULTS

• **Emotions**: Children expected the out-group and in-group peer to feel equally sad, upset, and down

• **Need**: main effect \( (p < .001) \) but inducing empathy was effective in low and moderate need helping contexts

• **Social Perspective taking**: Eliciting empathic understanding was effective irrespective of children’s social perspective taking ability
CONCLUSION

- Encouraging children to imagine how a peer in need feels, might be a powerful strategy to prevent group based biases in helping

- Inducing empathic understanding effective irrespective of need and children’s social perspective taking ability

- Might thus work for younger children also
LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

• Empathic understanding vs shared emotional state / emotional component

• Actual helping?

• Other group boundaries: ethnic/racial, gender?

• Long term effect? ¹

¹Batson, Turk, Shaw & Klein, 1995)
THANKS!

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