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Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

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Vol. 1
**Inequality,
Inclusion,
and Governance**

Organizers and partners



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DECODING CHILDHOOD PROSOCIAL DECISION-MAKING: THE ROLE OF MENTALIZATION AND PERSONALITY TRAITS IN SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

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Prosocial decision-making, characterized by behaviors aimed at benefiting others, is a critical component of social development in childhood. This study explores the interplay between Mentalization (i.e., Theory of Mind and empathy), and personality traits in influencing fairness and altruism in school-aged children. Using decision-making tasks such as the Ultimatum Game (UG) and Dictator Game (DG), alongside assessments of cognitive abilities and personality dimensions, the study examines how mentalization and socio-emotional factors shape children's decisions. Results indicate significant relationships between empathy, ToM, and prosocial outcomes, offering insights into the mechanisms underpinning fairness and altruism during childhood development.

Decision-making; children; empathy; Theory of Mind; personality

INTRODUCTION

Mentalization, defined as the understanding of one's own and others' minds, emotions, and thoughts, is considered a crucial process in mediating human experience within social contexts (Allen, 2006). This complex construct encompasses specific cognitive and emotional abilities, with Theory of Mind (ToM) and empathy being key components that develop during childhood

(Luyten et al., 2020).

The development of decision-making skills during childhood, particularly in primary school, is a significant focus. Prosocial decisions, involving considerations for the well-being of others, are often evaluated through tasks such as the Ultimatum Game (Guth et al., 1982) and Dictator Game (Kahneman et al., 1986; Benenson et al., 2007), where individuals decide how to share money with peers. Fairness is commonly understood through the lens of inequity aversion, which describes the tendency to avoid situations perceived as unjust or unequal. In social settings, fairness motivates individuals to sacrifice personal gains to restore balance and equality. The Ultimatum Game (UG), an interactive economic game, is often used to measure fairness. In this game, two participants—a Proposer and a Receiver—must decide how to divide a set amount of money or resources. Receivers generally accept equitable offers, where the distribution is fair, and reject inequitable ones, where the division is lopsided. Research indicates that children begin rejecting disadvantageous inequity by the age of 3–4, and by 8 years old, they also start rejecting advantageous inequity, even when it benefits them (Smith et al., 2013). Altruism refers to the human tendency to assist others in achieving their goals and to share valuable resources, with the broader aim of enhancing societal well-being, which indirectly benefits the individual. Children’s altruistic behaviors typically emerge around the ages of 2–3 years (Warneken & Tomasello, 2013) and become more consistent during the primary school years. The Dictator Game (DG) is a common method for assessing altruism, wherein the Proposer determines how much to share with the Receiver, who must accept the offered amount. Both fairness and altruism are associated with long-term benefits for communities while also providing immediate advantages to others. Concerning the psychological dimensions involved, literature highlights the role of the Theory of Mind in decisions involving other people (Castelli et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2017; Lombardi et al., 2021; Tsoi and McAuliffe, 2020), emphasizing how the ability to take another’s perspective leads to a better understanding of intention and, more generally, the internal states of the other player in the decision-making process. This ability helps children move beyond an egocentric position to consider this information from their own and others’ perspectives. More recently, some studies have shown that empathy plays a significant role not only in prosocial behavior (Brazil et al., 2023) but only specifically in decision-making related to fairness (Yijuan et al., 2022).

A final construct that could influence decision-making skills in children in social contexts is related to their personality traits. Recently, Demedardi and

colleagues (2021) demonstrated that certain personality traits, such as agreeableness, influence decision-making processes regarding white lies, a decision-making process specifically linked to prosociality aimed at building and maintaining positive relationships with others. Exploring this connection is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing decision-making in childhood. Furthermore, the study introduces the role of personality traits on decision-making processes, emphasizing the prosocial dimension aimed at building and maintaining positive relationships.

This study examines how fairness and altruism, assessed through the Ultimatum Game (UG) and Dictator Game (DG), respectively, are linked to ToM, empathy, personality traits, and cognitive abilities. While previous research has highlighted ToM's impact on fairness and empathy's role in altruism, the interplay between these constructs and personality traits in school-aged children remains underexplored.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants and measures

Sixty (60) children (35 females) were recruited from public primary schools, grades 3rd and 5th (M=114 months, SD=12 months). Parental consent was obtained, and the study adhered to ethical guidelines.

The measures are:

- Fairness and Altruism using the Ultimatum Game (UG; Güth et al., 1982) and Dictator Game (DG; Kahneman et al., 1986). In both games, participants played as Proposers. In the UG, the Receiver could accept or reject the offer, with rejection resulting in no gain for either player. In the DG, the Receiver had no option to reject, and the amount offered by the Proposer was scored.
- Theory of Mind (ToM) was evaluated with three False Belief Tasks (FBTs; Astington et al., 2002; Perner & Wimmer, 1985), utilizing the unexpected displacement paradigm, assessing first and second-order reasoning through a combination of story-based questions and justifications. Each task offered a maximum score of 5, for a total of 15 points.
- Empathy was measured using two questionnaires: the Index of Empathy (IE; Bryant, 1982) a 22-item questionnaire evaluating affective empathy (score range: 0–22), and the How I Feel in Different Situations (HIFDS; Feshbach et al., 1991), a 12-item self-report assessing cognitive and affective empathy on a 4-point scale.

- Personality Traits were assessed with the Big Five Questionnaire for Children (BFQ-C; Barbaranelli et al., 1998), comprising 65 items rated on a 3-point Likert scale. It measured Extraversion, Neuroticism, Openness to Experiences, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.
- Cognitive abilities were tested using Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices (CPM; Raven, 1984), a 36-item non-verbal task requiring participants to identify missing pieces in patterns.

2.2 Data Analysis

Pearson correlations were conducted to examine relationships between all variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

3. RESULTS

The Pearson's correlational analysis revealed several significant correlations between the measures of prosocial decision-making (fairness and altruism), mentalization (ToM and empathy), personality traits, cognitive abilities, and age. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of prosocial behaviors in childhood.

Fairness (measured by the UG) was positively correlated with ToM scores (measured by FBTs) ($r = 0.341, p < .01$), indicating that children with greater ToM skills were more likely to make equitable offers. The cognitive dimension of empathy (measured by HIFDS) was moderately associated with fairness ($r = 0.279, p < .05$), suggesting that the ability to understand others' emotions contributes to fair decision-making. Among personality dimensions, Agreeableness showed a significant positive correlation with fairness ($r = 0.190, p < .05$), reflecting its role in cooperative and prosocial behavior.

About Altruism (measured by the DG), the affective dimension of empathy (measured by the IE), positively correlated with altruistic behavior in the DG ($r = 0.291, p < .05$), suggesting that emotional resonance drives altruistic decisions. No significant direct relationship was found between ToM and altruistic offers, indicating that altruism may rely more on empathic dimension. Among personality dimensions, Conscientiousness is correlated with altruism ($r = 0.301, p < .05$).

Cognitive abilities, as measured by Raven's scores, were strongly correlated with ToM ($r = 0.483, p < .001$), suggesting that cognitive skills underpin mentalization processes but do not directly influence fairness or altruism.

4. DISCUSSION

This study provides significant insights into the relationships between fairness, altruism, mentalization, personality traits, and cognitive abilities in school-aged children. These results highlight the multifaceted and interconnected nature of prosocial decision-making during a critical developmental period.

The positive correlation between fairness and Theory of Mind (ToM) underscores the importance of mentalization in guiding fair decisions. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that ToM enables children to consider others' perspectives and intentions, facilitating fairer offers (Castelli et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2017). The ability to reason about others' beliefs and desires appears to play a critical role in shifting children away from egocentric behavior towards more socially considerate decision-making.

Empathy, as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive and affective components, demonstrated distinct relationships with prosocial behaviors. Cognitive empathy, reflected in the ability to understand others' emotions, was moderately associated with fairness, suggesting that children who can recognize and interpret others' feelings are more inclined to make fair decisions. On the other hand, affective empathy, which involves emotional resonance, was positively correlated with altruism in the DG. This suggests that altruistic behaviors, which often involve giving without reciprocity, are primarily driven by emotional sensitivity rather than cognitive reasoning. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that empathy motivates prosocial behaviors, particularly in the context of sharing and helping (Yijuan et al., 2022; Brazil et al., 2023).

The role of personality traits in prosocial decision-making was evident in the correlations between Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, fairness, and altruism. Agreeableness, characterized by traits such as kindness and cooperativeness, was linked to fairness, supporting its association with behaviors that prioritize social adaptability. Similarly, Conscientiousness, often associated with responsibility and self-discipline, was positively correlated with altruism, suggesting that children with higher conscientiousness may be more inclined to act in ways that benefit others. These findings corroborate existing literature on the influence of personality traits on prosocial behavior in adults and extend this understanding to children (Demedardi et al., 2021).

The strong correlation between Raven's scores and ToM highlights the cognitive underpinnings of ToM. Higher cognitive abilities may enhance children's capacity for complex reasoning about mental states, which in turn facilitates

more sophisticated social interactions. However, cognitive abilities did not directly correlate with fairness or altruism, suggesting that while they support mentalization processes, prosocial behaviors are more closely tied to socio-emotional factors such as empathy and personality traits.

Although not statistically significant, the observed trends indicating higher fairness and altruism in older children are consistent with developmental theories suggesting that prosocial decision-making becomes more refined with age. Older children's growing ability to consider others' perspectives, regulate emotions, and adhere to social norms likely contributes to these trends (Smith et al., 2013; Warneken & Tomasello, 2013).

These findings emphasize the importance of fostering both cognitive and emotional components of mentalization in educational settings to promote fairness and altruism. Programs designed to enhance ToM and empathy through perspective-taking exercises, role-playing, and social-emotional learning could support the development of prosocial behaviors. Additionally, incorporating personality assessments into interventions may help tailor approaches to individual differences.

The study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships, and the sample size does not allow for the generalization of results. Additionally, the use of simplified economic games may not fully capture the complexity of real-world prosocial behaviors. Expanding the scope of assessment to include naturalistic decision-making scenarios could enhance ecological validity.

5. CONCLUSION

These findings suggest a gradual improvement in prosocial decision-making with age.

Overall, the results demonstrate that fairness is closely linked to cognitive and personality dimensions, particularly ToM and Agreeableness, while altruism is more strongly associated with affective empathy and Conscientiousness. Cognitive abilities appear to support mentalization, which in turn influences prosocial tendencies. Understanding these relationships provides a foundation for interventions aimed at promoting prosocial development, ultimately fostering cooperation and equity within communities.

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