Children’s Sensitivity to the Ulterior Motives behind Apologies

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Introduction

- Children prefer apologetic transgressors over unapologetic ones and think victims who receive an apology will feel better than ones who do not (Drell & Jaswal, 2016; Vaish et al., 2011).
- Apologies can signal that the transgressor feels remorse (Goffman, 1971) and promises not to cause harm again (Schlenker, 1980).
- But not all apologies are equally sincere; some are motivated by a desire to maintain one’s reputation.
- Yet, young children do not evaluate prosocial acts motivated by a desire to look good in front of others less favorably than ones motivated by a genuine desire to do something nice (Heyman et al., 2014).
- We asked whether 6- and 10-year-olds (N=48) would evaluate a transgressor who apologized while others were watching differently than one who apologized when no one was watching.

Method

Example Vignette: Chelsea/Julia is playing with a friend in the sandbox. She brushes the sand off her clothes, sending sand flying into her friend’s eyes and that girl starts crying.

Public Apology: Chelsea see that everyone is watching. Chelsea runs over to the girl and says, “I’m sorry.” So everyone sees Chelsea tell the girl that she is sorry.

Private Apology: Julia sees that no one is watching. Julia runs over to the girl and says, “I’m sorry.” So no one sees Julia tell the girl that she is sorry.

Results

1. Which girl is nicer?

- 10-year olds evaluated the private apologizer as nicer; 6-year-olds were ambivalent.

2. How did the victim feel?

- 10-year-olds thought a private apology would make victims feel better than a public apology, but 6-year-olds thought both types would be equally effective.

Conclusion

- 10-year-olds recognize that public apologies can be motivated by an ulterior motive to maintain one’s reputation.
- 6-year-olds are still learning how impression management influences behavior and infer that both types of apologies are equally sincere.

Test Questions:

1. Is Chelsea or Julia nicer?
2. How did Chelsea’s/Julia’s friend feel after she said, “I’m sorry.”

References


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