



Pre-school children's understanding of the emotional consequences for failures to act prosocially

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This study compares 4- and 5-year-old children's assessment of the emotional consequences of failures to act prosocially with their assessment of the emotional consequences for prosocial and victimization situations. After listening to stories illustrating each of the socio-moral situations, children rated the emotional consequences for an actor, recipient and observing teacher and justified their ratings. Findings show that pre-school children's emotion ratings for failures to act prosocially differed from their emotion ratings for prosocial and victimization behaviours. Pre-school children's ratings of an actor's emotions depended on the presence or absence of an observing teacher in prosocial and victimization situations, but not in failures to act prosocially. This study illustrates the complexity of young children's reasoning about failures to act prosocially and highlights the importance of contextual influences on children's understanding of socio-moral emotions.

Young children's understanding of emotions is a key component in their early social and moral development. Several developmental researchers have examined young children's conceptualizations of situational affect (Arsenio, 1988; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), and have documented children's ability to differentiate between several types of socio-moral events (Wiersma & Laupa, 2000). The purpose of the present study is to add to this body of literature by examining children's understanding of the emotional consequences for a socio-moral event that has received little attention in the literature, failures to act prosocially, in relation to two other socio-moral events, prosocial behaviour and victimization.

Encouraging children to act prosocially, both in response to specific requests and as

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unsolicited prosocial acts, is undoubtedly an aim of most parents and teachers; yet young children often fail to perform spontaneous acts of prosocial behaviour (Grusec, 1991). Examples include failing to share cookies when another child has none, or failing to help a busy parent tidy up toys. Insight into children's conceptualizations of such events could open up avenues for promoting children's positive socio-moral development. We therefore compare children's understanding of the emotions involved in failures to act prosocially (FAP) with their understanding of the emotions involved in two other socio-moral events, namely prosocial and victimization. In particular, children's emotion ratings of the participants in FAP and their reasoning behind those ratings should allow researchers, parents and other adults to better understand how children conceptualize FAP, and what children are focusing on when judging the consequences of these events (Wiersma & Laupa, 2000).

Previous research on children's understanding of situational affect suggests that self-focused concerns, such as adult approval (Karniol, 1982) and material gain (Arsenio & Kramer, 1992), as well as other-focused concerns, such as reducing another's distress (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1997), are important outcomes for children in prosocial and/or victimization situations. Existing research on prosocial behaviour suggests that pre-school children tend to view an actor and a recipient in prosocial situations as feeling very positively and an adult observer as feeling close to neutral (Arsenio, 1988). We expect to replicate these findings. Although we have not found any research directly assessing variation in children's actor ratings as a function of an adult observer's presence in the story, Arsenio's finding that children attribute a neutral emotion to an adult observer indicates that children may not regard adult approval as an important outcome of prosocial behaviours.

Research suggests that children's understanding of victimization situations represents a different combination of affect for the actor, recipient and adult observer (Arsenio, 1988). Although pre-school children view an adult observer and a recipient as feeling negatively, they predict an actor to feel positively despite the actor's recognition of the recipient's distress. This 'happy victimizer' effect has been replicated frequently (Lourenço, 1997; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988), and is often contrary to how adults expect children to respond (Zelko *et al.*, 1986). Again, we expect to replicate these previous findings. Although there has been some speculation regarding the effect of an adult observer on children's emotion ratings of a victimizer (Arsenio, 1988; Wiersma & Laupa, 2000), to our knowledge no previous research has directly examined this effect. When an adult authority figure is present in the story, the possibility of adult disapproval and perhaps punishment for a victimizing act may moderate children's judgment that a victimizer will feel happy.

The main focus of the current study is on the comparison of children's emotion ratings for participants in situations involving the failure to act prosocially with their emotion ratings for participants in prosocial and victimization situations. We expect children to give a positive emotion rating for an actor in failures to act prosocially for a similar reason that they give a positive emotion rating for a victimizer. That is, children may perceive the failure to share or help as a personal benefit to the actor because the actor avoids having to make a sacrifice (e.g. give away a cookie, help with a chore). If children judge an actor in FAP situations to feel happier than in prosocial behaviours, they are probably focusing on personal possession as an important outcome of FAP, because the actor does not have to relinquish anything (a toy, a crayon, a turn at a game, etc.) and the actor's behaviour will probably not cause another individual to feel good. If children judge a FAP actor to feel the same as or less happy than a prosocial actor,

they are probably considering the effect of the recipient's negative feelings on the actor as well as the avoidance of personal loss. In this case, children may consider not only the actor's sacrifice in prosocial situations or avoidance of material loss in FAP, but also the impact of the recipients' feelings on the actors' feelings.

An important contribution of the current study involves assessing variation in children's emotion ratings of actors and recipients in socio-moral situations based on the presence of an observing teacher in the stories. Whereas previous research on children's understanding of the emotional consequences for prosocial and victimization situations has included stories with an adult observer, we specifically place these situations along with FAP situations within a school context by referring to the observing adult character as the teacher. In particular, comparing children's emotion ratings for a FAP actor in the presence and absence of a teacher may shed light on the role of teacher disapproval. Children will be likely to rate an observing teacher as unhappy. As previously mentioned, existing research has demonstrated the tendency for parents to focus on the negative feelings of the recipient in response to failures to act prosocially (Grusec, 1991), indicating that parents may exhibit a certain degree of negative emotion in such situations. Extending this logic to the school context, we examine whether children's perceptions of a teacher's emotion in response to a failure to act prosocially operate in the same manner. That is, if the teacher is absent, disapproval from the teacher is not likely to be a primary concern and children should therefore see the actor as feeling more positively than when the teacher is present.

Goal of the current study

The primary aim of our study is to examine whether children perceive a unique combination of emotional consequences for the individuals involved in FAP, or whether children's understanding of FAP is similar to prosocial behaviours or victimization. We specifically investigate children's understanding of the emotional consequences for an actor, a recipient and an observing teacher in all three situations.

We predict that pre-school children's ratings of the actor will be affected by the presence of an observing teacher in the story for failure to act prosocial situations, just as they should be in victimization situations, such that children will perceive the actors as less positive when the teacher is present. With regard to emotion ratings of the recipients, we predict that children will judge the FAP recipient to feel less happy than in prosocial situations because the nature of a FAP necessitates that someone experience distress requiring a prosocial act. FAP situations begin with the recipient in distress, thus signalling a negative emotion. However, we also predict that children will not judge the FAP recipient to feel as unhappy as the victimization recipient because there is no harm actively being done to the FAP recipient. The victimization recipient, however, is actively stolen from or physically harmed.

In short, we hypothesize that children's ratings for the emotional consequences of FAP will be distinctly different from their ratings for the emotional consequences of prosocial and victimization behaviours. We examine these hypotheses by telling children stories representing each of the socio-moral situations and then asking them to rate how the characters feel and to justify their ratings. We compare children's ratings of each character's emotional reaction across teacher presence/absence conditions and socio-moral situations, with failures to act prosocially as the focus of the comparison. In combination with these analyses, qualitative analyses of children's justification for their

emotion ratings should allow us to draw conclusions about children's perceptions of the important outcomes for failures to act prosocially.

Method

Participants

Participants included 53 pre-school children ($M = 4$ years 7 months, $SD = 3.39$; range = 4 years to 5 years 9 months; 26 males, 27 females) recruited from a total of four pre-schools in the Midwest and Northeast regions of the USA. Children came from primarily white, middle to upper-middle class families and were recruited through permission letters sent home to parents. The first author and three undergraduate research assistants conducted the interviews, with each interviewer spending two class periods building rapport with the children before beginning the study procedures.

Materials

Interviewers used a small felt board play set to illustrate six socio-moral stories. Two stories represented each of three different socio-moral events: failing to act prosocially, prosocial behaviour and victimization (see Table 1). In failures to act prosocially, an actor failed to relieve another child's obvious need, while in prosocial situations the actor aided the other child. Victimization stories were characterized by the active exploitation of another child (Turiel, 1983). Because 4- and 5-year-old children can more accurately judge a story character's emotion when the character's desires seem reasonable (Rieffe, Terwogt, Koops, Stegge, & Oomen, 2001), all story plots represented common desires. Thus, even if a child in our study did not like cookies, it would still seem reasonable that another child would want to eat cookies. We are therefore confident that the children in our study were able to make accurate emotional predictions, even if the story character's desires differed from their own. There was no indication of affect in the stories and all the felt figures had neutral facial expressions (Arsenio, 1988; Arsenio & Kramer, 1992; Wiersma & Laupa, 2000). A 5-point scale was used to code the emotion states of: *very happy* (5), *a little happy*, *just OK*, *a little unhappy* and *very unhappy* (1). Line drawings of facial expressions were created to represent each point on the scale. This scale was adapted from Wiersma and Laupa (2000), who demonstrated both inter-rater and test-retest reliabilities with 3- to 5-year-old children.

Procedure

Individual interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes. Before storytelling, the interviewer showed the child the emotion rating scale and asked the child to identify which face represented each of the five emotion states. For the few participants who responded incorrectly, the interviewer used a prompt until they applied the labels appropriately.

Children listened to stories with actors and recipients of the same sex as their own, and the interviewer randomly assigned the order in which children heard the stories. Each story was written on a 3×5 card. The interviewer shuffled the story cards before starting the procedure. For each socio-moral situation, the interviewer randomly

Table 1. Stories representing three socio-moral situations

Socio-moral situation	Story type	Story
Failure to act prosocially	Fail to share	Bill and Greg are eating snacks one day. Bill has cookies on his plate and notices that Greg does not have any. Bill hides his cookies so he does not have to share with Greg.
	Fail to help	Rick is carrying toys to the toy box and accidentally drops them all over the floor. Sam notices that Rick needs help picking up the toys, but Sam is colouring in his colouring book. Sam does not go over and help Rick.
Prosocial	Share*	Jenny brought a stuffed doggie (toy train) and a doll (ball) to play with at pre-school. She saw that Amy did not have any toys. Jenny handed the stuffed doggie (toy train) to Amy.
	Help	It's clean up time and Susie is sweeping the floor. Mary is all done cleaning and sees that Susie is the only one sweeping. Mary gets the vacuum cleaner and helps clean the floor.
Victimization	Steal	Jill is painting her toy horse. Kim wants to paint her toy train, but Jill is using the only paintbrush. Kim takes Jill's paintbrush without asking and paints her train.
	Harm	Jason is riding a bicycle one day. Mike wants to have a turn. Mike pushes Jason off and takes the bicycle for himself.

* Only the sharing story had different items for male and female stories. All others were the same, with the exception of the story characters' names.

assigned teacher presence or absence to one of the two stories and placed an adult figure on the felt board as if watching the action take place. The interviewer referred to the adult felt figure as the teacher because testing occurred in a pre-school setting and all stories suggested a pre-school environment. While telling the stories, the interviewer moved the felt pieces to simulate the action taking place. Before each story, the interviewer introduced the characters by name while placing the felt pieces on the board. In teacher-present stories, the interviewer placed the felt figure of the teacher on the board last and said, 'In this story, the teacher is in the room and is watching what the children are doing'. When referencing a character in the story, the interviewer simultaneously pointed to the felt figure representing the character. This procedure decreased the likelihood that children would confuse which felt figure represented which character.

Using the names of the characters and pointing to the relevant felt figure, the interviewer asked the following questions after each story: 'How do you think [the actor] is feeling right now', 'How do you think [the recipient] is feeling right now', and 'How do you think the teacher is feeling right now?' (only in teacher-present stories). After each of these questions, the interviewer followed the child's response with, 'Why do you think he/she is feeling that way?' Children rated the characters' feelings by pointing to one of the five line drawings of facial expressions that best represented the emotion. If children indicated that a character felt either happy or unhappy, the interviewer asked 'A little bit [happy/unhappy] or very [happy/unhappy]?' If the child responded verbally without pointing to one of the facial drawings, the interviewer

recorded the child's response and asked the child to point to the face that best represented that emotion state.

Children's justifications for their emotion ratings were coded into six categories adapted from Arsenio and Kramer (1992) and Wiersma and Laupa (2000): (1) *outcome orientation* – reference to actors' or recipients' possession of a desired object or achievement of a desired outcome (e.g. 'he got the toy'; 'she didn't have to give away her cookies'), (2) *normative concerns* – reference to rule adherence or departure (e.g. 'you're supposed to share'), (3) *welfare concerns* – reference to physical harm or welfare (e.g. 'he got pushed off the bike'; 'she hurt the other girl'), (4) *empathy orientation* – reference to actors' or recipients' concern for the other person (e.g. 'she [actor] didn't want Amy [recipient] to feel sad'; 'he's happy because his friend got something to play with'), (5) *repeat story plot* – failure to elaborate justification beyond reiterating the story plot (e.g. 'she's happy because she shared'), and (6) *other* – failure to respond or 'I don't know' response. We added the fifth and sixth categories to account for previous findings that many pre-school children who provide a justification often have difficulty elaborating beyond that of simply repeating the story (Wiersma & Laupa, 2000). Two independent raters coded all responses, yielding Cohen's kappa inter-rater reliabilities of .92 for actor justifications, .98 for recipient justifications, and .88 for teacher justifications.

Results

Overall, results support the hypothesis that children would assign different emotion ratings to actors, recipients and adult observers for failures to act prosocially in comparison with prosocial and victimization behaviours. Children's emotion ratings and justifications for their ratings suggest that children have a distinct understanding of failures to act prosocially relative to prosocial and victimization situations.

Preliminary analyses

We first conducted preliminary analyses to determine whether there were any significant relationships between children's emotion ratings and child age and gender. For all preliminary analyses, we used an adjusted α level of .01 as the significance criterion level to account for multiple comparisons. There were no significant gender differences for actor emotion ratings. There was a significant gender difference for ratings of a victimization recipient in the absence of a teacher, $t(48) = 2.70$, $p < .01$, indicating that girls rated the recipient as feeling significantly less happy than did boys.¹ There were no gender differences for emotion ratings of the recipient in prosocial or FAP stories. There also were no gender differences for emotion ratings of the observing teacher in any stories. Because overall gender differences were minimal, we did not include gender in any subsequent analyses.

We used bivariate Pearson correlations to examine the relationship between participants' age in months and emotion ratings. We again used an α level of .01 as the criterion level to account for multiple tests. We performed 15 correlations, 6 each for actor and recipient ratings and 3 for teacher ratings. None of the relationships were significant, and thus we did not include age in any subsequent analyses.

¹ Additional analyses revealed there were no interactions between gender and emotion ratings of the recipient.

Actor

Emotion rating

Figure 1 illustrates children's mean actor ratings and standard deviations for all three socio-moral situations. A 3 (socio-moral situation) $\times$ 2 (teacher presence) repeated measures analysis of variance on emotion ratings of the actor revealed a significant main effect for teacher presence, $F(1, 44) = 5.40, p < .05$, and a significant socio-moral $\times$ teacher interaction effect, $F(2, 88) = 3.40, p < .05$. The teacher presence main effect indicated that children thought an actor would feel happier in the presence of a teacher than in a teacher's absence.

We examined the interaction effect with follow-up simple effects contrasts, first focusing on the effect of teacher presence within each socio-moral situation. Children's emotion ratings for a FAP actor did not differ between teacher presence and absence conditions. However, children thought that an actor would feel happier in the teacher's presence than in the teacher's absence in both prosocial, $F(1, 44) = 9.61, p < .01$, and victimization situations, $F(1, 44) = 4.81, p < .05$. Further contrasts examined the effect of socio-moral situation within teacher presence conditions, focusing on FAP as the comparison condition. In the teacher-absent condition, there were no differences in actor ratings across socio-moral situations. In the teacher-present condition, children thought actors in both prosocial, $F(1, 44) = 8.23, p < .01$, and victimization situations, $F(1, 44) = 5.79, p < .05$, would feel happier than a FAP actor. Prosocial and victimization actor ratings did not differ from each other in the teacher-present condition.

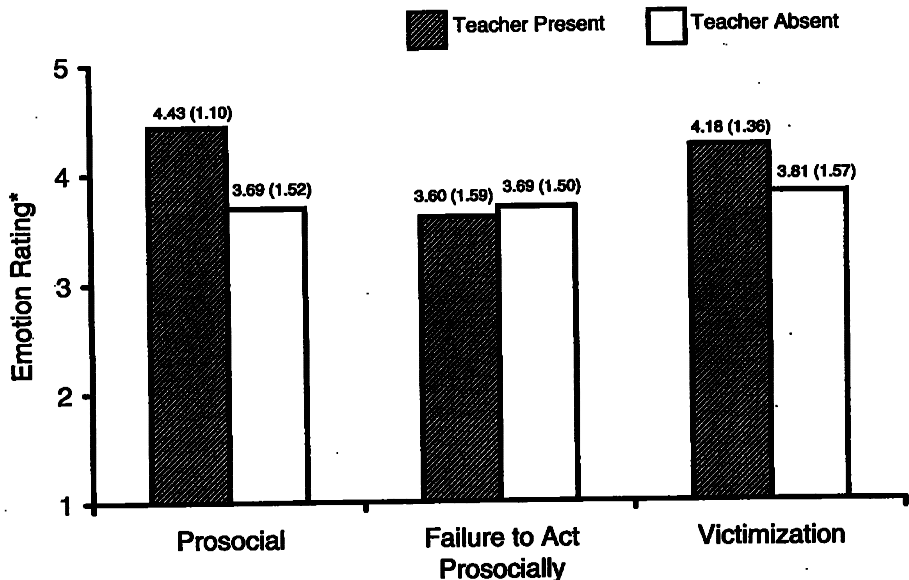


Figure 1. Children's mean ratings of an actor's emotional consequences in three socio-moral events. Means are presented with SD in parentheses. * Responses were coded as: 1 = very unhappy; 2 = a little bit unhappy; 3 = just OK; 4 = a little bit happy; 5 = very happy.

Justification of emotion rating

When justifying their ratings of a FAP actor, children overwhelmingly used an outcome orientation explanation in both teacher-present (71%) and teacher-absent (59%) conditions. This held true regardless of the emotion rating valence (happy vs. unhappy). The second most frequent response was repeating the story plot (teacher present, 16%; teacher absent, 19%), with the remaining responses that could be categorized falling within the empathy category (teacher present only, 3%).

When asked about their emotion ratings for the prosocial actor, the most frequent response was repeating the story plot (teacher present, 39%; teacher absent, 37%). However, among those responses that went beyond repeating the story plot, the majority fell within the outcome orientation category, both with a teacher present (26%) and teacher absent (30%). Interestingly, when taking into account the valence of children's emotion ratings, this pattern remained the same for teacher-present situations, but not for teacher-absent situations. When the observing teacher was absent, the majority of children who rated a prosocial actor to feel happy (66% of total ratings) explained their rating by repeating the story plot (55%), with empathy being the second most frequent justification (25%).

The pattern of children's victimization actor rating justifications mirrored that of their FAP actor rating justifications. The majority of children used an outcome orientation explanation in both teacher-present (68%) and teacher-absent (65%) conditions, regardless of the emotion rating valence. The second most frequent response was welfare concerns (7%) for the teacher-present condition, and repeating the story plot (10%) for the teacher-absent condition.

Recipient

Emotion rating

Figure 2 illustrates children's mean recipient ratings and standard deviations for the three socio-moral situations. A 3 (socio-moral situation) $\times$ 2 (teacher presence) repeated measures analysis of variance on recipient emotion ratings revealed a significant main effect for socio-moral situation, $F(2, 82) = 198.40$, $p < .001$. Simple effects contrasts indicated that children rated the FAP recipient as feeling significantly *less* happy than the recipient of a prosocial behaviour, $F(1, 41) = 175.82$, $p < .001$, but significantly happier than the recipient of a victimizing act, $F(1, 41) = 6.25$, $p < .05$.

Justification of emotion ratings

In justifying their emotion rating of the FAP recipient, the majority of responses in the teacher-present condition repeated the story plot (42%), while an outcome orientation justification was the second most frequent response (38%). In the teacher-absent condition, the outcome orientation justification was most frequent (38%), and repeating the story plot was second most frequent (35%).

When asked about their emotion ratings of the prosocial recipient, the outcome orientation justification was most frequent (teacher presence, 33%; teacher absence, 27%) with repeating the story plot the second most frequent (teacher presence, 27%; teacher absence, 23%). Children's justifications of their ratings for the victimization recipient fell primarily in the outcome orientation category in both teacher-present (57%) and teacher-absent (47%) conditions. The remainder of the responses were equally divided between normative concerns (teacher presence, 17%; teacher absence,

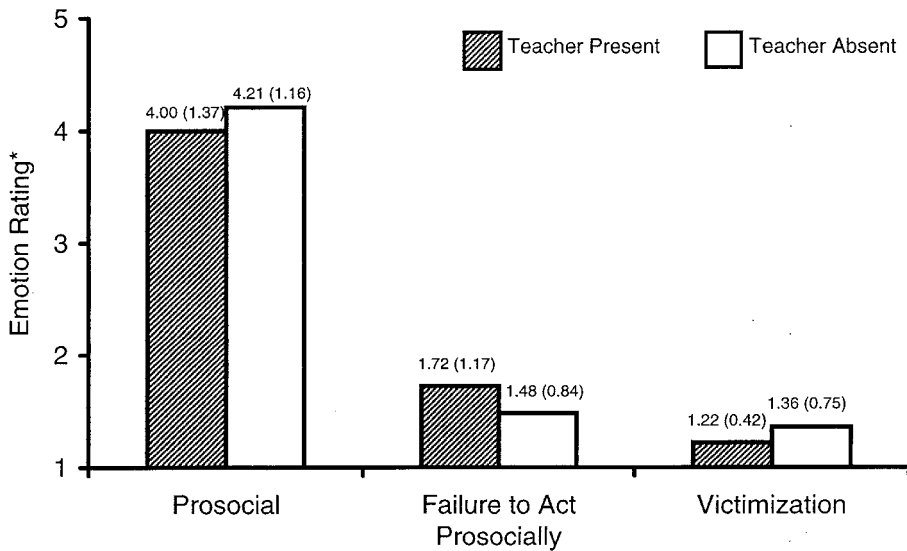


Figure 2. Children's mean ratings of a recipient's emotional consequences in three socio-moral events. Means are presented with SD in parentheses.* Responses were coded as: 1 = *very unhappy*; 2 = *a little bit unhappy*; 3 = *just OK*; 4 = *a little bit happy*; 5 = *very happy*.

23%) and welfare concerns (teacher presence, 17%; teacher absence, 27%). None of the responses fell in the repeat story plot category.

Teacher

Emotion rating

Children's mean ratings of a teacher's emotional response are presented in Fig. 3. Teacher ratings were subjected to a one-way repeated measures ANOVA to test for differences between socio-moral situations, yielding a significant main effect, $F(2, 72) = 16.17$, $p < .001$. Simple effects contrasts, focusing on failures to act prosocially as the comparison condition, revealed that children rated a teacher observing a prosocial act as feeling significantly happier than a teacher observing a failure to act prosocially, $F(1, 36) = 12.76$, $p < .01$. Children rated a teacher observing a failure to act prosocially marginally happier than a teacher observing a victimizing act, $F(1, 36) = 3.38$, $p = .07$.

Justifications of emotion rating

When asked about their teacher emotion ratings in FAP and prosocial situations, children's responses fell primarily within the repeat story plot category (FAP, 45%; prosocial, 33%) or the other category (FAP, 45%; prosocial, 52%). Also, 9% of children's responses cited an outcome orientation for the FAP teacher. Children's justifications for their teacher ratings in a victimization situation were slightly different. Although the majority of responses still fell within the repeat story plot (26%) and other (26%) categories, the remaining responses were fairly equally distributed across normative concerns (16%) and welfare concerns (21%).

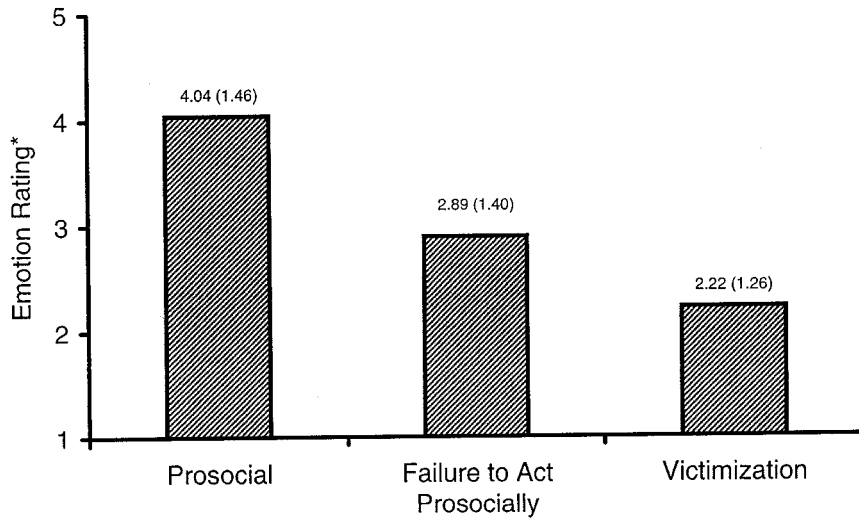


Figure 3. Children's mean ratings of a teacher's emotional consequences in three socio-moral events. Means are presented with SD in parentheses. * Responses were coded as: 1 = *very unhappy*; 2 = *a little bit unhappy*; 3 = *just OK*; 4 = *a little bit happy*; 5 = *very happy*.

Discussion

The present study compared children's ratings for the emotional consequences of failures to act prosocially with their ratings for the emotional consequences of prosocial and victimization situations. Results suggest that children's emotion ratings for failures to act prosocially are different from their emotion ratings for prosocial and victimization situations, particularly when considering the presence or absence of a teacher observer in the story. Consistent with previous studies (Arsenio, 1988; Wiersma & Laupa, 2000), the present study did not find notable age differences across 4- and 5-year-old children in their judgments of emotions in socio-moral events. Descriptive analyses suggest that children's justifications of their emotion ratings are similar for FAP and victimization situations, primarily focusing on the outcome of personal possession or material gain in both cases. Children's justifications for their emotion ratings of the prosocial actor depended on the presence or absence of an observing teacher in the story, although most children experienced difficulties in verbally expressing their reasoning in prosocial situations.

The present study provides insight into the contextual influences on children's understanding of various socio-moral situations. Although children did not distinguish between socio-moral situations in overall actor ratings, clear differences emerged when also taking into account an observing teacher's presence or absence in the story. Children's emotion ratings for the FAP actor were unaffected by whether a teacher was present or absent, but children thought both prosocial and victimization actors would feel happier in a teacher's presence than in a teacher's absence. These findings are contrary to our hypothesis that an observing teacher would influence children's emotion ratings of the FAP actor. Although children's mean rating of the observing

teacher in failures to act prosocially was closer to neutral ('*just OK*') than the mean ratings for prosocial and victimization situations, the distribution of children's FAP teacher ratings indicates that children did not choose the '*just OK*', or neutral, rating option. In fact, children's ratings were evenly split by emotion valence, indicating a lack of overall agreement among pre-school children regarding a teacher's emotional response to a failure to act prosocially.

Because the failure to act prosocially is an act of omission, rather than an act of commission, children may believe it is difficult for teachers to detect, particularly if the actor fails to perform a spontaneous, rather than a requested, prosocial behaviour. Pre-school children, therefore, may not have a clear understanding of the teacher's emotional reaction in this type of situation. This possibility is supported by the finding that the majority of children could not justify their FAP teacher emotion rating. It appears that children did not distinguish between teacher-present and teacher-absent conditions when considering the actor's emotional reaction because they did not have a clear understanding of the teacher's emotional reaction to failures to act prosocially.

We did, however, find teacher condition effects for children's ratings of the actor in both prosocial and victimization situations. Although previous research suggests that children attribute a neutral affect to a teacher observing a prosocial act (Arsenio, 1988), our findings indicate an overall happy rating. However, our findings are not directly comparable with those of Arsenio (1988), as he included two additional participants in his stories (a third character and child observer). Children's happy ratings of an observing teacher in prosocial situations suggest that children may have expected the prosocial actor to receive praise from the teacher; therefore, they rated the prosocial actor in a teacher's presence as feeling happier than a prosocial actor with no teacher present to give praise.

It is a little perplexing, however, why children rated a victimizer to feel happier in the *presence* of an observing teacher, particularly in light of children's negative emotion attributions to the observing teacher. This finding is contrary to findings of previous research that children rate an observing adult to feel negatively when witnessing one child victimize another (Arsenio, 1988). No adult consequences (e.g. punishing the child) were stated in our stories, and children may have assumed that the actor got away with the victimizing act without punishment. Perhaps children were using a cost/benefit analysis, weighing the benefit of stealing the paintbrush or the bicycle against the potential for adult disapproval. In the cost/benefit analysis, an observing teacher presents a risk; thus, children might believe that in order for the risk to be worthwhile, the actor must have *really* wanted the bike or paintbrush, resulting in a happier actor emotion rating. Taken together, these factors provide one possible reason why children thought a victimizer would feel happier in a teacher's presence than in a teacher's absence. It should be noted that, as *post hoc* conjectures, these explanations await empirical examination.

As mentioned previously, we are not familiar with any other study that has manipulated the presence/absence of an observing teacher in the story when examining children's emotion ratings of socio-moral events. The above explanations for our results regarding the teacher presence effects in the three socio-moral situations clearly deserve further attention in future studies. Although we did ask children to justify their emotion ratings, the 4- and 5-year-old children in our study appeared unable to articulate such complex reasoning.

Children's emotion ratings of a recipient provide a further possible explanation for the difference in actor emotion ratings among the three socio-moral situations. As

predicted, children thought that a FAP recipient would not feel as happy as a recipient in prosocial situations, but would feel happier than a recipient in victimization situations. Although children did distinguish between the emotional consequences for a FAP and a victimization recipient, they rated both as feeling unhappy. Children's consideration of the recipient's negative feelings may have moderated their happy attributions to the FAP actor, indicating that children are considering the actor's concern for the recipient (i.e. attributing an empathic reaction). In other words, the actor's concern for the recipient may have offset the valued outcome of not having to give up cookies or help with a chore.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

The results of our study are consistent with previous studies that failed to find notable age differences across 4- and 5-year-old children in their judgments of socio-moral emotions (e.g. Arsenio, 1988; Wiersma & Laupa, 2000). However, the age range and ethnic diversity of our sample was limited and future research should address children's understanding of failures to act prosocially across a wider age range and ethnic distribution. In particular, young children's overwhelming focus on the outcome of personal gratification in their justifications for a FAP actor's emotions may change with age. For example, as children get older, they may claim that the FAP actor feels happy because of personal gratification as well as unhappy because the recipient did not have his/her needs met. This example would illustrate that older children are typically more adept than young children at identifying multiple perspectives and understanding that an individual may experience more than one emotion at a time (Arsenio & Kramer, 1992; Harris, 1983; Harter & Buddin, 1987).

Findings also point to the importance of contextual influences on children's understanding of various socio-moral events. Although the current study provides evidence that the presence or absence of an observing teacher in the story differentiates children's emotion ratings for failures to act prosocially, prosocial behaviours and victimization, it is not clear that this effect would generalize to other adult authority figures and non-school environments. It is possible that the setting of the stories (e.g. home vs. school) and the relationship between participants (e.g. friends, siblings, strangers) contribute to variation in children's understanding of socio-moral emotions.

Finally, there has been considerable debate regarding whether children project their own emotions or take the perspective of the other person when using situational cues to infer others' emotions (Eisenberg, Murphy, & Shepard, 1997). Perhaps most relevant to the age group represented in our study, Gnepp, Klayman, and Trabasso (1982) found that pre-schoolers are able to take the other person's perspective when judging that person's emotional reactions to a situation, and are more likely to do so accurately when using personal or normative information rather than situational information. Although our stories did not provide personal information about the characters, most stories included normative information (e.g. most children would want cookies or a toy to play with, or would not want to be pushed off of a bike) as well as situational information. It is therefore likely that children were non-egocentric in their judgments of the story characters' emotions. However, further studies including stories with personal information might shed additional light on children's use of projection vs. perspective-taking in judging the emotional consequences of failures to act prosocially.

Conclusions

The present study suggests that pre-school children's understanding of failures to act prosocially is far more complex than many adults may realize. A major contribution includes assessing children's understanding of the emotional consequences for socio-moral situations within the school context. In particular, examining the role of an observing teacher for various socio-moral situations suggests that children do not appear to classify failures to act prosocially in the same category as prosocial or victimization behaviours. Overall, our findings suggest an intricate network of emotions and reasoning that pre-school children utilize when anticipating the consequences of various socio-moral situations.

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