Short Report

Children's Biased Evaluations of Lucky Versus Unlucky People and Their Social Groups

Kristina R. Olson,[1] Mahzarin R. Banaji,[1] Carol S. Dweck,[2] and Elizabeth S. Spelke[1]

[1]Harvard University and [2]Stanford University

Hurricanes strike some houses and spare others, lotteries are won and lost, and children are born into wealthy and poor families. Rationally, there is no reason to prefer people who are lucky to those who are unlucky. In fact, the explicit codes of ethics by which modern societies govern themselves emphasize neutrality or even a favoring of the least advantaged (Rawls, 1971). But rationality is not always a quality of human minds (Simon, 1957; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and this is so even when decisions involve the dimension of right versus wrong (Banaji & Bhaskar, 2000).

Understanding how children think about other people who experience luck or misfortune can provide a window into the origins of attitudes and preferences toward social groups that vary in privilege. Accordingly, we tested children's preferences for lucky versus unlucky individuals. Then we pushed further to test the generalization of such preferences beyond the individuals themselves to others who shared a group marker (same-colored T-shirt).

STUDY 1

Do children show a preference for those peers who experience randomly occurring (uncontrollable) positive rather than negative events? In Study 1, we compared evaluations of lucky versus unlucky individuals with evaluations of individuals performing purposeful (intentional) positive versus negative actions. Thirty-two 5- to 7-year-old children[1] (18 female, $M = 6$ years) heard four types of scenarios involving another child: intentional and positive (e.g., the child helped the teacher), intentional and negative (e.g., the child told a lie to his or her mother), uncontrollable and positive (e.g., the child found $5 on the sidewalk), and uncontrollable and negative (e.g., the child's soccer game was rained out).

The participants were read two-line vignettes about fictitious target children, one at a time. After each one, they were asked, "How much do you like [name]?" Responses were made on a 6-point smile-to-frown scale anchored by a large frowning face (*really don't like*) and a large smiling face (*really like*). Each child responded to 10 scenarios (out of 40 total), including at least 1 of each type. A mean preference rating was computed for each of the four types of scenarios for each subject.

The mean ratings differed across the types of scenarios, as demonstrated in a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance, $F(3, 93) = 49.18$, $p < .001$ (see Fig. 1). Not surprisingly, the children showed a preference for intentionally good peers over intentionally bad peers, $t(31) = 11.76$, $p_{rep} > .99$, $d = 3.04$ (Imamoglu, 1975). But they also showed a similar preference for beneficiaries of uncontrollable good events over victims of uncontrollable bad events, $t(31) = 3.87$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $d = 1.07$. As one might expect, the children also distinguished between intentional and uncontrollable events, showing a preference for victims of uncontrollable bad events over children who intentionally performed bad actions, $t(31) = 4.53$, $p_{rep} > .99$, d = 1.01, but only a marginal preference for children who intentionally performed good actions over beneficiaries of uncontrollable good events, $t(31) = 1.84$, $p_{rep} = .84$, d = 0.40.

STUDY 2

In a second experiment, we investigated whether this preference for the lucky over the unlucky spreads to new members of groups associated with good versus bad fortune. On each of two trials, forty-three 5- to 7-year-old children[2] (21 female, $M = 6$ years) were introduced to members of two groups (five members each) distinguished by their T-shirt color and location on the computer screen (right or left side). Three members of one group were described as beneficiaries of uncontrollable positive events, whereas three

Address correspondence to Kristina Olson, 33 Kirkland St., Cambridge, MA 02138, e-mail: krolson@wjh.harvard.edu.

[1]One additional child was excluded because of inattentiveness.

[2]Two additional participants were excluded because of parental interference or limited English comprehension.

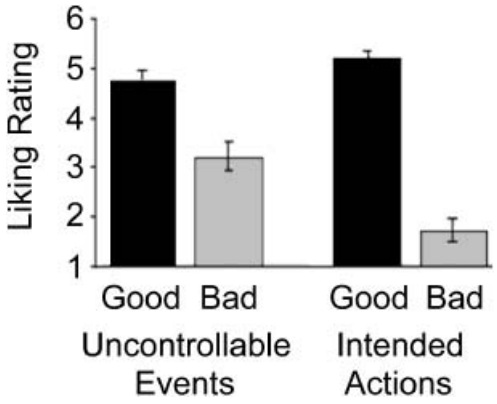

Fig. 1. Results from Study 1: children's rated liking of people who were targets of uncontrollable good or bad events, or perpetrators of intentional good or bad actions. Error bars indicate standard error of the mean.

members of the other group were described as victims of uncontrollable negative events. The remaining two members of each group were described neutrally (e.g., "Charlie likes oatmeal"). Thus, although group membership was never explicitly mentioned, the descriptions created a systematic yet imperfect association between group and luck. Subjects were then introduced to two new people, one belonging to each group, and were asked, "Who do you like more?" A similar procedure was followed to introduce the children to groups associated with intentional good versus bad actions and then to assess the children's liking for new people wearing T-shirts of the colors associated with these groups.

We calculated the proportion of trials on which the children preferred the member of the lucky or good group. We then conducted separate chi-square goodness-of-fit tests for the uncontrollable-events and intentional-actions scenarios to determine whether the children had a significant preference for people who appeared to belong to the good and lucky groups.[3] The children preferred new individuals who belonged to the mostly lucky group to those who belonged to the mostly unlucky group, $\chi^2(2, N = 38) = 7.68, p_{rep} = .92, w = .45$. In other words, the children preferred individuals who belonged to groups with lucky members despite the fact that (a) the group distinctions were arbitrary (T-shirt color and screen location), (b) the groups were never labeled as groups (e.g., "This is the blue-shirt group"), and (c) the children had no knowledge of the new members besides their group membership. Most remarkably, the effect was obtained even though group membership was not perfectly correlated with event type. Not surprisingly, children also preferred new individuals who belonged to the intentionally good group to those who belonged to the intentionally bad group, $\chi^2(2, N = 40) = 27.8, p_{rep} > .99, w = .83$.

[3]A trial was dropped from analysis if the participant announced that his or her choice was based on the child's name or T-shirt color (4.4% of trials).

CONCLUSION

Every society is marked by social inequalities. Recognition of the source of inequalities (often luck) might suggest favoring the disadvantaged, as evinced by messages in holy books, theories of justice, and the values expressed on surveys. But such abstract principles of justice are less often seen in the actions of individuals (e.g., Lerner, 1980). The two experiments reported here show the difficulty that confronts young humans as they make interpersonal decisions about how much they like individuals who benefit from sheer luck or experience misfortune. Young children (a) express stronger liking for people who are the beneficiaries of good luck compared with people who are the victims of bad luck and (b) generalize this preference beyond the individuals themselves to those who belong to the same group. Because people who begin life with disadvantage are also more likely than others to experience negative events that are beyond their control (e.g., those most affected by hurricanes are often the people who are the poorest), this preference for people with privilege may further increase negativity toward the disadvantaged. Such preferences may, in turn, help explain the persistence of social inequality.

Acknowledgments—We thank A. Reynolds for drawings used in Study 2, Harvard Museum of Natural History for research space, and A. Russell, C. Borras, R. Rau-Murthy, R. Ruhling, M. Mahone, V. Loehr, P. Hayden, and R. Montana for data collection. This research was supported by the Beinecke Scholarship, National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and Third Millennium Foundation.

REFERENCES

Banaji, M.R., & Bhaskar, R. (2000). Implicit stereotypes and memory: The bounded rationality of social beliefs. In D.L. Schacter & E. Scarry (Eds.), *Memory, brain and belief* (pp. 139–175). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Imamoglu, E.O. (1975). Children's awareness and usage of intention cues. *Child Development*, *46*, 39–45.

Lerner, M. (1980). *The belief in a just world: A fundamental delusion*. New York: Plenum.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Simon, H. (1957). *Models of man*. New York: Wiley.

Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. *Science*, *185*, 1124–1131.

(RECEIVED 1/3/06; REVISION ACCEPTED 3/13/06; FINAL MATERIALS RECEIVED 3/15/06)