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Title

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Authors

Tatone, Denis
Pomiechowska, Barbara
Schlingloff, Laura
et al.

Do infants infer prosocial goals from disadvantageous payoffs in joint action?

Denis Tatone
Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Barbara Pomiechowska
Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Laura Schlingloff
Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Gergely Csibra
Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

People may engage in a joint activity (JA) to accrue material rewards or to help others. From a third-party perspective, the occurrence of JAs is thus ambiguous about the goals of the participating agents. We argue that the payoff structure of a JA (how costs and rewards are distributed) may help disambiguate these goals. Specifically, we hypothesize that an agent's participation in a JA should be interpreted as prosocially motivated when its costs cannot be recouped by material rewards (disadvantageous payoff). We tested this hypothesis across three looking-time experiments with 12-month-olds. As predicted, infants expected a disadvantaged agent to behave altruistically towards her JA partner (Exp. 1). However, this expectation might be explained by a sensitivity to changes in overall reward distribution from familiarization to test (Exps. 2 & 3). Our results call for a re-evaluation of the role that payoff information plays in early goal attribution within JA contexts.