"Helping" Versus "Being a Helper": Invoking the Self to Increase Helping in Young Children

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Can a subtle linguistic cue that invokes the self motivate children to help? In two experiments, 3- to 6-year-old children (N = 149) were exposed to the idea of "being a helper" (noun condition) or "helping" (verb condition). Noun wording fosters the perception that a behavior reflects an identity—the kind of person one is. Both when children interacted with an adult who referenced "being a helper" or "helping" (Experiment 1) and with a new adult (Experiment 2), children in the noun condition helped significantly more across four tasks than children in the verb condition or a baseline control condition. The results demonstrate that children are motivated to pursue a positive identity. Moreover, this motivation can be leveraged to encourage prosocial behavior.

What motivates young children to help others? Helping is inherently social behavior (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006) and indeed making social goals salient has been shown to increase helping in young children (Over & Carpenter, 2009). Yet we suggest that, ironically, a focus on the individual self can also motivate helping. In addition to its social function, helping can indicate that the helper has positive qualities. Could a subtle cue that signals that helping would imply something positive about the self—that it would make one "a helper"—motivate children to help more?

Both children and adults are highly motivated to think of themselves as "good" and worthy of approval (Burhans & Dweck, 1995; Dunning, 2005; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). One important component of how people evaluate both themselves and others involves behavior (e.g., Bem, 1972). Because behavior is often controllable, people can shape their self-image by behaving in ways that reflect the kind of person they want to be. As such, when behavior is construed as having implications for the self—as reflecting not just what one does but who one is—people may strive to *be* (or become) good by *doing* things that are good. Indeed, recent research suggests that adults are more likely to perform socially approved behaviors (Bryan, Walton, Rogers, & Dweck, 2011) and less likely to perform socially disapproved behaviors (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013) when subtle linguistic cues represent that behavior as reflective of the self. For instance, Bryan et al. (2011) found that adults who completed a survey that referred to voting with noun wording (e.g., "How important is it to you to be a voter") the day before an election were more likely to then vote than adults who completed a survey using verb wording (e.g., "How important is it to you to vote"). This, Bryan and colleagues suggest, is because the noun condition represents voting as a way to claim the identity "voter."

Here we explore whether young children actively manage their identities in response to similar linguistic cues. Specifically, we examine whether noun wording can motivate prosocial behavior in young

children. Previous theory and research suggest that, by preschool age, children have developed a sense of self and can evaluate their "goodness" and "badness" (Burhans & Dweck, 1995; Eder & Mangelsdorf, 1997; Harter & Pike, 1984; Marsh, Ellis, & Craven, 2002; Stipek, Gralinski, & Kopp, 1990). However, research has not examined whether children at this age *actively* manage their identities. That is, can behavior be shaped by children's perceptions of its implications for identity?

To test this question, we framed helping behavior as more or less relevant to the self by referring to helping using either a verb or a predicate noun (e.g., "You could help [be a helper]"). This manipulation draws on a large volume of past theory and research indicating that noun wording, more than verb wording, conveys that a behavior reflects a person's essential character—something enduring and fundamental about the target (for an in-depth review, see Gelman, Hollander, Star, & Heyman, 2000; see also Bryan et al., 2011; Bryan et al., 2013; Carnaghi et al., 2008; Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007; Gelman & Heyman, 1999; Markman, 1989; Walton & Banaji, 2004). Even preschool-aged children are sensitive to this difference in wording, for instance, in how they perceive other children (Gelman & Heyman, 1999) and in how they react to praise of their own behavior (Cimpian et al., 2007). Moreover, when noun wording describes a potential future behavior (something one could do), as in the present research, it can influence whether people choose to perform that behavior (Bryan et al., 2011). It turns a decision about whether to engage in a behavior (e.g., "to help") into a more meaningful question about whether to be a *kind* of person (e.g., "a helper").

The present research tested whether referring to helping with a noun (vs. a verb) would affect children's helping behavior. Does the desire to "be a helper" motivate helping in young children? If so, this would suggest a much more active role for children in shaping the development of their identities than has previously been acknowledged in the literature.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

Participants were fifty-one 4- and 5-year-old children (20 boys, 31 girls; M_{age} = 4 years 7 months; 49% White, 12% Asian or Asian American, 4%

Black, 4% Latino or Latina, 2% Middle Eastern, 30% Multiracial) at a research nursery school in Northern California. An additional child failed to provide complete data and could not be included in analyses. Most children came from middle- to upper-middle-class homes. Thirty-four children were randomly assigned to the noun or the verb condition; 17 children from the same population were run subsequently in a baseline group. The age and gender composition of the baseline group did not differ from those in the two randomly assigned conditions, ps > .41.

Procedure

Children participated individually in a research room. The noun-versus-verb manipulation was embedded in the instructions and in two preliminary questions. The experimenter said:

Some children choose to help [be helpers]. You could help [be a helper] when someone needs to pick things up, you could help [be a helper] when someone has a job to do, and you could help [be a helper] when someone needs help.

Next, to reinforce the manipulation, children indicated, using 6-point scales (1 = *really not*, 6 = *really*), how much they wanted to help [be a helper] and how much they thought they would like helping [being a helper]. In the baseline condition, these instructions were omitted; there was no mention of helping.

Next, children were shown two novel, attractive toys and invited to play with them. Once children were fully engaged in playing with the toys, the experimenter provided the children with a series of four opportunities to help. In the first three cases, children had to stop playing to help; in the final case, children had to stop drawing to help. In each case, prompts made clear that help from the child was welcome but not mandatory. First, the experimenter pretended to notice that she had forgotten to pick up a pile of blocks on the floor; she then proceeded to put them in a container, providing periodic verbal prompts (e.g., "This is hard to do by myself") if children did not help spontaneously. Second, she went to put the blocks into a storage bin and pretended to have difficulty opening the lid because her hands were full. Third, as children transitioned from playing with the toys to drawing, they had the opportunity to help put away the toys. Finally, as children were drawing, the experimenter "accidentally" knocked over the cup of

crayons and made an ambiguous statement about picking them up (i.e., "Better pick those up").

The dependent variable was the number of tasks children helped with (possible range: 0–4). Children were coded as having helped with the relevant task if they (a) picked up at least one block and put it in the container, (b) lifted the lid of the bin, (c) put at least one toy in the storage bag, and (d) picked up at least one crayon and put it back in the cup.

Results

The omnibus effect of condition on helping behavior was significant, $F(2,48) = 3.62$, $p = .034$. Using pairwise comparisons, children helped with significantly more tasks in the noun condition ($M = 3.18$ out of 4, $SD = 0.81$) than in the verb condition ($M = 2.47$ out of 4, $SD = 0.94$), $t(48) = 2.23$, $p = .030$, $d = 0.81$, and the baseline condition ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(48) = 2.42$, $p = .019$, $d = 0.85$. The latter conditions did not differ; indeed, simply mentioning helping in the verb condition had virtually no effect relative to the baseline condition, where helping was not mentioned (see Figure 1).

Additional Coding

The experimenters who interacted with children were aware of children's condition assignment, because they delivered the manipulation orally. To ensure that the nonverbal behavior of the experimenters did not vary by condition, another research assistant, who was unaware of children's condition assignment, coded video recordings of each experimental session for the presence of nonverbal cues that the experimenter wanted the child's help. Specifically, the coder answered the following question

for each participating child: "Taking into account nonverbal cues (e.g., body language, tone of voice) to what extent did the experimenter communicate (intentionally or not) that she wanted the child to help her?" (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). There were no differences between conditions ($M_{Noun} = 2.94$, $SD = 0.56$; $M_{Verb} = 3.18$, $SD = 0.64$; $M_{Baseline} = 3.00$, $SD = 0.35$), all $ps > .20$. (See Data S1 in the online Supporting Information for additional coding of the video recordings and analysis of participants' responses to the manipulation questions.)

Discussion

Children in the noun ("helper") condition helped the experimenter 29% more often ($d = 0.81$) than children in the verb ("help") condition, who helped at a rate similar to those in a baseline condition where helping was not mentioned at all.

Experiment 2

An important question, about which we have so far been agnostic, is whether noun wording motivates children's helping behavior primarily because of children's desire to see *themselves* as helpers or to show *their interaction partner* that they are helpers. To some extent this is a false dichotomy as the line between how we see ourselves and how others see us is often blurry (Cooley, 1902; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Mead, 1934). Nevertheless, it is possible that children inferred that an adult who uses the word "helper" sees the world in terms of helpers and nonhelpers; perhaps children were motivated to show this person that they were
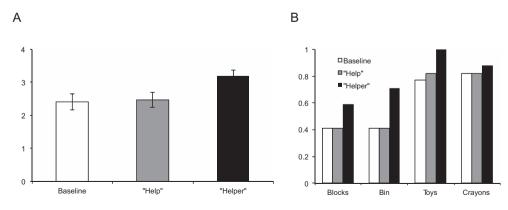

Figure 1. (A) Number of tasks children helped with in each condition in Experiment 1, possible range 0–4. Error bars are ±1 SE. (B) Proportion of children in each condition who helped with each task in Experiment 1.

helpers. In Experiment 2, we tested whether the noun wording would increase helping even when children interacted with a new adult.

Method

Participants

Participants were ninety-eight 3- to 6-year-old children (44 boys, 54 girls; M_{age} = 5 years 0 months; 50% White, 18% Asian or Asian American, 16% Latino or Latina, 4% Middle Eastern, 12% Multiracial) at nine private schools in Southern California. All children were randomly assigned to the noun or the verb condition. Data from four children were excluded: In two cases, the experimenter delivering the manipulation accidentally switched conditions in the middle of the manipulation; in one case, data about the dependent variable were not recorded; and in the final case, the experimenter forgot to set up the materials for helping. An additional child was accidentally run twice; data from his second session are not included in analyses.

An additional two children experienced disruptions to the experimental protocol—one took a 5-min bathroom break during the first helping task and the second was distracted by excessive noise during the helping phase of the procedure. We exclude data from these children in primary analyses. However, because this decision is a judgment call, we report additional analyses retaining these participants in Data S1.

Procedure

The procedure was nearly identical to Experiment 1 except that the manipulation and the dependent measures were administered by different experimenters. Experimenter 1 said:

> Some children choose to help [be helpers]. You could help [be a helper] when someone needs to pick things up, you could help [be a helper] when someone has a job to do, and you could help [be a helper] when someone needs help.

Next, to reinforce the manipulation, children indicated, using 6-point scales (1 = *really not*, 6 = *really*), how much they thought helping [being a helper] was fun and how much they thought they would like helping [being a helper]. Experimenter 1 then invited Experimenter 2 to come into the room. Experimenter 2 introduced participants to the toys

and Experimenter 1 excused herself before the helping tasks began.

Results

Unlike Experiment 1, which was conducted at a single school with dedicated research rooms and minimal distraction, Experiment 2 was conducted in nine different settings. We, therefore, controlled for school in all analyses to account for error variance introduced by variation in the testing environment. (See Data S1 for analyses not controlling for school and analysis of participants' responses to the manipulation questions.)

First, the effect of school (our control variable) was significant, $F(8, 82)$ = 2.33, p = .026. Second, as in Experiment 1, children helped with significantly more tasks in the noun condition (M = 2.88 out of 4, SD = 1.02) than in the verb condition (M = 2.36 out of 4, SD = 1.19), $F(1, 82)$ = 6.15, p = .015, d = 0.47 (see Figure 2). Although the magnitude of the effect observed in Experiment 2 was smaller than in Experiment 1 (d = 0.81), the difference in effect size between the two studies was not significant; that is, pooling the data (and excluding the baseline condition in Experiment 1), the condition by experiment interaction was nonsignificant, $F(1, 138)$ = 0.19, p = .66.

Discussion

The results of Experiment 2 replicate the basic effect of noun wording on children's helping behavior observed in Experiment 1 and show that the effect is not limited to interactions with the person who used that wording. In Experiment 2, children exposed to the opportunity to be "a helper" subsequently helped a new adult 22% more often (d = 0.47) than children exposed to the opportunity to "help."

Thus, it appears that noun wording increases helping by influencing children's beliefs about the implications of helping for their identities and not merely by conveying what a specific speaker thinks about the significance of helping. Experiment 2 does not rule out *any* role of self-presentation in the observed effect because children still helped in the presence of another person. The effect may well arise in part from children's desire to demonstrate to a new person that they are helpers (even though the new person had revealed nothing about her expectations or beliefs about helping). Critically, however, noun wording seems to have caused children to internalize the perspective that the choice to
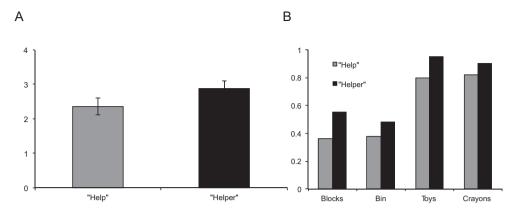
A

B

Figure 2. (A) Number of tasks children helped with in each condition in Experiment 2, possible range 0–4. Error bars are ±1 *SE*.
(B) Proportion of children in each condition who helped with each task in Experiment 2.

help or not would say something important about them.

General Discussion

In two experiments, we found that referring to helping with a noun ("helper") rather than a verb ("helping") significantly increased the rate at which children were willing to set aside engaging toys or an unfinished drawing to help an adult with chores. Children helped, we argue, because noun wording framed helping as an opportunity to take on a valued identity—to be or become "a helper." The subtlety of the manipulation and its consistent effect on behavior suggest that preschool-aged children are already thinking on some level about the kind of person they are and taking on an active role in shaping that identity.

Although we have argued that the effect of noun wording is driven by a desire to claim a positive identity, an alternative interpretation that is not ruled out by these experiments alone is that noun wording operates by a more rote, or purely cognitive process. That is, it may simply "prime" the relevant behavior more strongly than verb wording does. However, this interpretation seems unlikely given that in Experiment 1, there was no increase in helping in the verb condition (which directly activated the idea of helping) relative to the baseline condition (which did not activate the idea of helping at all). Furthermore, previous research with adults shows that noun wording does not always increase relevant behavior (Bryan et al., 2013). When noun wording refers to a socially disapproved behavior (e.g., "cheater"), people become *less* likely to engage in that behavior. This suggests that the effect of noun wording is driven by an active, motivational process, rather than by a purely cognitive process.

How do these findings relate to past research showing negative effects of noun wording among children? One previous study found that noun wording in the context of praise, relative to verb wording, can undermine children's motivation following a failure experience (Cimpian et al., 2007). In that study, children were first praised by an experimenter for their drawing ability (i.e., "You are a good drawer" or "You did a good job drawing"), and then criticized for errors in subsequent drawings. Following this failure experience, children who had received noun-based praise evaluated themselves more negatively and were less motivated to draw again in the future. A theoretically crucial difference between that study and this one is that helping behavior (at least in our studies) is not subject to the possibility of failure. In the drawing task, the question was whether the participant was a *good* drawer or a *bad* drawer. In our studies, because effort is the primary criterion for helping, the relevant question was simply whether the participant would choose to be "a helper." Noun wording may undermine motivation when the prospect of failure looms large because the noun threatens to tie that failure to the self. In contrast, noun wording may enhance motivation when failure is not a relevant concern. As a consequence, it is possible that references to being "a *good* helper" might produce effects different from references to being "a helper."

This study examined a single instance of the sort of variation in language that children are exposed to frequently in their daily lives. How might repeated exposure to noun-versus-verb wording shape the development of children's identities over time? Future longitudinal studies could examine

the effects of repeated exposure to noun-versus-verb wording on the development of a child's identity as a helper (cf. Gunderson et al., 2013). For example, this might cause children to develop a well-elaborated sense of their helpfulness (Markus, 1977) and become more sensitive to opportunities to help and the implications of their choice to help or not.

It is also intriguing to consider that adults may inadvertently signal to children, through their use of wording, that they think certain behaviors are more relevant to identity than others. In doing so, they may shape children's developing identities by influencing which behaviors children focus on in defining themselves (see Markus, 1977). For example, a child whose parents refer to her as "a swimmer" but to her musical pursuits as "playing the cello" may come to see swimming as more central to her sense of self than playing the cello. Parents' choice of wording may also reflect their underlying beliefs about the relative importance of different behaviors such that they use nouns to refer to behaviors they see as more important (see Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012). If so, parents' word choice may be a (presumably nonconscious) mechanism by which they transmit their values to—and help shape the identities of—their children. Relatedly, if parents had a tendency to use this type of essentialist language in referring to behavior more generally, they might instill a broader essentialist thinking style in their children (see Dweck, 1999; Master, Markman, & Dweck, 2012). These are exciting directions for future research.

In conclusion, the present results show that young children are sensitive to subtle linguistic cues that signal that prosocial behavior will allow them to claim a positive identity. Children respond to these perceived opportunities by behaving in ways that are typically characterized as altruistic. Ironically, this suggests that one important motive for prosocial behavior is actually quite *self*-ish.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Data S1. Supplemental Analysis and Discussion