

Preschoolers show cultural differences in generosity, competitiveness

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In a set of sharing experiments, Spanish-speaking Latino preschoolers were more likely to choose options that would be more generous to others, even over a more equal sharing choice.

Their English-speaking peers in the Washington State University study more often chose the most competitive option, one that advantaged themselves over others. The most competitive among that group were English-speaking Latino children, a finding that the researchers believe may reflect their desire to transition to the more individualistic American culture.

This study not only adds evidence that children from collectivist cultures, which prioritize the good of the group over the individual, show those values early, but also helps distinguish their motivations.

"We knew that Spanish-speaking kids tended to be more cooperative, but we didn't know whether that had to do with generosity or wanting things to be equal. Our work shows that they're not more driven by equality. They're just flat out more generous," said Paul Strand, a WSU psychologist and senior author of the study published in [The Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology](#).

Strand, along with WSU graduate students Erinn Savage and Arianna Gonzales, ran a set of [game](#)-based experiments with 265 children ranging in age from 3 to 5 who were all enrolled in a Head Start preschool program. They used three "economic dictator games," originally developed by Swiss and German researchers, which give children choices on keeping and giving items they liked.

In one game, the child had a choice between an equal scenario: keeping one sticker and giving one to an unnamed classmate and a more generous option: keeping one sticker and giving the classmate two. A second game gave the kids the equal scenario and a more selfish or "competitive" option in which the child could keep both stickers and give the classmate none. In the third game, the child could choose the equal option of keeping one and giving one, or simply keep one sticker without giving the classmate any—perhaps the most competitive option in all three

games.

Across the games, the Spanish-speaking Latino children chose the options that resulted in their classmates having as many stickers as possible, more often than their English-speaking peers did. The English-speaking children as a whole tended to pick the options that were either equal or benefitted themselves. However, in the last game, 49% of English-speaking Latino children chose the most competitive option in which they kept a sticker and gave none. About 34% of their white and Black peers and 30% of Spanish-speaking children chose that option.

"These are children coming from a family that was collectivistic in their backgrounds, but they're even more immersed in interacting with individualistic kids because they're speaking English, so they may be overcompensating," said Strand.

The researchers also asked teachers to fill out surveys on how the children acted in class and found that the children's competitive choices did not appear to be tied to behavioral problems. This is contrary to a previous study that found a link between bad behavior and competitive choices of white children.

That competitiveness may be part of a developmental stage for some children that doesn't require special attention from teachers, Strand said. He also noted that other research has found that all children tend toward more equal choices when they reach school age.

Psychologists are particularly interested in the [preschool years](#) because it is a time when [children](#) start to emerge from a self-centered focus to interact with others more socially, which as this study shows, can also reveal their cultural values.

"Even as early as four years old, we see these [cultural differences](#),"

Strand said. "They may be getting these from the home environment. We don't know all the ways cultural values are transmitted, but we know that they get them early."

More information: Erinn Savage et al, Generous, egalitarian, and competitive social values: An intercultural, intracommunity analysis of preschoolers, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appdev.2023.101580](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2023.101580)

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