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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 44(44)

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Publication Date

2022

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Peer reviewed

Not just if, but how much: Children and adults use cost and need to make evaluations about generosity across contexts

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Abstract

Evaluations of others' generosity are critical for identifying quality social partners, yet the factors which systematically affect these evaluations and how they vary across development are still relatively unclear. In this work, we propose that two key evaluative dimensions are the cost associated with a giving action and the need of the recipient. In this way, we suggest that information about both the giver and the recipient influences generosity evaluations. Across two sets of studies, we establish that adults' and children's third-party evaluations of generosity indeed are sensitive both to the cost and need associated with the action. Variations in cost and need predicted responses across several, distinct manipulations. Further, these effects were observed both in comparative and standalone contexts, suggesting both dimensions are spontaneously invoked in third-party evaluations. Interestingly, children's responses to cost manipulations were less consistent than to need manipulations, implying cognitive development could contribute to cost understanding.