ABSTRACT

This body of work explores inequality aversion, and more generally prosociality in early childhood using the resource allocation task (RAT). Across a series of experiments, a number of different research questions are addressed by manipulating the trials included in the RAT or experiences that occur prior to the RAT. Insight into the development of underlying motivations and situational influences on inequality aversion in children is obtained. In Study 1 a longitudinal approach is used to explore the development of aversion to both advantageous and disadvantageous inequality. Results suggest that aversion to these types of inequality develop differentially and preferences for equality are influenced by different motivations. Importantly, reliability of children’s responses as well as validity for the conceptualization of these two different types of inequality is also established. Study 2 attempted to determine if fairness norms or social comparison concerns was the primary motivation underlying preferences for equality in situations of disadvantageous inequality. The results provide support for the influence of social comparison concerns particularly in costly situations, and particularly for older children (6-year-olds) as opposed to younger children (4-year-olds). Finally, in Study 3 the influences of empathic concern and personal distress are explored in children 5-6 years of age (Study A) and 3-years of age (Study B) by assigning children to watch either an empathy inducing video of a little girl upset that her dog has run away, or a neutral control video of the same girl preparing for a yard sale. Across both studies increased prosociality was observed in the emotion induction group as children shared more in situations of advantageous inequality and showed less envious behaviour in situations of disadvantageous inequality. Prosocial behaviour was correlated with empathic concern (emotion rating’s of the stimulus character) but not personal distress (rating’s of own emotion). Together, this body of work provides a breadth of information regarding how, why, and when inequality aversion develops in childhood, as well as what factors may motivate or influence decision-making. Importantly, such information may allow us to better encourage and support the development of positive social behaviours and prosociality.