Beliefs about Social Exchange: A Story of Corrupt Politicians and Savvy Preschoolers

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This is a story about the inspiration for a new line of work my colleagues and I recently began. A couple of years ago, I became interested in—some might say obsessed with—a corruption trial that involved the former Governor of Virginia, Bob McDonnell (2010–2013). In 2014, after he left office, Gov. McDonnell was indicted on federal public corruption charges, for "accepting personal benefits in exchange for an agreement to influence government matters."

Over the course of the trial, all kinds of salacious details emerged about marital difficulties between Gov. McDonnell and his wife, financial problems in the family, and so on. But here are the facts that are relevant to the story I want to tell. Johnnie Williams was the chief executive officer of a Virginia-based company called Star Scientific. Star Scientific had developed a dietary supplement (derived from tobacco plants) called Antabloc, which the company believed could be useful in the treatment of diseases that are characterized by inflammation (e.g., ulcers, Alzheimer's). According to the indictment, Mr. Williams began attempting to develop a relationship with Gov. McDonnell early in his term, in order to get the Governor's help in supporting and promoting his company and its products.

So if you're a rich businessman and want to curry favor with an elected official, what can you do? In the US, you can go the legal route and donate to their campaign or their political action committee. Or you can go the (possibly illegal) route of showering the official with gifts. In Virginia at the time, there was no cap on how much or what kinds of gifts elected officials could accept. Mr. Williams took both routes.

During the trial, Mr. Williams freely admitted that over the course of 2 or 3 years, he gave over $160,000 in gifts and loans to members of the McDonnell family, including $15,000 for the catering of Gov. McDonnell's daughter's wedding; a $10,000 engagement gift for another of Gov. McDonnell's daughters; $20,000 in apparel and accessories for the Governor's wife; a $6,500 Rolex watch for Gov. McDonnell; golf trips for the Governor's sons; family holidays at a lakeside vacation home and rides in a Ferrari; and loans of $120,000 at very favorable rates to help the Governor with his struggling real estate investments. When asked, Mr. Williams also said that he did not consider Gov. McDonnell to be a friend (and by the end of the trial, Gov. McDonnell probably felt the same way).

As details continued to emerge about just how generous Mr. Williams had been, Gov. McDonnell kept repeating that he had never done anything for Star Scientific in return. He seemed astonished that people would find that hard to believe. In fact, during the trial he said that everyone knew that a standing rule for his administration was: "If you can't take somebody's money and be able to vote against their interests the next day, you don't belong in this business."

Members of the LIFE program who have read this far are likely to recognize the absurdity of this "standing rule." Plenty of research shows that returning favors is a deeply ingrained part of who we are. You don't have to look very far to find examples: In the US (and also in Germany, Ed.), charities sometimes include a sheet of personalized return address labels in their mailings because it increases the likelihood that the recipient will donate. Our instinct to reciprocate is thought to have played a crucial role in the development of human culture by enabling cooperation and smooth social exchange (e.g., Cialdini, 2001). If indeed Gov. McDonnell was not influenced by the gifts he had received, he was guilty of an arguably worse crime of violating a key provision of the social world: If I scratch your back, you'll scratch mine.

The drive to reciprocate is evident early in development. In a study by Dunfield and Kuhlmeier (2010), for example, 21-month-olds saw two actors, seated at a table. One actor gave several small toys to the children, one at a time. The other placed the same number of toys on the table, but

she did not offer them to the children. Instead, the toys rolled to them, as if by accident. Later, when the same two actors needed help reaching something that was beyond their grasp, most toddlers retrieved the item for the actor who had earlier deliberately given them toys rather than the one who had done so accidentally.

I kept saying to anyone who would listen to me during the trial that even a 4-year-old would recognize how crazy it was for Gov. McDonnell to expect people to believe that he had not been affected by Mr. Williams's gifts. Even if you did not agree with his politics (and I did not), Gov. McDonnell was a very smart guy. His failure to understand how his actions would be perceived was stunning, especially given the size and extravagance of the gifts. Surely, even a child would expect that someone who had been given a gift would, if given the opportunity, return the favor. As it turns out, I couldn't find a study that made this particular point clearly. So I convinced a couple of colleagues that we should do a study (Nameera Akhtar at UC-Santa Cruz and Ben Converse at UVA), and we recruited an undergraduate research assistant to help (Angelica Chang at UVA).

Our first study was simply an attempt to see whether preschoolers would expect a gift recipient to reciprocate with something tangible—if a recipient has the opportunity to reciprocate with "stuff," would children expect them to do so? Or if the recipient later just acted in a friendly manner, would that be enough to satisfy children's expectations about the reciprocal obligation?

We showed 4- and 5-year-olds several vignettes like the one in Figure 1. In the experimental condition, children saw Character A give some items to Character B, and in a control condition, they did not see this initial exchange. Children in both conditions were told that the next day, the two characters bumped into each other, and children were asked to decide what happened next: Would Character B give some stuff to Character A? Or would she offer a friendly greeting? Our interest was in whether children in the experimental condition would be more likely than those in the control condition to expect Character B to give Character A some resources.

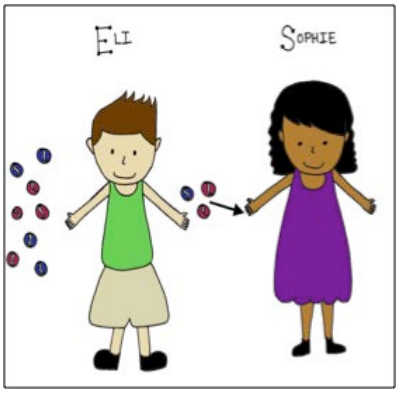
Results showed that children in the control condition expected Character B to give resources to Character A on 73% of trials, which is more often than expected by chance. This is interesting in and of itself—it suggests that kids expect that when someone has the chance to give stuff to another person, they will. But of most interest for current purposes, children in the experimental condition expected Character B to give resources to Character A on 86% of trials, more often than expected by chance and more often than those in the control condition.

We also asked children whether they liked Character B better if she gave Character A some resources, a friendly greeting, or whether they liked her the same in both endings. Children in the control condition tended to say they liked her the same in both endings; those in the experimental condition tended to say that they liked her best in the ending where she gave some resources.

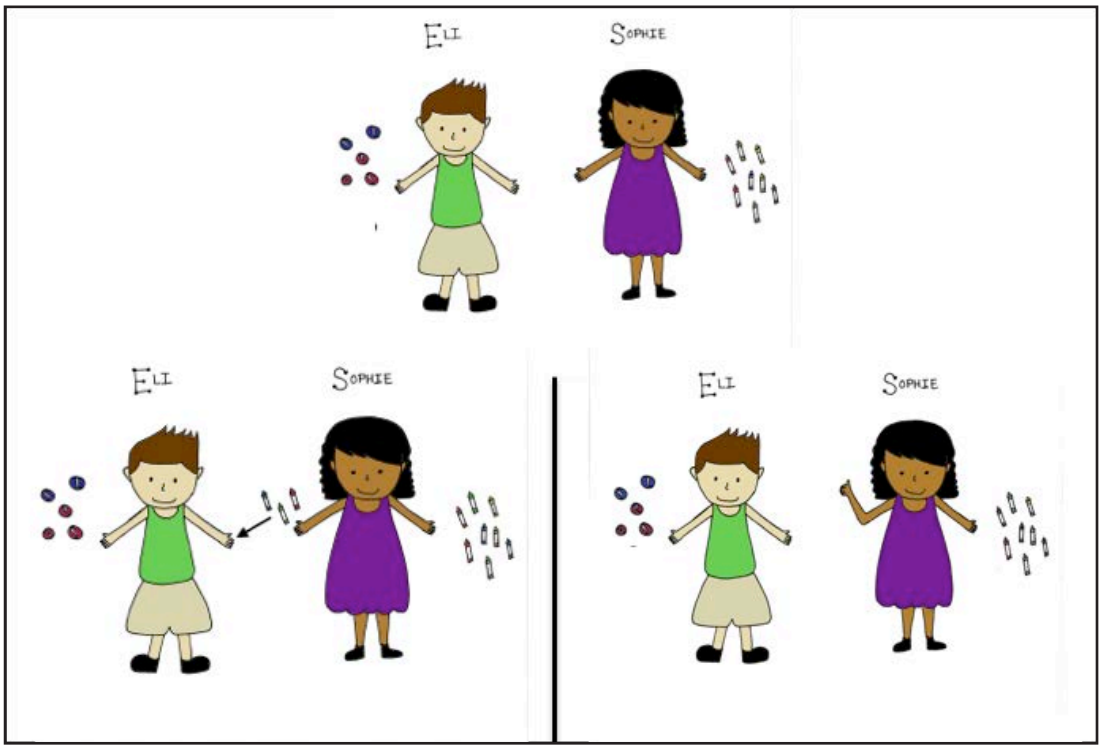
So returning to the question that motivated this study and extrapolating wildly from the results, I think we have our answer: Even 4- and 5-year-olds would expect Gov. McDonnell to give Mr. Williams something in return for his many gifts. And they think Gov. McDonnell would be more likeable if he fulfilled the reciprocal obligations in this way than if he ignored them (as he claimed to have done).

From here, we began a "proper" research program, driven less by Gov. McDonnell's situation than by theoretically interesting questions about how strong children believe the obligations of reciprocity to be. In our first follow-up study, we asked whether 4- and 5-year-olds expect gift recipients to give resources back to the initial donor, or whether they just expect that the recipient will give resources to someone (but not necessarily the initial donor).

We showed children several vignettes in which Character A gave some resources to Character B, and then children decided what would happen the next day—whether Character B would give resources to Character A or to Character C. We also ran a control condition where children did not see the initial act of giving. As expected, children in the experimental condition expected the stories to end with Character B giving to Character A (rather than Character C) more often than children in the control condition (65% vs. 46%). Interestingly, when children in the experimental condition indicated that Character B would give to Character A, they were completely unable to explain why. The data show that they expected reciprocity, but they did not have an explicit understanding of it.



"This is Eli. This is Sophie. One day,
Eli sees Sophie, says 'hello,' and Eli gives
Sophie some marbles."



"The next day, Sophie has a bunch of crayons and Eli still has some marbles."
Q1: "What happens next: Will Sophie give Eli some crayons,
or will Sophie give Eli a 'thumbs-up'?"
Q2: "Do you like Sophie better if she gives Eli some crayons, if she gives Eli a 'thumbs-up,'
or do you like her the same in both endings?"

Figure 1. Sample vignette from experimental condition of the first study. The control condition was similar, but there was no initial act of giving.

Finally, we ran a version of the same procedure with one change. Children saw vignettes in which Character A gave some resources to Character B (or not, in the control condition). As in the previous study, children were asked to decide whether Character B would later give resources to Character A or to Character C. But this time, Character A was shown with some of his original stuff, and Character C was shown with nothing. Children in both conditions expected that Character A would give to Character C—the "needy" person—rather than Character B on over 90% of trials, and they had no difficulty explaining why: "Because she doesn't have anything." Apparently, for 4- and 5-year-olds, the obligation to alleviate need trumped the obligation to reciprocate. Interestingly, we ran a small pilot study using these materials with adult participants in the experimental condition, and obtained the opposite results: Adults expected Character A to give to Character B on over 90% of trials; they

expected reciprocation even though Character C was needier.

Naturally, this set of studies raises even more interesting questions about social exchange: When in development, and how, does the obligation to reciprocate become stronger than the obligation to alleviate need? What individual differences might help explain why some adults favor alleviating need? What cultural and generational differences are there in how reciprocal obligations are fulfilled?

It's funny how this new program of research was created by my obsession with our former governor's inability to understand why people would have questions about whether he was influenced by a businessman's gifts. But when I'm talking to new and prospective graduate students, I remind them that the best way to build a research program is to find a question they are passionate about, that they really want to know the answer to. Inspiration sometimes comes in the most unlikely of places.

I imagine that many of you want to know what happened to the former Gov. McDonnell. He was found guilty of several corruption-related charges, and sentenced to two years in prison. He is currently out on appeal, and his case will be argued in front of the Supreme Court in April 2016. Heavy-hitters on both sides of the political aisle have risen to his defense, arguing that the kinds of quid pro quo in which he was said to have engaged are routine in politics, just part of the way the system works, and so the sentence should therefore be overturned.

References

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