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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of situational influences of affect and goal value on social problem-solving in middle childhood. It was expected that the adequacy of any particular social problem-solving process would be reduced by increases in goal intensity. On the basis of prior testing, two social goals of high value and two of low value were selected for 90 fourth and fifth graders. Goals were included in four hypothetical social problems presented to the children following randomly assigned happy, angry, or neutral "mood inductions." Results revealed that factors which increase the intensity of the social situation inhibited the social problem-solving process. This was reflected by reduced flexibility, greater irrelevancy, use of fewer prosocial strategies, and use of more authority-oriented techniques. Appended are six references and related materials. (Author/GLR)

Effects of emotion and goal value on social problem-solving

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Abstract

Situational influences of affect and goal value on social problem solving in middle childhood were investigated. Adequacy of the social problem-solving process was expected to be reduced by increases in goal intensity. On the basis of prior testing, two high and two low value social goals were selected for each of 90 Grade 4/5 children. These goals were included in four hypothetical social problems presented to the children, following randomly assigned happy, angry or neutral mood inductions. Mixed ANOVAs revealed that factors which increased the intensity of the social situation (affect, high goal value) inhibited the social problem-solving process, as reflected in reduced flexibility, greater irrelevancy, fewer prosocial strategies, and more authority-oriented techniques.

Introduction

Competent social problem solving includes possessing a flexible strategy repertoire and skill in selecting effective strategies. Studies of these abilities have focused largely on individual differences such as age and social status (Putullaz & Gottman, 1981; Krasnor & Rubin, 1983; Rubin & Krasnor, 1986), while situational factors have been largely neglected. Typically, researchers fail to assess the personal importance of hypothetical social problems for the subject, as well as his or her affective involvement. In this study, we investigated the influence of two contextual aspects (goal value and mood) on social strategy generation and decision.

Hypotheses

We expected the social problem-solving skills to be inhibited under conditions of high goal intensity. In particular, we predicted that social strategies will be more assertive and aggressive, less prosocial and less flexible: (1) for high value goals than for goals of lesser value; and (2) for negative affect than for positive or neutral affect.

Method

On the basis of prior testing, two high and two low valued goals were individually selected for each of 90 grade 4/5 children (35 boys, 55 girls). Randomly assigned children were given a happy, angry or neutral mood induction (Masters, Barden & Ford, 1979), followed by four illustrated hypothetical social problems involving same-sex targets in two task contexts (peer entry and object acquisition). An example is provided in Appendix A. Children generated potential strategies and

selected their preferences.

Coding yielded summary scores for prosocial, agonistic, trade/bribe, and appeal to authority strategies, as well as flexibility and irrelevancy (Rubin, 1983).

Results

In general, goal value predictions were supported. High value goals generated more irrelevant responses and less flexibility than low value goals (see Fig. 1*). In addition, high value goals elicited fewer prosocial and more authority appeals in

Insert Figures 1 and 2 here

strategy decisions than did low value goals (see Fig. 2).

Support for the mood hypotheses was mixed. Both positive (M=9.25, SD=1.99) and negative (M=9.89, SD=2.69) mood inductions diminished problem solving, resulting in fewer total strategies than the neutral condition (M=11.04, SD=1.91). The neutral group generated and selected more prosocial strategies than the angry and happy groups (see Figs. 3 and 4 respectively). The anger group also generated more

Insert Figures 3 and 4 here

irrelevant responses than neutral groups. In addition, children in the anger induction selected appeals to authority more often than did happy and neutral children.

Finally, a significant interaction for agonistic strategies (see Fig. 5) indicated that the happy group generated more agonistic responses for high value activities than

Insert figure 5 here

for low value ones, while the opposite pattern was found for the angry group. Newman-Keuls post hoc comparisons for this test, however, indicated no significant difference among the means.

Conclusions

*Note: Exact means and standard deviations for all figures are presented in Appendix B.

In summary, factors which increased the intensity of the social situation (affect, high goal value) inhibited the social problem-solving process, reflected in reduced flexibility, greater irrelevancy, fewer prosocial strategies, and more authority-oriented techniques.

Under anger induction, children selected more prosocial and generated fewer agonistic strategies than expected. These findings are consistent with Isen's (1984) repair theory, in which negative affect leads to attempts to make oneself feel better by acting "nicely" rather than retaliating.

Notoriously inconsistent results in the general literature on social problem solving may stem partially from the inclusion of goals differing in interest and value for subjects, as well as failure to approximate naturalistic conditions by excluding emotional arousal. These contextual factors deserve more attention, from both applied and theoretical perspectives.

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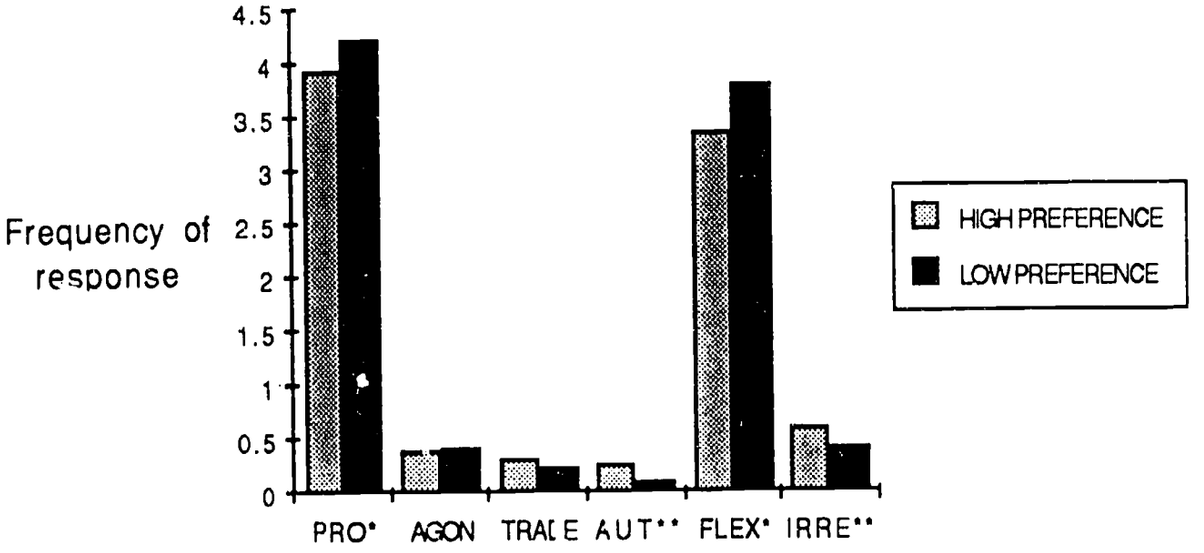
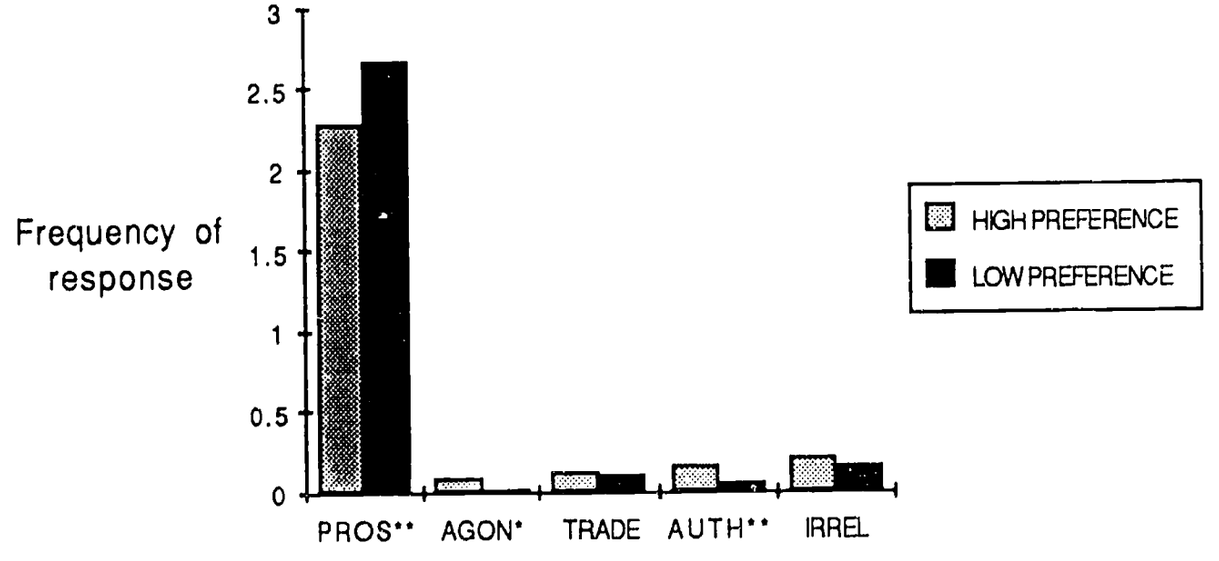
Figure 1. Mean social problem solving scores as a function of goal values for strategy generation.



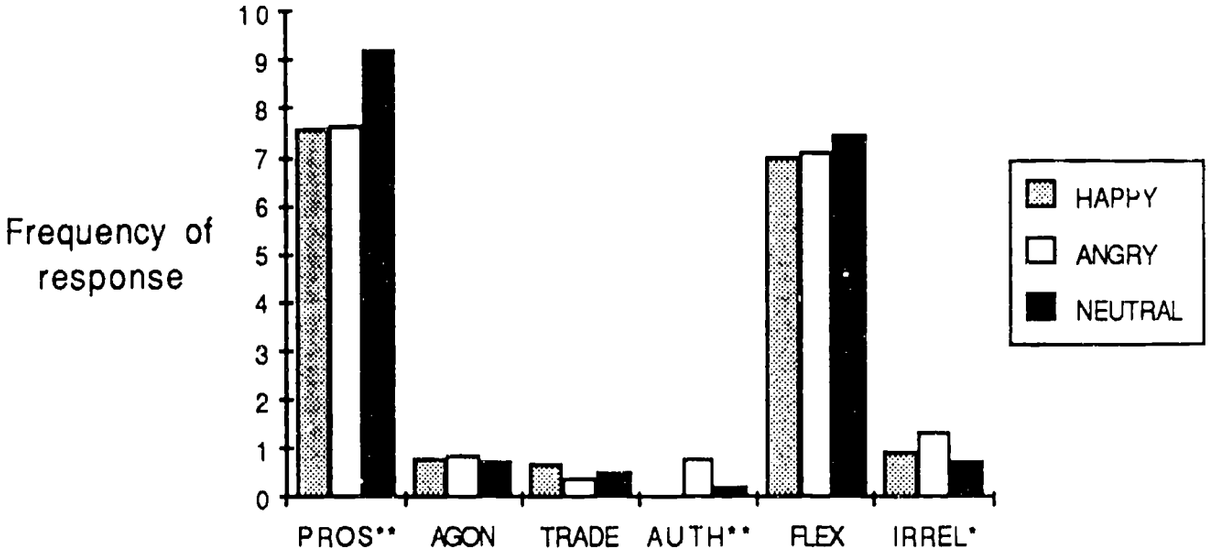
**p < 0.05 *p < 0.08

Figure 2. Mean social problem solving scores as a function of goal values for strategy decision.



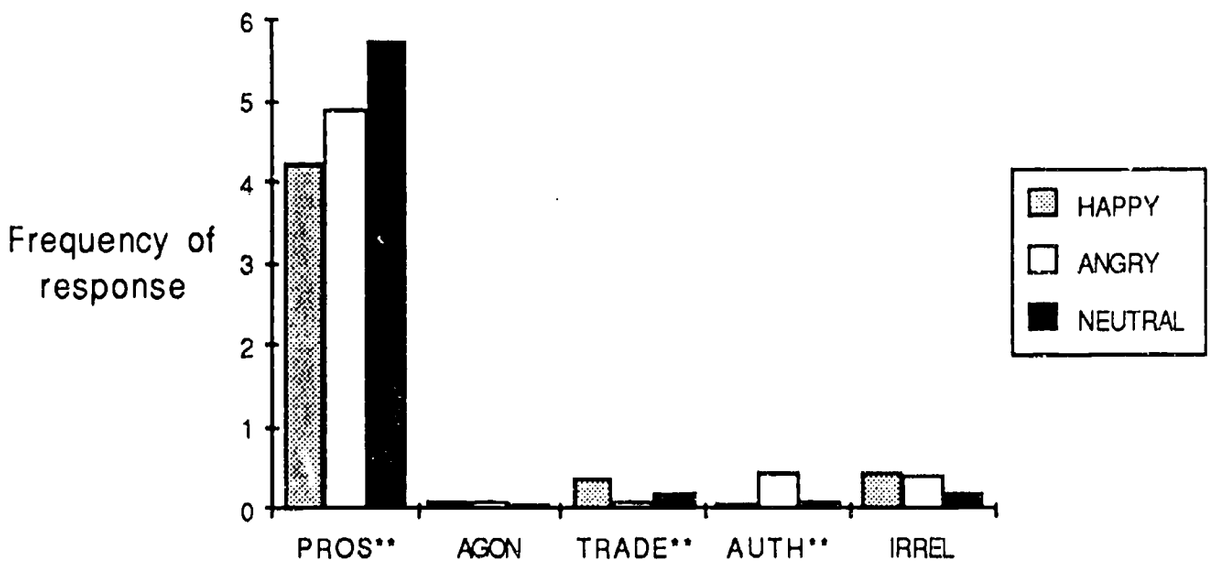
**p < 0.05 *p < 0.08

Figure 3. Mean social problem solving scores as a function of mood for strategy generation.



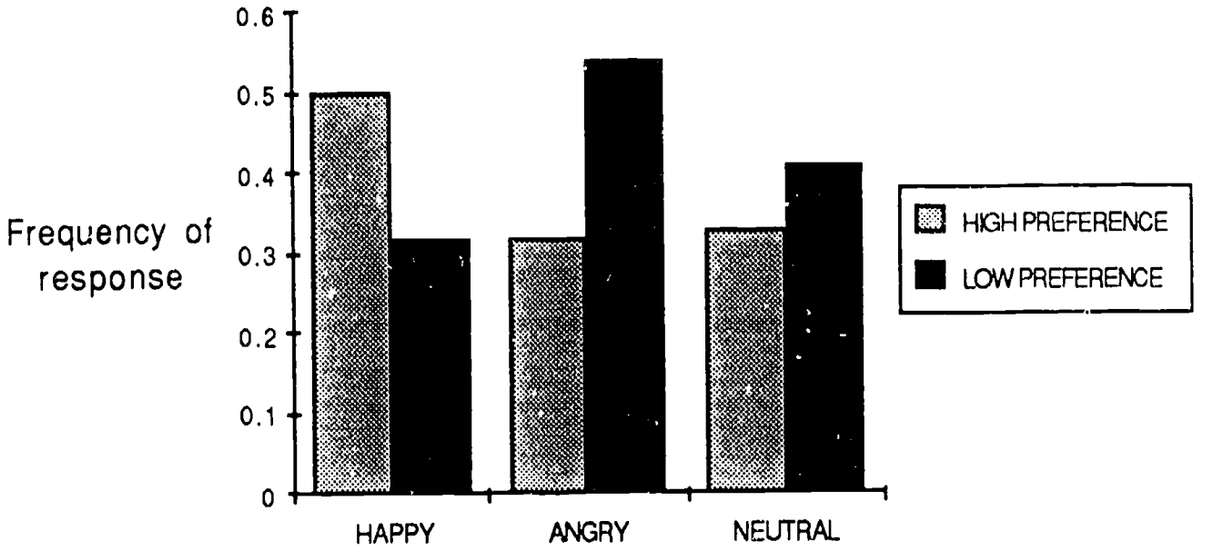
**p < 0.05 *p < 0.08

Figure 4. Mean social problem solving scores as a function of mood for strategy decision.



**p < 0.05 *p < 0.08

Figure 5. Mean frequency of agonistic responses generated as a function of mood and goal value.



**p < 0.05 *p < 0.08

Appendix A. Sample social problem-solving stories.

Male, object acquisition, anger affect, low preference

Tom and Jeff are at home. Tom is feeling angry because he was not allowed to go outside. Jeff has been reading a book. Tom would like to read the book Jeff has.

What do you think Tom could say or do so that he could read the book Jeff has?

Female, peer entry task, neutral affect, low preference

Sandy is at home. A group of girls are going swimming together. Sandy would like to join the girls going swimming.

What do you think Sandy could say or do so that she could join the girls going swimming?

Male, object acquisition, happy affect, high preference

Jeff and Ben are at home. Jeff is feeling happy because he got a present. Ben has been reading a book. Jeff would like to read the book.

What do you think Jeff could say or do so that he could read the book Ben has?

Appendix B: Means and Standard Deviations

Table 1: Social problem solving scores as a function of goal value for strategy generation.

	PROS*	AGON	TRADE	AUTH**	FLEX*	IRREL**
HIGH	3.93 (1.61)	0.39 (0.62)	0.30 (0.58)	0.27 (0.70)	3.37 (1.96)	0.60 (0.83)
LOW	4.22 (1.45)	0.42 (0.70)	0.23 (0.53)	0.11 (0.44)	3.82 (1.96)	0.41 (0.70)

** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.08$

Table 2: Social problem solving scores as a function of goal value for strategy decision.

	PROS**	AGON*	TRADE	AUTH**	IRREL
HIGH	2.28 (1.03)	0.09 (0.28)	0.12 (0.33)	0.16 (0.43)	0.22 (0.47)
LOW	2.67 (0.91)	0.01 (0.11)	0.11 (0.35)	0.05 (0.22)	0.16 (0.40)

** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.08$

Table 3: Social problem solving scores as a function of mood for strategy generation.

	PROS**	AGON	TRADE	AUTH**	FLEX	IRREL*
HAPPY	7.61 (2.18)	0.82 (1.12)	0.68 (0.90)	0.07 (0.26)	7.0 (2.48)	0.93 (0.77)
ANGRY	7.64 (2.79)	0.86 (1.14)	0.39 (0.73)	0.82 (1.49)	7.11 (3.98)	1.36 (1.77)
NEUTRAL	9.22 (2.17)	0.74 (1.12)	0.52 (0.75)	0.22 (0.64)	7.48 (2.72)	0.74 (0.94)

** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.08$

Table 4: Social problem solving scores as a function of mood for strategy generation.

	PROS**	AGON	TRADE**	AUTH**	IRREL
HAPPY	4.25 (1.35)	0.11 (0.32)	0.39 (0.57)	0.07 (0.26)	0.46 (0.69)
ANGRY	4.89 (1.80)	0.11 (0.32)	0.11 (0.32)	0.44 (0.85)	0.43 (0.84)
NEUTRAL	5.73 (1.43)	0.08 (0.27)	0.19 (0.40)	0.11 (0.32)	0.22 (0.42)

** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.08$

Table 5: Agonistic strategy scores as a function of mood and goal value.

	HIGH	LOW
HAPPY	0.50 (0.69)	0.32 (0.61)
ANGRY	0.32 (0.61)	0.54 (0.74)
NEUTRAL	0.33 (0.55)	0.41 (0.74)

** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.08$