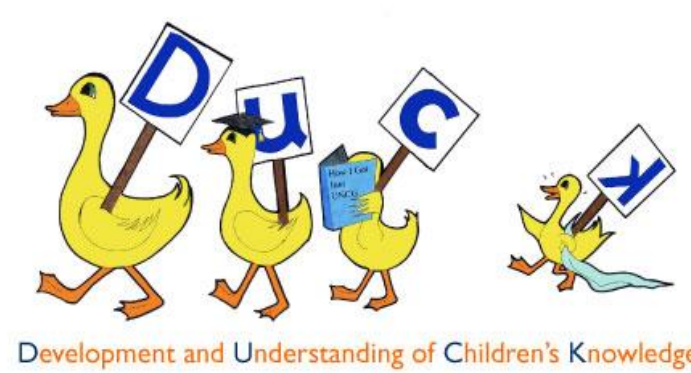


Why did she do that? Chinese children attribute positive and negative behaviors to personality traits over situations



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Introduction

Personality attributions have an important influence on psychosocial development. For example, children who attribute peers' negative behavior to internal causes and fail to account for situational causes may develop a hostile attribution bias that interferes with friendships (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Previous research has illuminated some of the influences on trait reasoning (Boseovski, Chiu, & Marcovitch, 2013; Heyman & Gelman, 1998), but less research has examined cultural differences in children's use of person and situation factors in their trait attributions of others.

American children demonstrate a tendency to be person-focused at the expense of situational information across early and middle childhood (Seiver, Gopnik, & Goodman, 2013). In contrast, Eastern Asian children consider contextual information to a greater degree than Americans (e.g., in emotion judgments of cartoon characters; Kuwabara, Son, & Smith, 2011).

Despite this cultural variation (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999), Eastern Asian children share with American children the tendency to view traits as inborn and the belief that positive traits are most likely to be maintained across the lifespan (Lockhart, Nakashima, Inagaki, & Keil, 2008).

These perceptions of trait stability may influence children's expectations for social interactions (e.g., Giles & Heyman, 2003) and the extent to which children perceive others to be in control of their own behavior or trait expression (Lockhart, Chang, & Story, 2002).

We assessed whether 4- to 7-year-old Chinese children attributed behavior to traits or situational factors overall and whether these attributions were influenced by the valence of situation and trait information.

Method

130 Chinese 4- to 7-year-olds from Hangzhou, China.

Participants heard about actors who engaged in behavior that resulted in a positive or negative outcome (e.g., sharing vs. refusing to share) in situations that involved a positive or negative situational factor (e.g., a parent left for a long trip, which provoked sadness vs. a parent returned from a long trip, which elicited happiness).

The behavior and situational factor type were crossed to produce four story categories in total: positive factor-positive outcome (PP), negative factor-positive outcome (NP), positive factor-negative outcome (PN), and negative factor-negative outcome (NN). Participants heard six vignettes in each story category. See Table 1 for examples.

Participants were asked to provide a reason (i.e., situational or person-related) for the actor's behavior in each vignette.

"Did X act this way because she's happy her mom is returning after a long trip or because she's a nice person?" (Outcome response question)

Participants were given a score of 0 for situational reasons and a score of 1 for person reasons. These scores were combined across each of the six vignettes to create an outcome response total for each story category (range: 0-6).

Figure 1. Means for outcome explanation by valence combination.

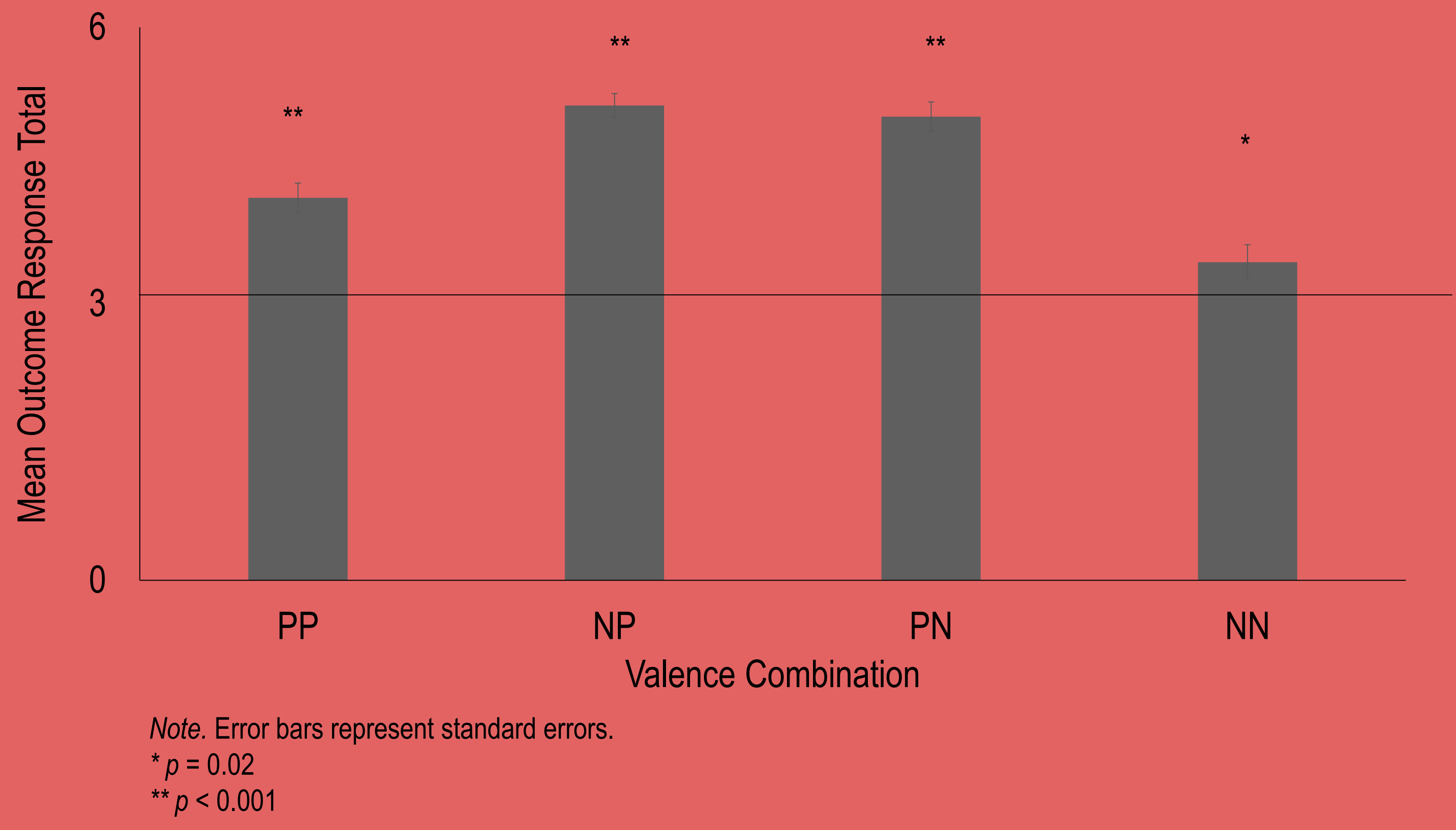


Table 1. Example story content

Story Category	Example
Positive factor-Positive outcome	"[Actor] is really happy today because her mom is coming back from a long trip...[Recipient], another girl in the class, wants to get her things too, but she can't reach because they are way at the back of the cubby. [Recipient] asks [Actor] if she will help and [Actor] says, 'Yes, I will help you so that you can get your things.'"
Negative factor-Positive outcome	"[Actor] is a chubby girl. She is not skinny or thin. She is much heavier than the other kids in her class...[Recipient] asks [Actor] if she can be her reading partner and [Actor] says, 'Yes, I want you to be my partner and we can read together.'"
Positive factor-Negative outcome	"[Actor's] stomach is full because she just ate lunch. Her stomach feels just right and it's not rumbling at all...[Recipient], another girl in the class, wants to use the play set too, so she asks [Actor] if she will share and [Actor] says, 'No, I won't share with you, so you can't play.'"
Negative factor-Negative outcome	"[Actor] is very sad today because someone stole her brand-new doll...[Recipient] asks [Actor] if they can work together and [Actor] says, 'No, I won't let you work on it, so you will have to do something different.'"

Results

A 2 (age: 4- to 5- year-olds vs. 6- to 7-year-olds) x 4 (story category: PP, NP, PN, NN) mixed ANOVA on outcome response totals revealed a significant main effect of story type, $F(2.67, 312.81) = 60.95, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.34$.

Participants attributed behavioral outcomes to traits rather than situations at a rate significantly above chance (Figure 1). Follow-up tests revealed that trait attributions were significantly stronger for positive outcome stories than negative outcome stories, $F(1, 117) = 20.87, p = 0.000$.

There was no main effect of age nor an age by story category (PP, NP, PN, NN) interaction ($ps > .10$). Trait attributions held across combinations of valenced information, but were weaker for NN stories.

Discussion

Consistent with findings for American children, 4- to 7-year-old Chinese children prioritized traits over situational causes to explain behavior. These findings challenge traditional ideas that individuals from Eastern Asian cultures make holistic evaluations of social situations (Ji, Lee, Guo, 2010). Instead, these findings support developmental similarity in trait attribution across cultures (Lockhart et al., 2008).

Notably, the tendency to make trait attributions was not uniform across story outcomes. The finding that trait explanations were favored for positive outcomes over negative outcomes suggests that children are relatively reluctant to attribute negative traits when alternative behavioral explanations are available. This is consistent with previous findings that children require more information to make a negative than positive trait attribution (Boseovski & Lee, 2006) and with research that has documented a positivity bias in trait attribution in childhood (Boseovski, 2010).

Future cross-cultural investigations in trait attribution should include children's evaluation of the situational factor type (i.e., mood or emotion versus physical appearance, etc.) proposed to elicit certain behaviors (Boseovski & Lapan, 2019). Children's trait attributions may be influenced in context-specific ways through the unique intersection of situational factors with children's propensity to endorse positive change in others.

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