Abstract

Do children believe that love persists regardless of emotions (e.g., happiness, anger) provoked by the current situation? Children (6th, preschool to Grade 3) were more likely to say that a child’s mother loved him when he was happy than that a stranger or a mean neighbor did. For all antagonists, children were more likely to say that the boy was loved when he was happy than when he was not. At all ages tested, children understood love as a volatile emotion.

Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds
William Shakespeare

Method

In the current study, 96 children (32 4-year-olds, 32 6-year-olds, 32 8-year-olds) and 21 adults each heard 12 stories (See Table 1 for examples) about an 8-year-old boy and three antagonists who varied in likability.

- His mother (whom they were told loves him and take very good care of him), an unknown woman, and a mean neighbor (whom they were told never lets anyone play in his yard).
- Half the participants heard stories in which the antagonist provoked the boy’s emotions (happiness, neutral, sadness, anger).
- Half heard parallel stories in which the antagonist was present but did not cause the boy’s emotion.

Results

Adults indicated that, regardless of concomitant emotion and regardless of whether she caused his emotion or not, the boy’s mother loved him (90.3%), and that the unknown woman (1.3%) and the mean neighbor (1.3%) did not. Adults view love as a persisting emotion.

Table 1. Examples of the stories used in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Caused</th>
<th>Not Caused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One day, Jamie drew a really nice picture. Jamie’s mom said it was really nice. Jamie was very happy.</td>
<td>One day, Jamie drew a really nice picture. Jamie’s mom was in the kitchen.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Neighbor</th>
<th>Caused</th>
<th>Not Caused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One day, Jamie’s mean neighbor gave Jamie a toy truck. Jamie was very happy.</td>
<td>One day, Jamie found his favorite truck. He was very happy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. In a mixed design ANOVA (alpha = .05), the main effect for emotion, F(2, 84) = 13.51, p < .001, showed that children were more likely to say that Jamie’s antagonist loved him when he was happy.

The proportion of “yes” responses was significantly higher (p < .001) for the happy stories than the other stories, and significantly higher (p < .001) for the sad and neutral stories than for the angry stories.

Likelihood of Saying an Antagonist Loved the Child Varied with the Antagonist’s Likability

Children’s Attributions of Love Varied with Emotion, Even for the Child’s Mother

Children’s Attributions of Love were Affected by the Caused/Not Caused Condition for Happy and Angry Emotions

Discussion

These results indicate that children, from preschool to 3rd Grade, do not understand love as a persisting emotion. Rather, their early theory of love has it as a more volatile emotion so that an angry mother does not love her son but a kind stranger does.

Children do not think that love is the same as happiness, as suggested by the results of our prior study:

- Children’s attributions of love when the child was happy increased when the antagonist caused his happiness and decreased when they did not.
- For anger, children’s attributions of love decreased when the antagonists made him angry and increased when they did not.
- Thus, children understand love that is a more complex emotion than happiness, but nonetheless they did not yet understand its persistent quality.

Our family members love us even when they make us angry, but we do not love strangers or unkink people who perform favors for us.

We have demonstrated, in two different studies, that love is a volatile emotion for children, both when we ask them about a child’s love for his parents and adults’ love for a child.

Perhaps other emotions (hate), or attitudes (expect rules), or moral inclinations, which are assumed persistent by adults, are thought volatile by young children.

References


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