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## Brief Report

# Young children understand the normative force of standards of equal resource distribution

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### ABSTRACT

Much recent research has shown that children are sensitive to basic principles of fair distribution of resources much earlier than previously assumed. Under appropriate circumstances, toddlers and sometimes even infants both expect that others will follow principles of equal distribution of resources and do so themselves. But from these findings it remains unclear whether young children understand and follow such principles of fairness as normative rules. The current study tested for such an understanding of the normative force of principles of resource distribution with a novel method. In the study, 3- and 5-year-olds witnessed how a (puppet) agent distributed resources jointly earned by herself and a fellow agent in equal or unequal ways. In one condition, the child herself or himself was this fellow agent, and in another condition it was an unrelated third party. Children spontaneously protested frequently against unfair distributions both when they themselves were affected and when another third party was affected (and never did so after fair distributions), with 5-year-olds doing so in more explicitly normative terms than 3-year-olds. These findings suggest that young children indeed understand principles of fair distribution as normatively binding regardless of whether they are personally affected or not.

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## Introduction

Children's developing understanding of fairness in resource distribution has long been studied in research on social-cognitive development (Damon, 1977). Many traditional studies interviewing children about how to distribute resources in hypothetical situations have suggested developmental progress through an ordered, stage-like sequence of successively more complex fairness principles; children first reason about resource allocation in purely egocentric ways, then (from around 5 or 6 years of age) they do so according to equality principles, and finally, only from around 8 to 12 years of age, they begin to take into account more complex factors such as merit and personal need (Damon, 1977; Hook & Cook, 1979).

More recently, this research has been revolutionized in two ways (see Blake, McAuliffe, & Warneken, 2014, for a review). First, by investigating children's intuitions about how to distribute resources in simplified ways (often involving real interactions with real resource distribution rather than purely verbal interviews about hypothetical situations), new research suggests that children are sensitive to principles of fair distribution much earlier than previously assumed. Under suitable conditions, in particular when resources were jointly earned in a collaborative task, even 3-year-olds do not distribute egocentrically but rather according to equality, sometimes even according to merit (Baumard, Mascaró, & Chevallier, 2012; Hamann, Bender, & Tomasello, 2014; Kanngiesser & Warneken, 2012; Schmidt, Svetlova, Johe, & Tomasello, 2016). Second, by confronting them with real-life resource distributions by other agents, new research suggests that, similarly, young children expect others to act fairly much earlier than previously assumed (Geraci & Surian, 2011; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011; Sloane, Baillargeon, & Premack, 2012). These two kinds of measures, first-person action and third-person expectation, were found to be related in some recent work; to the extent that children expected others to follow certain fairness principles, they tended to act on these principles themselves (or at least to act prosocially in general) (Paulus & Moore, 2014; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011).

Thus, what these findings show is that, when it comes to children's expectations of how others will act as well as to their own acts, sensitivity to principles of fair distribution emerges already during the preschool years, with some roots perhaps even during infancy. But what these findings leave open is whether and how young children understand such principles. For adults, principles of fair distribution not only are descriptive regularities reporting what usually happens but also constitute prescriptive rules stating what ought to be done with corresponding normative force; concerning our own actions, we not only act in ways that are consistent with such principles but also actively follow and are normatively guided by them (for the distinction between merely acting in accordance with a norm and actively following a norm, see, e.g., Kripke, 1982; Quine, 1972; Wittgenstein, 1953). Concerning our observation of third-party behavior in relation to these principles, we not only expect that others will act in accordance with the principles (in the descriptive sense), and correspondingly show surprise in cases where they do not, but we also expect them to follow the norms in the prescriptive sense, insisting that they "ought to" do so. We react to deviations from the principles not only with surprise but also with normative responses such as critique and protest. Another crucial feature of normative principles of fair distribution as adults understand them is that they apply in agent-neutral ways (Nagel, 1970); any agent is subject to the norm in much the same way when distributing in relation to any other agent. We see it as normatively wrong if someone distributes in deviation from such principles (say, favoring oneself) when we ourselves are personally affected as the recipients as much as when a third party is the recipient and we have no personal disadvantage.

The central empirical question from a developmental point of view, then, is when children develop an understanding of principles of fair distribution as agent-neutral prescriptive norms. To address this question, it is not sufficient to record the two above-mentioned types of measures: children's own distribution behavior in accordance with the principles and their descriptive expectations of how others will act in such accordance. Rather, more direct indicators of the perceived normative force of the principles in question are required. Such indicators can be of two kinds. First, especially with older children, explicit discourse, either spontaneously or elicited by questions, about the normative status of some distributive action yields more direct and conclusive evidence (Dunn, 1987). Research using

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