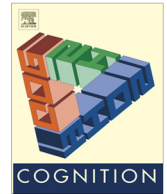




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Ownership reasoning in children across cultures

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ABSTRACT

To what extent do early intuitions about ownership depend on cultural and socio-economic circumstances? We investigated the question by testing reasoning about third party ownership conflicts in various groups of three- and five-year-old children ($N = 176$), growing up in seven highly contrasted social, economic, and cultural circumstances (urban rich, poor, very poor, rural poor, and traditional) spanning three continents. Each child was presented with a series of scripts involving two identical dolls fighting over an object of possession. The child had to decide who of the two dolls should own the object. Each script enacted various potential reasons for attributing ownership: creation, familiarity, first contact, equity, plus a control/neutral condition with no suggested reasons. Results show that across cultures, children are significantly more consistent and decisive in attributing ownership when one of the protagonists created the object. Development between three and five years is more or less pronounced depending on culture. The propensity to split the object in equal halves whenever possible was generally higher at certain locations (i.e., China) and quasi-inexistent in others (i.e., Vanuatu and street children of Recife). Overall, creation reasons appear to be more primordial and stable across cultures than familiarity, relative wealth or first contact. This trend does not correlate with the passing of false belief theory of mind.

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1. Introduction

Recent cross-cultural research indicates that market integration (i.e. average number of calories purchased per capita) and affiliation with a large world religion predict individuals' propensity to be generous as well as their tendency to distribute resources and engage in costly punishment (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Henrich et al., 2010). Such findings suggest that socio-economic and cultural context could determine much of the ways we tend to

see and relate to material possessions: how we are inclined to share and distribute justice, how we think of who owns what and why? Ethnographies and comparative studies of property rights show how norms of individual ownership may significantly vary across cultures (Barclay, 2005; O'Meara, 1990). From a developmental perspective, the question is when and how children start to manifest the individual ownership norms of their culture? Alternatively, what kind of early ownership norms might be invariant across cultures in child development?

By the second year, children manifest explicit attachment to particular person (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) and material things (Faigenbaum, 2005; Ross,

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Conant, & Vickar, 2011), becoming vocal and explicit about their possession (Bates, 1990; Rochat, 2011; Tomasello, 1998). However, the frequency and form of infants' and toddlers' early attachment and exclusive control over things may vary across cultures. Early attachment to objects or transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953) is less prevalent in cultures where the practice is for children to sleep with their parents (Hobara, 2003). When asked to split valuable goods with someone else, preschoolers growing up in rural, traditional, or small communal living environments tend to be less selfish and more egalitarian (Rochat et al., 2009). They are also less inclined to restore justice by punishing (Robbins & Rochat, 2011; see also Henrich et al., 2006 for cross-cultural differences in adults). Cross-cultural research with young children indicates that, in general, the spontaneous sharing of food and the exclusive appropriation of material things among young children may vary across cultural contexts and socio-economic circumstances (Birch & Billman, 1986; Rao & Stewart, 1999; Stewart & McBride-Chang, 2000). To the extent that there are cultural variations in the way children share resources and distribute justice among peers, questions remain whether early cultural ways of sharing may also translate in differential early reasoning and "intuitions" about who should own what and why.

In the recent influx of experimental studies on the origins and development of reasoning about possession (Ross and Friedman, 2011), entitlement (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2013), ownership of ideas (Shaw, Li, & Olson, 2012), ownership transfer (Blake & Harris, 2009; Kanngiesser, Gjersoe, & Hood, 2010), and reasons and intuitions to own (Friedman, 2008; Noles, Keil, Bloom, & Gelman, 2012), very little exists from a cross-cultural perspective (Rochat, 2014). Existing data primarily with Western middle-class preschoolers (but see Faigenbaum, 2005 for an exception) suggests that from three years of age, even possibly by two years (Fasig, 2000), young children like adults infer the ownership of an object based on a first possession principle ("who had it first owns it"; see Friedman, 2008; Friedman & Neary, 2008). By four- to five-years, children can infer ownership on the basis of who authorized the use of an object (control of permission principle; Faigenbaum, 2005; Neary, Friedman, & Burnstein, 2009; Neary & Friedman, 2014). More recently, studies show that by five years children develop some understanding of grounds for ownership transfer (e.g., labor investment, borrowing as opposed to stealing; Blake & Harris, 2009). This understanding may even emerge earlier, around three- to four-years, when children are active participants rather than third party observers in the ownership transfer (Kanngiesser et al., 2010).

The few existing studies comparing possessive behaviors in children across cultures present a mixed picture of universal and culture specific developments. Furby (1978) performed open-ended interviews of five- and ten-year-old children, questioning them about what makes somebody own something. Interviewees were North American and Israeli, some living in Kibbutz communal organizations, all showing exposure to marked differences "in the degree to which personal possession is practiced

and encouraged" (Furby, 1978, p. 64). Furby reports two common and putatively universal motives for possession: the control of effects one has on objects (sense of efficacy or "effectance motives" in relation to objects) and self-assertiveness (self defining motives in relation to others). Furby also finds complex interactions of age, gender, culture, as well as object kinds regarding what constitutes possession and determines possessive behaviors. Although the right of use and/or control of an object are central aspects of what determines possession across cultures for all children, Furby reports that the acquisition process of the object was the main determinant of possession only for the youngest (five-year-old) Israeli children. Overall, the range of meanings and reasons for possessing as opposed to not possessing an object increase with age in all three cultures but at significantly different rates (Furby, 1978).

In another rare cross-cultural study that compared one- to three-year-old toddlers growing up in different kibbutz, Lakin, Lakin, and Costanzo (1979) observe fewer conflicts over objects among children raised in total collective care relative to those in daycare. These observations suggest that from an early age, a link may exist between the various kinds of cultural practices that surround children and their developing attitudes as well as motives to possess (i.e., more or less need for self-assertiveness and claim of ownership; see Keller, 2007). Again, indirectly corroborating the effect of culture on young children's degree of possessiveness, three and five year-old preschoolers growing up in diverse small non-Western rural communities around the world tend to show a lesser tendency to be greedy and self-maximize when asked to share, compared to same age preschoolers of large Western and non-Western urban and industrial areas (Rochat et al., 2009).

1.1. The present research

In this research, we considered the extent to which children's early intuitive reasoning about ownership reflects the particular values of their cultural and developmental niche (Super & Harkness, 1986) or alternatively, whether there are some universal principles that all children develop in independence of their socio-economic and cultural environment. The overarching goal was to weigh the extent to which the early development of ownership reasoning varies across cultural contexts.

In addition to what we know about Western middle class preschoolers regarding the principles they use in determining ownership, we considered additional principles that have been traditionally called for in political philosophy and the philosophy of law on the determination of ownership of an object (Locke, 1689/1997; Rose, 1985) but that have not been considered jointly in the perspective of development. These principles include *creation* (effort and work in creating an object, e.g., Kanngiesser et al., 2010; Li, Shaw, & Olson, 2013), *first contact* (antecedence in seeing or touching the object first, e.g., Friedman & Neary, 2008), *familiarity* (anterior use and habit; e.g., Friedman, Neary, Defeyter, & Malcolm, 2011; Neary et al., 2009), and *equity* (equitable distribution between rich and poor; e.g., Zebian & Rochat, 2012). We also compared children's

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