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Effort or outcome? Children's meritorious decisions

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ABSTRACT

How individuals determine what is fair and just when allocating resources is a fundamental aspect of moral development. Decisions about fairness involve considerations such as merit, which includes effort (one's own exertion to achieve a goal) and outcome (one's product). Previous research has described merit in terms of both effort and outcome (e.g., a meritorious individual is both hard-working and productive). Crucially, no research has documented whether children give priority to being hard-working (high effort) or to being productive (high outcome or product) when allocating resources. This gap in the literature obfuscates two constructs that reflect how individuals allocate resources. The current study examined this process by which children (3- to 10-year-olds, $N = 100$; $M_{\text{age}} = 7.27$ years, $SD = 2.39$) weighed these two different aspects of merit in their fairness decisions in several situations where levels of effort and outcome were varied. When there was a discrepancy between effort and outcome, children increasingly prioritized effort over outcome with age and allocated more resources to hard-working peers than to productive peers. Effort and outcome were also examined. In situations where only effort varied (i.e., outcome was controlled), with age children were more likely to incorporate effort into their fairness decisions; however, in situations where only outcome varied (i.e., effort was controlled), with age children were less likely to incorporate effort into their fairness decisions. Taken together, the findings suggest that as children get older, they increasingly focus on effort of individuals rather than on their productivity when distributing resources.

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Introduction

Prior research has provided evidence that children's understanding of distributive justice reflects cognitive and social cognitive developmental changes (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Damon & Killen, 1982). For instance, young children advocate for strict equality at an early age (e.g., 3 years) and judge that equal allocations are fair in most contexts (Olson & Spelke, 2008; Warneken, Lohse, Melis, & Tomasello, 2011). However, children gradually understand that unequal allocations are necessary to ensure fairness in some situations and develop the understanding that "equity-based concerns," such as merit, need, and preexisting inequalities, are more fair than strict equality (Rizzo & Killen, 2016). Thus, with age children are more likely to deviate from strict equality in their allocating of resources by distributing more resources to someone who deserves more due to merit, need, or disadvantaged status (Kenward & Dahl, 2011; Kienbaum & Wilkening, 2009; Li, Spitzer, & Olson, 2014; Rizzo & Killen, 2016; Sigelman & Waitzman, 1991). More research is needed, however, for what constitutes *merit* when children are making decisions. For example, when children take merit into account in a distributive context, do children differentiate effort (how hard one works) from products (what one actually produces independent of effort)?

The current study aimed to focus particularly on how children incorporate merit into their fair distribution decisions and how they construct merit in this process. A number of prior studies provided converging evidence that as children's fairness thinking becomes more sophisticated with age, children develop the ability to allocate resources based on others' contribution to the work (Baumard, Mascaro, & Chevallier, 2012; Kanngiesser and Warneken, 2012; Rizzo, Elenbaas, Cooley, & Killen, 2016; Schmidt, Svetlova, Johe, & Tomasello, 2016).

An important thing to note here, however, is that the construct of merit includes the components of effort (i.e., how hard someone works) and the outcome of one's effort (i.e., the product), which are not the same (Anderson & Butzin, 1978; Carson & Banuazizi, 2008; Kienbaum & Wilkening, 2009). For example, meritorious individuals are often portrayed as hard-working *and* highly productive (Kanngiesser & Warneken, 2012; Liénard, Chevallier, Mascaro, Kiura, & Baumard, 2013; Melis, Altrichter, & Tomasello, 2013; Rizzo et al., 2016). Therefore, one of the main goals of the current study was to determine whether children are capable of differentiating "effort" and "outcome" in their understanding of merit.

Our everyday lives provide many instances of hard work garnering few rewards and scarce effort being richly rewarded. Because it is ingrained in our lives that hard work brings desired outcomes, as reflected in popular sayings such as "no pain, no gain," individuals in the society pursue a balance between effort and outcome (Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2017; Lee, Puig, & Lee, 2012; Schrift, Kivetz, & Netzer, 2016). In the adult world, distributions of resources involve complex, multifaceted decision-making processes in which multiple variables are weighed and considered. Throughout childhood, contexts in which resources are distributed become increasingly varied (Goulding & Friedman, 2018). For example, distributing toys at home has different expectations from distributing toys at school, where ownership is not personal (as it is at home) but rather communal (Huh & Friedman, 2017). Thus, a developmental analysis of the emergence of how children weigh effort and outcome in the context of resource allocation decision making is warranted. In the current study, the specific context was a school-based one in which participants allocated rewards to children for their contributions to a school project.

Theoretical framework

This study was motivated by social domain theory, which has demonstrated how children differentiate moral (fairness), conventional (traditions), and psychological (personal) aspects of decision making (Turiel, 1983, 2006). With age, children increasingly give priority to intentions that are based on fairness over intentions that are based on conventions in situations where these considerations conflict (Killen & Smetana, 2015; Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014).

Understanding intentions is a central issue in fairness decisions regarding resource allocation (D'Esterre, Rizzo, & Killen, 2019; Smetana et al., 2012; Turiel, 2006; Zelazo, Helwig, & Lau, 1996).

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