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Children's fairness in two Chinese schools: A combined ethnographic and experimental study

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that children's sense of fairness is shaped in part by cultural practices, values, and norms. However, the specific social factors that motivate children's fairness decisions remain poorly understood. The current study combined an ethnographic approach with experimental tests of fairness (the Inequity Game) in two Chinese schools with qualitatively different practices and norms. In the "University school," children received explicit moral instruction on fairness reinforced by adults when supervising children's activities. By contrast, in the "Community school," children received less formal moral education and little adult supervision during play time, but norms of cooperation and fairness emerged through informal interactions with peers and other members of the community. Contrary to our predictions, children in both schools ($N = 66$) rejected both disadvantageous and advantageous allocations of resources in the test trials. However, in the very first practice trials, children from the Community school tended to reject all inequalities, whereas children from the University school tended to accept inequalities. We draw on the ethnographies of the schools to interpret these results, concluding that, despite the similarities in the experimental results, different motivations and social factors likely underlie the rejection of inequality in the two schools.

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Introduction

The development of fairness behaviors varies across societies, suggesting that cultural norms and values shape children's sense of fairness (Henrich, 2006; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Keller, Poortinga, & Schöllermerich, 2002). Recent work has demonstrated that even simple responses to inequality vary widely for children beyond typical Western samples (Blake, McAuliffe et al., 2015; House et al., 2013; Rochat et al., 2009). Using an established economic task, the Inequity Game, it has been found that children respond differently to the same unequal allocation of resources depending on whether they receive less (disadvantageous inequity) or more (advantageous inequity) than a peer (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011). A recent comparison of children in seven societies (United States, Canada, India, Mexico, Peru, Senegal, and Uganda) found that children in all societies were willing to pay a cost to avoid getting less than a peer (disadvantageous inequity) but that children in only three societies (United States, Canada, and Uganda) were willing to pay a cost to avoid getting more than a peer (advantageous inequity) and only at older ages (Blake et al., 2015). In fact, both responses to inequality varied by society, with differences in the age of emergence as well as the strength of the effects. Although these results strongly suggest the role of cultural learning in shaping responses to unfair outcomes, the particular social influences that affect this basic sense of fairness remain speculative.

Although broad cross-cultural comparisons are valuable for identifying potential cognitive and behavioral universals, these approaches are often inadequate for identifying the precise factors that shape the development of particular behaviors. Assessing these factors requires focused contrasts within a society and the use of more in-depth qualitative analyses of the norms and values that may influence children's behavior (Lancy, Bock, & Gaskins, 2012; LeVine & New, 2008; Montgomery, 2009; Rogoff, 2003). Ethnography offers an established approach for a systematic analysis of the structural, historical, and behavioral differences that characterize "cultures." Recent research on adults has used a combination of anthropological approaches and experiments to show how differences between populations within the same society can explain differences in local cooperation (Bernhard, Fehr, & Fischbacher, 2006; Lamba & Mace, 2011; Nettle, 2017). In the current study, we applied this approach to compare children's fairness behavior in two schools in China.

For our experiments, an ongoing ethnographic comparison of the two schools provided a foundation for predicting differences in children's fairness behavior in the two schools. Specifically, the ethnography revealed differences in pedagogical approaches within the schools and in the broader patterns of socializing in the two communities. These community differences aligned with differences in children's general patterns of cooperation and competition in the schools, documented by observations in a structured context by the first author (Kajanus, 2018, chap. 2). Based on these ethnographic differences, we hypothesized that children in the two schools would make different decisions in the fairness experiment, reflecting different norms of cooperation and fair behavior. In brief, we predicted that the children at a more competitive school ("University school") would have a greater focus on their own gains, whereas children at a more cooperative school ("Community school") would show a more generous orientation, particularly in sacrificing their own rewards to endorse an equal outcome. We next provide a brief history of changes within Chinese society that make it an interesting test case for fairness and summarize the results of the ethnographic research at the two schools.

Moral norms and social change in China

China represents a unique society that remains quite different from Euro-American societies and so has been the focus of much cross-cultural research (e.g., Chen et al., 1998; Dunham, Chen, & Banaji, 2013; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2011; Wang, 2004; Whiting, Whiting, & Longabaugh, 1975). In line with Confucian values that emphasize the collective and the family over individual interests, China is often broadly described as a "collectivist" society, in contrast to the "individualistic" Western societies where self-reliance, the ability to act on personal interests, and the relative breaking off from the family are prerequisites for full-fledged adulthood (Hsu, 1981; Nisbett & Masuda, 2003; Oyserman,

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