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# Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp)



## Children use partial resource sharing as a cue to friendship



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 August 2016

Revised 1 February 2017

Available online 9 March 2017

#### Keywords:

Resource distribution

Partiality

Sharing

Friendship

Alliances

### ABSTRACT

Resource sharing is an important aspect of human society, and how resources are distributed can provide people with crucial information about social structure. Indeed, a recent partiality account of resource distribution suggested that people may use unequal partial resource distributions to make inferences about a distributor's social affiliations. To empirically test this suggestion derived from the theoretical argument of the partiality account, we presented 4- to 9-year-old children with distributors who gave out resources unequally using either a partial procedure (intentionally choosing which recipient would get more) or an impartial procedure (rolling a die to determine which recipient would get more) and asked children to make judgments about whom the distributor was better friends with. At each age tested, children expected a distributor who gave partially to be better friends with the favored recipient (Studies 1–3). Interestingly, younger children (4- to 6-year-olds) inferred friendship between the distributor and the favored recipient even in cases where the distributor used an impartial procedure, whereas older children (7- to 9-year-olds) did not infer friendship based on impartial distributions (Study 1). These studies demonstrate that children use third-party resource distributions to make important predictions about the social world and add to our knowledge about the developmental trajectory of understanding the importance of partiality in addition to inequity when making social inferences.

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## Introduction

People frequently distribute resources among others, and knowing how, when, and why people give resources to one another is crucial to navigating the complex social world. Indeed, early in development children distribute resources themselves (for a review see Hook & Cook, 1979) and make social judgments about how resources are distributed (e.g., LoBue, Nishida, Chiong, DeLoache, & Haidt, 2011; Shaw, DeScioli, & Olson, 2012). They can also learn critical invisible social information by monitoring others' access to and distribution of resources. For example, children expect people who control resources to be more powerful and hold a higher position in the social hierarchy (Gülgöz & Gelman, 2016) and make sophisticated inferences about who owns resources based on who possesses them (e.g., Nancekivell, Van de Vondervoort, & Friedman, 2013).

A recent partiality account of resource distribution (Shaw, 2013) suggested that one particularly important piece of social information that people may be able to ascertain from observing third-party resource distributions is the strength of people's social allegiances (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009, 2013). That is, people may infer that when a distributor gives more to one person over another, this is because the distributor likes, or is better friends with, the favored recipient. This account further predicts that these inferences about social relationships should be strongest when the giving is *partial* (based on an individual's social identity) rather than *impartial* (based on an unbiased procedure or cultural norm). Indeed, the partiality account argues that people object to inequality and claim that it is unfair when it is based on personal allegiances (i.e., is partial) but not when it is based on impartial rules. However, these critical predictions regarding inferences about relationships based on partial resource distribution have not yet been tested. Here, we investigated whether children use third-party preferential resource distributions to infer patterns of friendship and when children begin to restrict their inferences about friendship to cases of partial, but not impartial, unequal resource distribution.

Although studies have asked about how social relationships affect resource distribution, the past research focused on how children's own social relationships affect first-person decisions about whom to share with and on how knowing other people's social relationships affects children's expectations about whom third parties will be more likely to share with. For example, preschool aged girls are more likely to share food resources with friends compared with non-friends (Birch & Billman, 1986), and 4- to 6-year-olds will share stickers with friends even at a cost but will not take the same cost to share with non-friends or strangers (Moore, 2009). In addition, preschoolers guide others to share more with friends and family members compared with strangers (Olson & Spelke, 2008) and expect other people to preferentially share with friends compared with disliked peers (e.g., Paulus & Moore, 2014). However, these studies merely tell us that children do nice things for their friends (such as giving them more resources than they give non-friends) and also expect other people to be nicer toward their friends. This research does not tell us whether or not children hold the abstract understanding that how resources are distributed broadcasts a signal to uninvolved third parties about likely patterns of friendship. In our studies, we asked whether children understand the signal value of resource distribution for detecting friendships, even in cases where the child is not involved in any aspect of the distribution.

If the partiality account of fairness (Shaw, 2013) is correct, then children should understand that third-party patterns of giving can serve as a signal of social allegiances. Specifically, children should infer that a distributor is better friends with a recipient who is favored, or that the distributor likes the recipient of spoils more than the non-recipient. Importantly, under this account, advanced reasoning about resource distribution would require understanding that *partial giving* signals friendship, whereas *impartial giving* does not. Therefore, although children may initially assume that giving someone more resources indicates friendship, as children mature into adults they should begin to limit their inferences of friendship to cases where the giving is partial (Shaw, 2013) and should not infer friendship when the giving is predicated on an impartial procedure (e.g., rolling a fair die) or a culturally agreed-on rule (e.g., rewarding higher merit) (Baumard, Mascaro, & Chevallier, 2012; Hook & Cook, 1979). Indeed, if one gives a recipient more based on an impartial procedure or merit, adults certainly do not see the distribution as partial or infer that the distributor favors that person

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