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The value of variety and scarcity across development



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ABSTRACT

An important task that children face is determining the value of items, and two possible cues to value include scarcity and variety. In three studies with 289 children aged 4–12 years and 148 adults, we examined the use of these cues to guide choices when making selections among items. At all ages, participants typically preferred varied sets for themselves and others. In contrast, scarce items were rarely preferred to abundant items. However, when in the context of multiple recipients, participants selected scarce and varied items more when items were maximally scarce. Our results suggest that the preference for variety is early emerging, whereas the preference for scarce items is context dependent.

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Introduction

A fundamental task that children face is determining the value of items that they encounter. The ability to determine item value has implications for how much effort to devote toward obtaining or retaining an item, determining what constitutes a fair distribution of resources, and choosing whether or not to engage in disputes. Thus, it is important to understand how children determine item value and specifically which cues they use at different points in development. Certainly for adults, value is influenced by numerous factors that reflect domain-specific knowledge, including an item's function (e.g., a functional clock has higher value than a broken clock), one's current needs and desires (e.g., a bottle of water has higher value when one is thirsty than when one is not), and market forces (e.g., a

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property has greater value when the housing market is on an upswing). Importantly, however, additional cues to value may be gleaned simply and straightforwardly from the distribution of items in a given context even without consideration of domain-specific knowledge. Two such cues include variety and scarcity.

Variety refers to differences among items within a set. For example, a gift bag containing a keychain and a mug is more varied than one containing either two keychains or two mugs. Adults tend to seek out and prefer variety (e.g., Maimaran & Wheeler, 2008; Mittelman, Andrade, Chattopadhyay, & Brendl, 2014; Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999; Read & Loewenstein, 1995; Simonson, 1990; see Kahn, 1995, for a review), although there are different explanatory accounts of this preference. McAlister and Pessemier (1982) noted that variety seeking can be a motivation in and of itself (direct), or it can emerge as a result of some other motivation (derived). Direct motivations that have been proposed include a hedge against future uncertainty and utility maximization (Kahn, 1995). By obtaining varied items, we can better equip ourselves to manage future needs, which are by definition unknown. Furthermore, variety allows us to maximize utility (or “manage satiation”) in that repeated consumption of similar items can result in decreased utility for each subsequent item (Fishbach, Ratner, & Zhang, 2011; McAlister, 1982). Both hedging against uncertainty and utility maximization have clear evolutionary advantages and, thus, may be available from early in development.

Although a preference for variety is well established in adults, much less is known about whether, and if so when, this preference emerges during childhood. Previous work explored individual differences in variety seeking in the food domain (Nicklaus, Boggio, Chabanet, & Issanchou, 2005), finding that children use variety to guide their choices (Just, Lund, & Price, 2012; Roe, Meengs, Birch, & Rolls, 2013). However, previous work has not tested whether variety, in and of itself, is a preference. For example, although children are more likely to consume more varied snacks (e.g., apple, peach, pineapple) than uniform snacks (e.g., pineapple), this could reflect that varied snacks are more likely to include a more favored food. In other words, increased consumption in the context of variety may reflect the greater value of particular items (derived value) rather than a value placed on variety per se (direct value).

Scarcity refers to the relative infrequency of an item, whether or not it is unique (the only one of its kind). For example, if a set of prizes includes five keychains and one mug, the mug would be scarce and unique; if the set includes four keychains and two mugs, the mugs would be scarce but not unique. As with variety, a preference for scarcity could be derived or direct. Commodity theory suggests that scarcity has direct value: “Any commodity will be valued to the extent that it is scarce, unavailable, or difficult to attain” (Brock, 1968, p. 246). Some of the derived mechanisms that result in scarcity selections include a preference for unique items (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), popular items (e.g., Verhallen, 1982; Verhallen & Robben, 1994; Worchel, Lee, & Adewole, 1975), higher priced items (Lynn, 1991), or authentic items (Frazier, Gelman, Wilson, & Hood, 2009; Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom, 2011) as well as a desire to signal an owner’s uniqueness or status (Gierl & Huettl, 2010). Although there is some evidence that direct motivations result in scarcity selections (e.g., adults in Worchel et al., 1975, preferred scarce cookies to abundant cookies; see Mittone & Savadori, 2009, for a review), scarce items do not always receive greater value (Sehnert, Franks, Yap, & Higgins, 2014), and the strength of this preference is often weaker than derived motivations such as the preference for popular items.

Although much less is known about children’s use of scarcity, recent work found that children prefer scarce items under conditions that we would characterize as reflecting a derived motivation. For example, preschoolers prefer items with distinctive (rare) histories (Gelman, Frazier, Noles, Manczak, & Stilwell, 2015) and prefer to allocate rare (scarce) items to preferred puppets (although scarcity was confounded with variety) (Chernyak & Sobel, 2016). We are aware of only one study demonstrating a direct motivation for scarcity in children: Namely, preschoolers preferred the scarce choice when the two types of items in a set were visually distinct from one another (e.g., red vs. green apples), although not when they were visually similar (e.g., two similar kinds of crackers; the authors termed this a “visual minority effect”; Maimaran & Salant, 2016). Interestingly, this scarcity preference was obtained in preschoolers but not in adults. Altogether, then, there is intriguing initial evidence that children may use scarcity to guide their valuations and choices, although the breadth and consistency of this preference are unknown.

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