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Young children, but not chimpanzees, are averse to disadvantageous and advantageous inequities



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ABSTRACT

The age at which young children show an aversion to inequitable resource distributions, especially those favoring themselves, is unclear. It is also unclear whether great apes, as humans' nearest evolutionary relatives, have an aversion to inequitable resource distributions at all. Using a common methodology across species and child ages, the current two studies found that 3- and 4-year-old children ($N = 64$) not only objected when they received less than a collaborative partner but also sacrificed to equalize when they received more. They did neither of these things in a nonsocial situation, demonstrating the fundamental role of social comparison. In contrast, chimpanzees ($N = 9$) showed no aversion to inequitable distributions, only a concern for maximizing their own resources, with no differences between social and nonsocial conditions. These results underscore the unique importance for humans, even early in ontogeny, for treating others fairly, presumably as a way of becoming a cooperative member of one's cultural group.

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Introduction

It is a striking fact that humans consider a given amount of resources perfectly satisfactory unless someone else gets more, in which case they often find that amount unsatisfactory. It is an even more striking fact that humans consider a given amount of resources perfectly satisfactory unless someone else gets less, in which case again they often find that amount unsatisfactory. In the language of economics, humans are averse to inequity—in both advantageous and disadvantageous directions (e.g., Dawes, Fowler, Johnson, McElreath, & Smirnov, 2007; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999).

When and how young children become averse to inequitable resource distributions, especially those favoring themselves, is a matter of some controversy. Various studies report different results depending on the context in which children are observed, the role of adults in the process, and the alternatives children have at their disposal in the test situation. Most straightforward, in third-party situations where they must distribute resources among others, children from as young as 3 years show a very strong bias for equal distributions (e.g., Frydman & Bryant, 1988; Olson & Spelke, 2008; Peterson, Peterson, & McDonald, 1975; Rochat et al., 2009; Shaw & Olson, 2012). When young children themselves are among the recipients, however, the situation becomes more complicated.

With regard to distributions that disadvantage them, young children show negative responses from as young as 3 years (Birch & Billman, 1986; LoBue, Nishida, Chiong, DeLoache, & Haidt, 2011). By 4 or 5 years of age, children will even sacrifice own rewards or accept an absolutely lesser offer to avoid being at a disadvantage relative to a peer (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Sheskin, Bloom, & Wynn, 2014). It is important that a number of measures in some of these studies contradict the hypothesis that children just want more resources. Rather, they are making an explicit social comparison between themselves and others and are invoking words like *unfair* if they are disadvantaged. However, McAuliffe, Blake, Kim, Wrangham, and Warneken (2013) found that children in this age range also rejected disadvantageous distributions when there was no peer partner present (i.e., an adult put less resources on the child's tray but put more on an opposite tray that belonged to nobody), suggesting that at least some of children's judgments of unfairness may be directed at the adult doing the distributing.

In the case of advantageous distributions, Blake and McAuliffe (2011; see also Blake, McAuliffe, & Warneken, 2014; Blake et al., 2015; McAuliffe et al., 2013) used an apparatus in which children could either accept an allocation between themselves and a peer or else reject it so that no one got anything. They found that children did not reject advantageous inequities until 8 or 9 years of age. In that study, children were not allowed to respond by suggesting a redistribution because, the authors argued, a redistribution would potentially confound the motive of sympathy for the partner with aversion to inequity (see Box 2 in Blake et al., 2014). But this method has its own confound in that rejecting an inequitable distribution punishes both partners (because acceptance of the distribution benefits both to some degree) and also wastes resources. This raises the possibility that young children might dislike inequity, just not enough to punish everyone. And in fact, when children are allowed to reallocate advantageously distributed resources, from as young as 3 years they sometimes sacrifice their extra resources to equalize. Specifically, in the second study of Hamann, Warneken, Greenberg, and Tomasello (2011; see also Ulber, Hamann, & Tomasello, 2015; Warneken, Lohse, Melis, & Tomasello, 2011), when a pair of 3-year-olds collaborated to produce resources and one child unexpectedly received more than the other, the lucky child sacrificed to equalize nearly 80% of the time. Moreover, in a control condition where the two children produced resources independently (the study was focused on the effect of collaboration), the lucky child still sacrificed to equalize nearly 40% of the time. Notably, in this study no adult was present at the time of distribution, and no adult gave the children instructions about how to distribute the resources.

In seeking explanations for children's proclivity for equal resource distributions, a crucial source of information is the behavior of humans' closest living relatives, the great apes. If they show a similar proclivity, it becomes highly unlikely that children's tendencies result solely from adult socialization or teaching; if they show no such proclivity, humans' aversion to inequity would seem to be evolutionarily unique, with developmental mechanisms still to be determined. So far, evidence is mixed. Although chimpanzees engage in some food sharing in the wild, (Boesch, 1994; Mitani & Watts, 2001), it is not clear that they are doing more than simply avoiding harassment from beggars (Gilby, 2006). In

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