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Cognitive Development



You can't always want what you get: Children's intuitions about ownership and desire



Nicholaus S. Noles^{a,*}, Susan A. Gelman^b

^a University of Louisville, United States

^b University of Michigan, United States

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ABSTRACT

Ownership is a central element of human experience. The present experiments were designed to examine the influence of psychological state on ownership judgments. In three experiments, 4-year-olds were asked to make ownership attributions about owners and non-owners who either desired or did not desire a gift. Despite exhibiting a clear sensitivity to the desires of others, children made accurate ownership attributions independent of individuals' desires. At the same time, there are subtle influences of desires on children's ownership judgments, as well as subtle influences of ownership on children's desire judgments. Thus, the two factors are largely but not wholly distinct in young children's thinking.

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Humans live in a complex social network constructed of people and property, in which children readily participate. By age two, children use possessive language (Rodgon & Rashman, 1976), recognize familiar items and recall who owns them (e.g., their own toothbrush and their mother's shoes; Fasig, 2000), and accurately track and identify new objects given to them. This ability expands rapidly, such that children keep track of both their own property and the property of others by age three (Gelman, Manczak, & Noles, 2012). Critically, they accomplish these tasks by monitoring the historical path of objects, and not simply by remembering physical features (Friedman, Van de Vondervoort, Defeyter, & Neary, 2013; Gelman et al., 2012). By age four, children exhibit impressively well-defined intuitions

* Corresponding author at: Life Sciences Building, Room 306, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292.
Tel.: +1-502-852-5955.

E-mail addresses: n.noles@louisville.edu, nicholaus.noles@gmail.com (N.S. Noles).

about ownership and property. They restrict ownership to humans only, and not non-human animals or artifacts (i.e., the dog drinks out of a bowl and we call it the “dog’s bowl,” but nevertheless a human, not the dog, owns the bowl; Noles, Keil, Bloom, & Gelman, 2012). Similarly, children infer that artifacts are much more likely to be owned than inanimate natural kinds (Neary, Van de Vondervoort, & Friedman, 2012). Having identified a piece of property, children use a wide variety of cues to identify property owners, including proximity, possession (Friedman, 2008; Neary & Friedman, 2008), gender stereotypes (Malcolm, Defeyter, & Friedman, 2014), creative labor (Kanngiesser, Gjersoe, & Hood, 2010), and control of permission (e.g., restricting access to a piece of property is a strong cue that the person controlling access owns the property; Neary, Friedman, & Burnstein, 2009).

Even more impressively, preschoolers demonstrate an understanding of the nuanced contrast between ownership and possession. They defend possession of an object more aggressively if they own it (Eisenberg-Berg, Haake, & Bartlett, 1981; Eisenberg-Berg, Haake, Hand, & Sadalla, 1979) and strenuously object when their property rights, as well as the property rights of others, are violated (Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011). Furthermore, they use appropriate claims regarding ownership (“I want it; it’s mine!”) and possession (“But I was playing with it!”) despite receiving inconsistent instruction from parents that focuses on prosociality (“It’s nice to share”) instead of property rights (Ross, 1996). Children’s intuitions about property transfers, such as giving and selling, develop more slowly and require contextual support, but by age five children begin to demonstrate adult-like understandings when they are presented with highly ritualized property transfers (e.g., a present given at a birthday party; Blake & Harris, 2009; Friedman & Neary, 2008, but see Kanngiesser et al., 2010), and by age seven they begin to demonstrate more nuanced understanding of the property rights associated with ownership (Kim & Kalish, 2009).

Although prior studies document children’s ownership attributions, little is known regarding the extent to which children distinguish *mental attitudes* toward objects from ownership per se. In theory-of-mind reasoning, desire is understood as an internal state that motivates action toward achieving a goal, and children possess a rich understanding of desires, both their own and those of others, by preschool age (Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997; Wellman & Lui, 2004; Wellman & Woolley, 1990).

Concepts of desire and concepts of ownership may interact in at least two ways, and perhaps influence each other, over the course of development. First, desire may be a motivational component of property acquisition. For example, if I want a cookie, I am likely to construct the goal of owning it and may engage in a process (taking it off the plate, asking for it, buying it) that results in my satisfying this goal. Thus, desire for an object may lead to a set of actions that result in ownership of that object. Desire may similarly play a role in motivating the transfer or divestment of property (e.g., I don’t want this cookie, so you can have it). Given the tight link between desire for an entity and motivation to own it, children may have difficulty maintaining a conceptual distinction between the two.

Conversely, ownership status may influence attitudes toward property. Typically, owned objects are desirable (e.g., people buy things that they like and people select gifts for others that they hope will be desirable to the recipient). Furthermore, objects that a person does not desire are less typically owned by that person (e.g., one rarely requests or buys items that one does not want or intentionally gives a gift that the recipient will dislike). Further, there may be an element of cognitive dissonance, such that people at times downgrade their evaluation of items that they know they cannot have (so-called “sour grapes”). Knowledge of these attitudinal correlations between ownership and liking or desire may also lead to a blurring of the distinction between ownership and desire early in development.

Despite this intertwining of ownership and desire, a mature understanding of ownership also includes an appreciation of the opposite point: that ownership and desires are also distinct. People often want things that they do not own (e.g., an expensive car), and sometimes do not want things that nevertheless belong to them (e.g., an ill-considered gift). Whether children grasp that desires alone do not determine ownership is thus an empirical question.

Motivations and attitudes related to property are often divorced from ownership. Is this separation a natural and early emerging facet of children’s social cognition, or are there developmental challenges that they must meet in order to disentangle desire and ownership? The goal of the present study is to explore the influence of desires on children’s ownership judgments. To do so, we investigate children’s

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