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Just rewards: 17-Month-old infants expect agents to take resources according to the principles of distributive justice



Ying Wang*, Annette M.E. Henderson

School of Psychology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Adults expect distributive justice—that rewards are distributed according to the principles of equality and equity. Previous research has demonstrated that preschool-aged children are sensitive to distributive justice, yet the age at which these sensitivities emerge remains unknown. The current research demonstrates that 17-month-old infants ($N = 84$) expect individuals to distribute shared resources based on the amount of work each partner contributed to attain the resources. These findings provide evidence that sensitivity to two principles of distributive justice, equity and equality, emerges much earlier than has previously been suggested.

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Introduction

In our everyday interactions, humans expect distributive justice—that resources will be distributed in a fair manner. Resources are deemed to be distributed fairly if they are divided according to the principles of equality or equity (Adams, 1965; Cohen, 1987; Cook & Hegvedt, 1983; Deutsch, 1975, 1985, 1986). The principle of equality ensures that resources are distributed equally among all recipients. The principle of equity suggests that resources are distributed according to the amount of input (effortful contribution and productivity) each individual contributed to attain the outputs (resources).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ywan428@aucklanduni.ac.nz (Y. Wang).

In general, people will regard a distribution as fair when there is proportionality between inputs and outputs (Adams, 1965).

Research investigating the development of distributive justice suggests that, early in life, children demonstrate a self-serving bias evidenced by preschool-aged children being more likely to keep sweets for themselves than to give sweets to another child (Blake & Rand, 2010; Rochat et al., 2009; see also Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Moore, 2009). By 7 years of age, children shift to a preference for equality; they are more likely to divide resources equally (Benenson, Pascoe, & Radmore, 2007; Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Smith, Blake, & Harris, 2013) or choose an equal division option (Fehr et al., 2008; Moore, 2009). It is not until later in childhood that children demonstrate a reliable tendency to engage in equity and contribution-based proportional resource distribution (Almás, Cappelen, Sørensen, & Tungodden, 2010; Gummerum, Hanoch, Keller, Parsons, & Hummel, 2010; Gummerum, Keller, Takezawa, & Mata, 2008; Kienbaum & Wilkening, 2009). To illustrate, 14-year-old proposers who kept more resources for themselves reasoned that they did so because they viewed the decision-making process as requiring more effortful contribution than the role of the responder (Gummerum et al., 2008). Together, the above evidence suggests that children are not sensitive to distributive justice until later in childhood.

However, this view of young children as selfish and not considerate of distributive justice contexts has been called into question by research using third-party resource distribution tasks with preschoolers (e.g., Baumard, Mascaro, & Chevallier, 2012; Ng, Heyman, & Barner, 2011; Olson & Spelke, 2008) and looking time methods with infants (Enright, Gweon, & Sommerville, 2017; Geraci & Surian, 2011; Meristo, Strid, & Surian, 2016; Meristo & Surian, 2013; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011; Sloane, Baillargeon, & Premack, 2012; Sommerville, Schmidt, Yun, & Burns, 2013; Surian & Franchin, 2017; Ziv & Sommerville, 2017). In one such study, 15-month-old infants who viewed a violation of expectation paradigm showing a distributor dividing cookies between two recipients, looked longer on trials in which the recipients were given unequal distributions of cookies compared with equal distributions (Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011). Furthermore, 16-month-olds, but not 10-month-olds, looked longer toward a neutral character who approached an agent who was shown to be a fair distributor compared with when the neutral character approached an unfair distributor (Geraci & Surian, 2011). Thus, by 16 months of age, infants seem to expect that resources will be divided equally between recipients and that agents should align with individuals who have previously been shown to distribute resources in this manner. These studies suggest that children are sensitive to contexts in which resource distributions violate the rules of *equality* before their second birthday.

The only known study that has examined the role of contribution in expectations of resource distribution in children younger than 3 years (Sloane et al., 2012) provides some evidence that infants are sensitive to *equity* in resource distributions—that infants consider the relative contributions performed by recipients toward those resources when forming expectations of fair distribution. In this study, 21-month-olds were familiarized with an event in which a distributor informed two recipients that they would receive stickers if they tidied up their toys. One group of infants was shown an event in which both recipients did an equal amount of work (i.e., each tidied up half of the toys), and another group of infants was shown an event in which one of the recipients did all of the work (i.e., one person tidied up all of the toys). In the subsequent test trials, the distributor dispensed an even number of stickers to both recipients. The results revealed that infants who had seen only one actor tidy up the toys looked longer toward the equal distribution than did infants who had seen both actors tidy up the toys (Sloane et al., 2012). Thus, by 21 months of age, infants expect a third-party to distribute rewards based on the contribution of each individual toward goal completion.

The findings reported by Sloane et al. (2012) suggest that a sensitivity to distributive justice is in place by 21 months of age, at least in a context where a distributor chooses how many resources to give to each recipient. Although these findings align well with situations that infants may experience in their everyday lives, such as when a mother must divide resources between an infant and another individual (e.g., his or her sibling), they do not address how infants might view situations in which individuals are provided with the opportunity to divide resources among themselves. It is an open question as to whether infants would apply the principles of distributive justice to contexts in which individuals distribute attained resources among themselves. To begin to fill this important gap, we developed a novel familiarization paradigm in which infants were familiarized with two puppets

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