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## Using versus liking: Young children use ownership to predict actions but not to infer preferences



Madison L. Pesowski\*, Ori Friedman

Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

Three experiments show that young children ( $N = 384$ ) use ownership to predict actions but not to infer preferences. In Experiment 1, 3- to 6-year-olds considered ownership when predicting actions but did not expect it to trump preferences. In Experiment 2, 4- and 5-year-olds, but not 3-year-olds, used ownership to predict actions, and 5-year-olds grasped that an agent would use his or her own property despite preferring someone else's. This experiment also showed that relating an agent to an object interfered with 3- and 4-year-olds' judgments that a more attractive object is preferred. Finally, Experiment 3 found that 3- and 4-year-olds do not believe that owning an object increases regard for it. These findings are informative about the kinds of information children use to predict actions and the inferences they make from ownership. The findings also reveal specificity in how children use ownership to make judgments about others, and suggest that children more closely relate ownership to people's actions than to their desires.

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### Introduction

Preferences and ownership conflict when we prefer and desire other people's belongings over our own. Preferring and desiring others' property is so prevalent that we are warned against it in the 10th commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." Yet, rather than acting according to our preferences, we typ-

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [mlpesows@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mlpesows@uwaterloo.ca) (M.L. Pesowski).

ically act on the basis of ownership. When we prefer someone else's magazine, phone, or bicycle, we do not attempt to take it and instead use our own. This respect for ownership matters for predicting other people's actions. If we ignored ownership and only considered people's preferences and desires, we would erroneously expect violations of ownership to be rampant.

Although we frequently prefer others' belongings over our own, ownership may also counteract these preferences given that we typically prefer our belongings over similar objects we do not own. Increased regard for our own belongings occurs for several reasons. We typically decide what to acquire, and so we choose objects we like (Noles & Gelman, 2014). When we choose to acquire an object, the very act of choosing increases how much we like the object (e.g., Brehm, 1956). Receiving an object, even without having chosen it, also increases our regard for it (e.g., Beggan, 1992; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991). This increased regard for owned objects also matters for understanding other people. To correctly anticipate others' preferences, we must remember that they may have an inflated regard for their belongings.

Here we investigated whether preschoolers consider these two facts of ownership when making judgments about other people; we investigated whether they use ownership to predict actions and infer preferences. We already know that children use information about ownership to judge whether actions are acceptable (Kim & Kalish, 2009; Neary & Friedman, 2014; Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011), to predict people's emotions (Pesowski & Friedman, 2015), and to infer history and seek historical traces (Gelman, Manczak, Was, & Noles, 2016; Nancekivell & Friedman, 2014b). If preschoolers also use ownership to predict actions and infer desires, this will reveal further ways in which they use information about ownership. In addition, if children use ownership in just one of these ways (e.g., to anticipate actions but not preferences), the findings will reveal specificity in how children use ownership in their judgments about other people.

### *Predicting actions*

It is plausible that preschoolers use ownership to predict how others *will* act because they consider it when judging how others *should* act (e.g., Kanngiesser & Hood, 2014; Kim & Kalish, 2009; Nancekivell & Friedman, 2014a; Neary & Friedman, 2014; Rossano et al., 2011). However, some findings suggest that young children could have difficulty in predicting that ownership will cause people to act against their preferences and desires. When young children consider situations where an agent's preferences and desires conflict with rules or moral principles, they are often as likely to predict the agent will act on his or her preferences as to predict the agent will heed the rules (Bernard, Clément, & Kaufmann, 2016, Experiment 1; Kalish & Shiverick, 2004, Experiment 2; Lagattuta, Nucci, & Bosacki, 2010).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, young children often deny that others can act against their desires (Kushnir, Gopnik, Chernyak, Seiver, & Wellman, 2015). Beliefs that people will (or must) act according to their desires could impede preschoolers from predicting that others will respect ownership, especially when this requires acting against desires.

To our knowledge, only one previous study has specifically examined whether children consider ownership when predicting others' actions (Pietraszewski & Shaw, 2015), although it examined 6- to 8-year-olds and not preschoolers. In that study, children predicted that when two similarly sized agents fight over an object, the owner of the object will prevail over an adversary who likes it. Ownership also mitigated children's predictions that a larger adversary will defeat a smaller one. However, the study found only limited evidence that ownership influences children's expectations about how long agents will search for a lost object. A few other studies have asked children to predict *whether* one agent will steal another's belongings (e.g., Lagattuta et al., 2010; Smetana, 1985; Tisak & Turiel, 1988), to judge *who* an agent stole from (Baron & Dunham, 2015; Chalik & Rhodes, 2014; Rhodes, 2012), or to judge *which* agent stole an item (Baron, Dunham, Banaji, & Carey, 2014; Dunham,

<sup>1</sup> One study featuring such conflicts found that preschoolers predominantly predicted that an agent would heed norms and rules and would act against his or her desires (Chernyak, Kushnir, Sullivan, & Wang, 2013). However, in that study, the agent was initially described as having always acted in accord with the norms and rules, and so it is possible that this extra information influenced preschoolers' judgments. Bernard et al. (2016) also found children were more likely to predict that rules would be followed when predicting the actions of a group.

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