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Brief Report

Evaluations of intergroup resource allocations: The role of theory of mind

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relations between children's social cognitive skills and their evaluations of resource allocations in intergroup contexts ($N = 73$, 3–6 years of age). Participants evaluated three snack-time resource allocation scenarios (self-disadvantaged, self-advantaged, and other-disadvantaged) in either a school ingroup or outgroup context. They evaluated the acceptability of the resource allocation and provided reasoning about their evaluation. Participants who had false belief theory of mind (FB ToM) competence were more likely than participants who did not have FB ToM to evaluate inequality as unacceptable. In addition, participants without FB ToM evaluated unequal allocations to another child as more okay in an outgroup condition than participants with FB ToM. Participants reasoned about their allocations differently depending on the context. Results reveal the importance of FB ToM for recognizing unfair resource allocations, especially in intergroup contexts.

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Introduction

From a young age, children recognize that refusing to share is unfair because it causes psychological harm to others and creates inequality (Smetana, 2006). Furthermore, children reason about inequality in complex ways (Killen & Smetana, 2015), and recent research has shown that they even attempt to rectify inequality by attending to the needs of the victim (Riedl, Jensen, Call, & Tomasello,

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2015). To test children's actual sharing behavior, a robust field of research has emerged on children's resource allocation decisions or how they choose to share valued items such as stickers, food, and toys with peers and evaluate these allocation decisions. Much of this research has shown that young children act predictably in self-interested ways. For instance, research has shown that young children often make inequitable choices when they are a beneficiary of resources (Damon, 1975; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; McCrink, Bloom, & Santos, 2010). It is only at around 7 or 8 years of age that children exhibit a consistent preference for equality when allocating resources (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Fehr et al., 2008). However, recent research with infants has documented a rudimentary preference for fairness very early in life (Geraci & Surian, 2011; Sommerville, Schmidt, Yun, & Burns, 2013). In addition, research indicates that younger children accept advantageous inequality (where they benefit) but reject disadvantageous inequality, whereas older children reject both (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011). What accounts for these seemingly contradictory findings? If a preference for fairness emerges early, why do preschool-aged children at times act in ways that perpetuate unfairness? Might they struggle to understand the perspective of the other children involved? The current study was designed to address these contradictions by examining whether children's social-cognitive competency aids them when making resource allocation decisions and examining a range of different allocation contexts.

A growing body of research on theory of mind (ToM), the ability to recognize that others' intentions, beliefs, and desires may differ from one's own (Wellman & Liu, 2004), documents the ways in which social-cognitive skills can aid children in making social decisions in group contexts. For instance, research demonstrates that children with false belief ToM (FB ToM) make more fair offers in economic game contexts than children who do not yet demonstrate FB ToM (Takagishi, Kameshima, Schug, Koizumi, & Yamagishi, 2010). Furthermore, research suggests that children who understand that others may hold different beliefs than they do exhibit more frequent and spontaneous sharing patterns (Wu & Su, 2014). What has not yet been tested, however, is the relation between social-cognitive skills and children's moral judgments about resource allocations. Research has shown that children with FB ToM are more likely to recognize that transgressions can occur accidentally (Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011) and that as children develop ToM they make more sophisticated moral judgments (Smetana, Jambon, Conry-Murray, & Sturge-Apple, 2012). Although some research suggests that children's sharing behavior is related to their ToM abilities (Takagishi et al., 2010; Wu & Su, 2014), research has not yet examined whether and how children with ToM evaluate resource allocation decisions differently than children who do not yet demonstrate ToM competence.

Research on moral development from social domain theory (Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel, 1983) has demonstrated that individuals make social evaluations by considering three domains of knowledge: (a) the moral domain, which involves issues of fairness, justice, the rights of others, and harm; (b) the societal domain, which involves issues surrounding customs, conventions, group functioning, and traditions; and (c) the psychological domain, which involves autonomy and personal choice. Furthermore, researchers have recently posited that the psychological domain also includes issues surrounding perspective taking and interpretation of others' intentions (Mulvey, Hitti, & Killen, 2013). Research from social domain theorists documents the early emergence of a strong sense of fairness in children and a recognition of the wrongfulness of harm, including psychological harm (Killen & Smetana, 2015). However, less is known about how children's moral judgments of resource allocations relate to their social-cognitive skills.

This is an important question because there are many contexts where children are a party to inequitable resource allocations but are not actually the actors who are distributing the resources. For instance, children are commonly given snacks and such snacks are not always distributed equally. In the current study, we were interested in children's evaluations of the acceptability of three different resource allocation possibilities: (a) self-disadvantaged, when the participant is a victim and receives an unequal distribution; (b) self-advantaged, when a group member receives fewer resources and the participant receives more resources than the other children; and (c) other-disadvantaged, when a group member receives fewer resources but all other children, including the participant, receive the same amount. These three contexts were of interest because the participant may evaluate them differently depending on whether the participant focuses on his or her own perspective or the

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