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## Cognitive Development



# Children have difficulty using object location to recognize when natural objects are owned



Julia W. Van de Vondervoort, Ori Friedman\*

Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

An object's location can be informative about whether it is owned—typically, a seashell on a beach is not owned, but one in someone's home is. However, in four experiments, we provide evidence that children have difficulty using location to recognize when natural kinds are owned. Children aged three to seven years ( $N=262$ ) and adults ( $N=50$ ) were shown pictures of objects located inside and outside, and were asked whether each object is owned. While adults viewed natural kinds located inside as owned by someone, children did not. Though children's judgments were sometimes influenced by where objects were located, they never viewed natural kinds as owned at rates exceeding chance. This finding was robust across a variety of testing methods. For example, it occurred when children were asked either of two test questions, when the location of the objects was explicitly highlighted, and when children were shown commonly encountered natural objects and less familiar natural objects. In contrast with children's difficulty recognizing the ownership of natural objects, they overwhelmingly claimed that human-made objects are owned. These findings extend knowledge about children's differing expectations about artifacts and natural kinds, and are informative about how children recognize ownership.

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\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue W, Waterloo, Ont. N2L 3G1, Canada.

E-mail addresses: [friedman@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:friedman@uwaterloo.ca), [friedmao@gmail.com](mailto:friedmao@gmail.com) (O. Friedman).

Property ownership influences young children's thoughts and behavior in relation to objects and people, and their social and moral judgments. For instance, young children typically uphold owners' rights in disputes over property (Kim & Kalish, 2009; Neary & Friedman, 2014) and even spontaneously protest when ownership rights are violated (Kanngiesser & Hood, 2014; Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011; also see Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2013).

For ownership to influence their thoughts and behavior, children must know whether objects are owned, and if so, by whom. Young children use many cues to judge *who* owns an object. For example, two-year-olds base ownership judgments on verbal testimony (Blake, Ganea, & Harris, 2012; Gelman, Manczak, & Noles, 2012). Children aged two and older also typically infer that an object belongs to the first person known to possess it (Blake & Harris, 2009; Friedman & Neary, 2008; Friedman, Van de Vondervoort, Defeyter, & Neary, 2013). Children aged three and older assume that ownership is transferred when an object is given as a gift (Blake & Harris, 2009; Friedman & Neary, 2008) or when someone creatively labors on it (Kanngiesser, Gjersoe, & Hood, 2010; Kanngiesser, Itakura, & Hood, 2014).

However, less is known about how children judge *whether* objects are owned. Such judgments are important because people are typically more entitled to use non-owned objects than objects belonging to others. For example, even 4-year-olds appreciate that it is typically permissible to help yourself to an apple growing in the wild, but not to one growing in a stranger's garden (Nancekivell & Friedman, 2014a). These judgments are also important because they allow people to conclude that an object is owned even when they lack the information necessary to identify the owner. For example, it is easy to conclude that a locked bicycle has an owner, even if there are no hints of the owner's identity.

Whereas research has revealed many cues that children consider in judging who owns an object, it has only uncovered one cue used to judge whether objects are owned: Children make these judgments by considering whether objects are human-made artifacts or naturally-occurring objects. Children aged three and older typically assume that artifacts like shoes and forks are owned, and that natural kinds like pinecones and rocks are non-owned. Children even extend these assumptions to novel objects (Neary, Van de Vondervoort, & Friedman, 2012). However, it should be noted that children do not rigidly adhere to these assumptions. For example, if told that a natural object is owned, children readily accept this (Nancekivell & Friedman, 2014a, 2014b).

## 1. Ownership and location

Another potential cue for judging whether an object is owned is whether the object is located inside or outside. The importance of location for ownership judgments is particularly straightforward for judgments about natural kinds. There is little reason to expect a pinecone in the wild to be owned. There is no evidence that someone has claimed, or even wanted to claim, ownership over this pinecone. In contrast, a pinecone on a bookshelf in a home could not have arrived at its place without human intervention. This intervention suggests that someone took ownership of the pinecone and intends to keep it. Such examples suggest that judging whether an object is owned often requires integrating information about what kind of thing it is (natural kind, artifact) and information about its location (inside, outside).<sup>1</sup> Discovering whether children integrate both kinds of information is important because in daily life both kinds of information occur together—when people encounter an object, they typically see both what it is and where it is located.

We report a series of experiments providing evidence that children make limited use of object location when judging whether natural objects are owned.<sup>2</sup> Children, and adults in one study, were

<sup>1</sup> The claim that ownership judgments often involve considering location does not imply that an object's location *guarantees* that it is owned or non-owned, and also does not imply that people's ownership judgments depend on simple rules linking kinds of objects and locations (e.g., rules like *if natural and inside, then owned*). Rather, the claim only implies that people's ownership judgments are often affected by considerations of an object's location.

<sup>2</sup> We focused on natural kinds as our starting point because the relation between the ownership of artifacts and object location is likely to be considerably more complicated. For instance a bottlecap found on the ground outside is likely to be viewed as non-owned, whereas as a diamond ring or diary found in the same location might be viewed as owned (for related discussion, see Friedman, Neary, Defeyter, & Malcolm, 2011).

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