



Children's developing understanding of legitimate reasons for allocating resources unequally



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ABSTRACT

Recent research on distributive justice suggests that young children prefer equal distributions. But sometimes unequal distributions are justified, such as when some individuals deserve more than others based on merit, need, or agreed-upon rules. When and how do children start incorporating such factors in their distributive decisions? Three-, 5-, and 8-year-old children ($N=72$) had the opportunity to allocate several items to two individuals. One individual was neutral and the other provided a reason why she should be favored. Three of these reasons were legitimate (based on merit, need, or agreed-upon rules) whereas a fourth was idiosyncratic (“I just want more.”). We found that with age, children's equality preference diminished and their acceptance of various reasons for privileged treatment increased. It was not until 8 years, however, that they differentiated between legitimate and idiosyncratic reasons for inequality. These findings suggest that children's sense of distributive justice develops from an early equality preference to a more flexible understanding of the basic normative reasons that inequality may, in some cases, be just.

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1. Introduction

Issues of justice are prevalent in all human societies and circle around questions such as how we should treat one another and how we should allocate benefits and burdens on a local or global level. The notion of equality is central to the formal principle of justice which dates back to Aristotle's formula in *Nicomachean Ethics* to treat equals as equals and like cases alike—and thus unequal cases unequally (Aristotle, trans. 1989, 1131a22–b24). At a theoretical level, it is easy for modern scholars to agree that equal treatment and equal respect are key to formal justice (Dworkin, 1981; Feinberg, 1974; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1992).

In practical terms, however, the challenge is to determine criteria for comparing cases or persons and then decide whether they are equal or unequal in some relevant respect. This issue is most prominent when deciding how to distribute resources among people or within a society (*distributive justice*). Although an equal distribution might be the default case (Tugendhat, 1993), departure from equality is frequently considered necessary to attain a just distribution of goods (Feinberg, 1974; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1992). And there are different reasons for advocating, or even normatively expecting, an unequal distribution of

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resources. For instance, one person might be needier than another (need principle), or might have contributed more to a collaborative task (merit or equity principle), or might simply be entitled – according to rules, conventions, or agreements – to a certain share, for instance, as the winner of a competition (Deutsch, 1975; Feinberg, 1970, 1974; Lerner, 1977; Rawls, 1971). The current study investigates children's developing understanding of such legitimate reasons that justify an unequal allocation of resources in contexts in which the child does not stand to benefit from the resource allocation.

Classic studies on understanding and exercising distributive justice as a disinterested “judge” typically presented children with hypothetical stories (asking children to decide how to allocate resources between some characters and to justify their decision) and found evidence for a protracted course of stage-like development: children first focus on idiosyncratic preferences and desires (preschool age), then apply an equality rule indiscriminately (early school age), and finally become more flexible and consider things like merit, reciprocity, or need at around 8–10 years of age at the earliest (e.g., Damon, 1977; Peterson, Peterson, & McDonald, 1975; Piaget, 1932; Sigelman & Waitzman, 1991 though see Leventhal, Popp, & Sawyer, 1973, for evidence of some appreciation of merit in preschoolers).

Based on more recent research, three major findings can be distilled that suggest a more intricate picture of children's emerging grasp of distributive justice. First, children at around 3 years of age possess a strong egalitarian preference and in situations when the number of resources is even, allocate items equally between recipients (Baumard, Mascaro, & Chevallier, 2012; Kenward & Dahl, 2011; Olson & Spelke, 2008; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012; Shaw, DeScioli, & Olson, 2012). This preference might be based on fairness expectations that develop early during the second year of life (Geraci & Surian, 2011; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011; Sloane, Baillargeon, & Premack, 2012), potentially in concert with prosocial motives that involve some concern for the welfare of others (Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009; Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Paulus, 2014b; Paulus & Moore, 2012; Sommerville, Schmidt, Yun, & Burns, 2013; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010). Second, there is evidence that children appreciate merit and need in distributive contexts at younger ages than previously thought: merit at 3 years (Baumard et al., 2012; Hamann, Bender, & Tomasello, 2014; Kanngiesser & Warneken, 2012), and (material) need at 5–7 years (Kienbaum & Wilkening, 2009; Paulus, 2014a). Third, there is accumulating evidence that by 8 years of age, children's understanding of distributive justice gets more mature and flexible in the sense that children seem to apply justice principles irrespective of whether they stand to benefit from a distribution or not. For instance, children's notion of equality gets more generic and principle-like, as 7- to 8-year-olds, but not younger children, tend to avoid advantageous inequality, that is, unequal resource allocations they would benefit from (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Shaw & Olson, 2012 but see Paulus 2015 for cross-cultural variation). Eight-year-olds' understanding of equality even extends to equality of opportunity: they not only accept an impartial procedure (50:50 chance) that yields an unequal outcome, but they are also more reluctant than 6-year-olds to use a partial procedure that would lead to the same unequal outcome (Shaw & Olson, 2014). Moreover, 3- to 8-year-olds are aware of others expecting them to share resources equally (and expect others to do so, too); nevertheless, it is not until 7 or 8 years of age that children actually share goods equally (Smith, Blake, & Harris, 2013). In intergroup contexts children at this age descriptively expect that others will favor their in-group and children themselves share less with out-group than with in-group individuals (DeJesus, Rhodes, & Kinzler, 2014; Fehr et al., 2008), suggesting that school-aged children's understanding of distributive justice is driven less by simple preferences and more by considerations of different reasons and contexts that might justify or lead to equality or inequality.

In sum, previous research has shed some light on children's equality preference and their understanding of merit and need. Besides the finding that 8-year-olds endorse equality of opportunity more than 6-year-olds in the context of procedural justice and outcome inequality (Shaw & Olson, 2014 see also Grocke, Rossano, & Tomasello, 2015), to our knowledge, there is no systematic investigation of children's developing understanding of more arbitrary, yet legitimate, reasons for unequal resource distribution that are essentially based on agreement. For instance, arbitrary agreed-upon rules of a game might entitle someone to a reward irrespective of moral considerations like deservingness (Feinberg, 1970, 1974; Rawls, 1971)—and by entering a game, one accepts its rules, even if they are arbitrary or lead to asymmetries in resource allocation. Understanding the validity of such rule-based reasons is an important developmental achievement, because besides prototypically moral contexts, children experience, and need to make sense of, many situations in which resources are allocated according to some rules, laws, or conventions.

More generally, we lack a systematic investigation of the developmental trajectory of children's understanding of justified inequality and how this interacts with children's equality preference—hence, the crucial context is one in which both an even and an uneven allocation of resources is possible. Important questions that have not been systematically addressed by prior research are when and how children start considering different reasons for justified inequality and depart from an egalitarian allocation, whether they appreciate some reasons more than others, and whether their understanding changes with age.

Of particular interest is the question of whether children's responsiveness to various justifications for unequal allocations is indeed based on their evaluation of the validity of the reasons given or on simply accepting any verbal justification irrespective of its validity or legitimacy. Recent research has found that when confronted with opposing assertions (e.g., as to which direction a dog went), 4- and 5-year-olds favor an assertion backed by a circular (completely uninformative) explanation (“because he went in this direction”) over an assertion backed by no explanation (Mercier, Bernard, & Clément, 2014). And there is evidence that even adults fall prey to “placebic reasons” such that they accept requests accompanied by circular reasons (“May I use the Xerox [copy] machine, because I have to make copies?”) more than requests accompanied by no reason (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978). In the case of distributive justice, it is possible that a young child who gives more resources to one individual “because she has worked more” (supposedly based on appreciation of merit) would be just

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