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# Procedural justice in children: Preschoolers accept unequal resource distributions if the procedure provides equal opportunities



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### ABSTRACT

When it is not possible to distribute resources equitably to everyone, people look for an equitable or just procedure. In the current study, we investigated young children's sense of procedural justice. We tested 32 triads of 5-year-olds in a new resource allocation game. Triads were confronted with three unequal reward packages and then agreed on a procedure to allocate them among themselves. To allocate the rewards, they needed to use a "wheel of fortune." Half of the groups played with a fair wheel (where each child had an equal chance of obtaining each reward package), and the other half played with an unfair wheel. We analyzed children's interactions when using the wheel and conducted an interview with each child after the game was over. Children using the unfair wheel often decided to change the rules of the game, and they also rated it as an unfair procedure in the interview. In contrast, children who played with the fair wheel were mostly accepting of both the outcome and the procedure. Overall, we found that children as young as preschool age are already sensitive not only to distributive justice but to procedural justice as well.

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## Introduction

Living and cooperating in a social group requires some agreement on how resources should be distributed. Justice and fairness in resource distribution can be achieved in two basic ways: distributive justice in allocating to each individual exactly what he or she deserves and procedural justice in allocating to each individual the opportunity to access resources that he or she deserves. An allocation procedure is fair if no one is disadvantaged or advantaged by it. This simple principle is the basis of many of the rules and norms we follow in our daily lives.

### *Distributive justice*

Children seem to care for distributive justice from very early on (Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011). However, their behavior is influenced by two crucial factors: self-affectedness and the presence of another individual. Self-affectedness can be investigated by comparing children's judgments and behaviors when they themselves can profit from a certain decision (first-party situations) with such situations where they decide for someone else or judge another individual's behavior (third-party situations). In the latter case, for example, Geraci and Surian (2011) found that toddlers prefer to see two recipients obtaining equal outcomes rather than unequal ones and prefer fair distributors who do not favor one recipient over the other. Interestingly, if children themselves are a recipient and asked to share, they report that they should share a resource equally already at 3 years of age but fail to act accordingly until 7 or 8 years of age (Smith, Blake, & Harris, 2013). The same pattern has been observed in another type of studies where children do not need to distribute a resource but can accept or reject a certain distribution. They reject unequal offers favoring another recipient but are fine with offers favoring themselves until 8 years of age (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011). There seems to be a norm of equality that is known by children from very early on. However, they fail to act accordingly until early school age.

A second variable that affects children's fairness behavior is the presence of another individual. Looking at the social influences on rejection of unequal distributions, McAuliffe, Blake, Kim, Wrangham, and Warneken (2013) found that children almost exclusively rejected the advantageous offer if the other receiver (the disadvantaged child) was present. Similarly, Shaw and Olson (2012) showed that already 6-year-olds overcome their self-serving bias and would throw a surplus resource away rather than keeping it for themselves if the experimenter is present and aware of the children's decision. Here the most likely motivation for their behavior seems to be reputation management. It is known that even younger children share more when another person is watching than when they are alone (Engelmann, Herrmann, & Tomasello, 2012). However, McAuliffe and colleagues (2013) pointed out that this is only one possible motivation that could not exclusively account for the behavior that the children showed in their studies. Paulus and Moore (2015), for example, suggested that children share resources because they anticipate the partner's negative emotions in case of an unequal share.

### *Procedural justice*

However, often we need to face situations in which simple distribution principles cannot be deployed because the "resource" cannot be split up (e.g., kickoff in sports), it is too scarce (e.g., more demand than tickets for a concert), or no equal split is possible. In these situations, fairness can also be reached by providing equality of opportunity. This can be achieved by using a procedure that provides everyone with the same chance (Rawls, 1971). Procedural justice of this type has been studied intensely in adults following the classic work by Thibaut and Walker (1975). Most studies have been conducted in the laboratory simulating legal dispute settings. Subsequent interviews with participants revealed a positive relation between their perception of procedural justice and satisfaction with outcomes. An undesirable outcome is more likely to be accepted if it is the result of a fair procedure. Since then, this "fair procedure effect" has been replicated many times (for a review, see Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996).

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