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Brief Report

Children's inequity aversion depends on culture: A cross-cultural comparison



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ABSTRACT

Recent work showed the presence of strong forms of inequity aversion in young children. When presented with an uneven number of items, children would rather tend to throw one item away than to distribute them unequally between two anonymous others. The current study examined whether or not this pattern is a universal part of typical development by investigating 6- and 7-year-old Ugandan children. Results revealed that the Ugandan children, in contrast to their U.S. peers, tended to distribute the resources unequally rather than to throw the remaining resource away. This points to cross-cultural differences in the development of children's fairness-related decision making.

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Introduction

A classical topic of developmental psychology concerns the development of fairness and resource distribution during childhood (e.g., Damon, 1977). One type of fairness that has received considerable attention in the literature concerns inequity aversion, that is, an aversion against someone receiving either too much or too little compared with someone else (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). Research has shown that in such situations of unequal resource distributions, people actively try to restore equality (e.g., Dawes, Fowler, Johnson, McElreath, & Smirnov, 2007). Similar phenomena have been reported from developmental studies, indicating an early onset of inequity aversion (e.g., Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Paulus, Gillis, Li, & Moore, 2013).

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Of particular interest are studies on inequity aversion in third-party interactions. If young children try to attain equal resource distributions in these situations—that is, situations that are different from scenarios in which they can benefit themselves or compare their own outcomes with those of other recipients (e.g., [Blake & McAuliffe, 2011](#); [Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008](#))—this would point to a strong motive for inequity aversion. A recent and widely noted examination of the presence of inequity aversion in young children yielded evidence that 6- to 8-year-olds would rather tend to throw a resource away than to establish an unequal resource distribution ([Shaw & Olson, 2012](#)). In that study, children could distribute an unequal number of resources between two recipients who contributed equally to a task (e.g., cleaning up a room). After all but one item had been distributed equally, the experimenter asked whether the child would like to throw the remaining item away or hand it over to one of the recipients. Although the latter option would cause an unequal distribution, it is noteworthy to mention that this would not be at a cost to the other recipient or to the child making the decision. Across a number of experiments, nearly all children decided to throw the additional item away, demonstrating that the children are averse to inequity. Importantly, this was not the case when the children could distribute two remaining items equally or throw both of them away. Here, the children showed a strong inclination to distribute the items.

A central question is whether this kind of strong inequity aversion is a universal part of typical development or specifically related to children growing up in a wealthy part of the United States. To answer this question, [Shaw and Olson \(2012\)](#) replicated their finding with a group of children of lower socioeconomic status (SES) in South Africa. If strong inequity aversion were indeed a universal part of human nature as indicated by these findings, and is not affected by culture and SES, this would have important theoretical consequences for our understanding of the ontogenetic origins and the nature of human morality (see [Carpendale, Hammond, & Atwood, 2013](#)). Such a finding of a potentially universal inclination for inequity aversion is striking given that other studies have revealed cross-cultural variability in young children's ([Rao & Stewart, 1999](#); [Rochat et al., 2009](#)) and adults' (e.g., [Henrich et al., 2005](#)) resource distribution decisions.

Yet, it is important to note that [Shaw and Olson \(2012\)](#) asserted that “South Africa is a relatively Westernized and industrialized nation, so it is unclear if these results would generalize to societies without these Western values and technology” (p. 388). One could assume that cultures that, on the one hand, experience a scarcity of resources and, on the other, are less individualistic (i.e., put less emphasis on the rights of individuals) and higher in power distance (i.e., put less emphasis on equality) (see [Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010](#)) constitute a critical touchstone for universal claims of human inequity aversion. In particular, one could argue that a reduced concern for individual rights and a reduced emphasis on equality might lead to a reduced inequity aversion.

The current study addressed this issue by examining a group of Ugandan children in a procedure that closely followed [Shaw and Olson's \(2012\)](#) study. Uganda offers an excellent opportunity to address this question because it differs in economic and cultural aspects from the Westernized and higher SES group that was the main focus of Shaw and Olson's study. According to the Uganda National Household Survey, in 2009 the average monthly income was approximately \$100 U.S. ([Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2010](#)), and the UN 2014 Human Development Index ranked Uganda as 164 (out of 187 countries). Moreover, following [Hofstede and colleagues \(2010\)](#), East African countries score considerably higher on power distance and lower on individualism than the United States or South Africa. East African children are typically educated to be more cooperative and less competitive than their American peers ([Munroe & Munroe, 1977](#)), and the regional tribes have a strong impact on people's customs and self-concept (see also [Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010](#), for a presentation of cross-cultural differences in self-concepts and cooperativity).

Consequently, Uganda offers an unique opportunity to assess the universality of strong inequity aversion in young children. If strong inequity aversion is indeed a universal aspect of typical development, one would expect to find the same pattern of results/behavior in Uganda. Yet, if inequity aversion is a phenomenon specific to Western culture, wealth, and values, one would expect that Ugandan children would rather distribute the remaining resource than dissipate it.

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