



Young children's understanding of violations of property rights

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ABSTRACT

The present work investigated young children's normative understanding of property rights using a novel methodology. Two- and 3-year-old children participated in situations in which an actor (1) took possession of an object for himself, and (2) attempted to throw it away. What varied was who owned the object: the actor himself, the child subject, or a third party. We found that while both 2- and 3-year-old children protested frequently when their own object was involved, only 3-year-old children protested more when a third party's object was involved than when the actor was acting on his own object. This suggests that at the latest around 3 years of age young children begin to understand the normative dimensions of property rights.

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1. Introduction

Possession and property structure many, if not most, of our everyday interactions with objects. Young children (and even some animals) care about physical possession, and indeed many of children's early conflicts with peers are over physical possession (Bakeman & Brownlee, 1982; Brenner & Mueller, 1982; Bronson, 1975; Dawe, 1934; Dunn & Munn, 1987; Hay, 1984; Hay & Ross, 1982; Shantz, 1987). By around 24 months, young children can reliably identify who possesses familiar objects (Fasig, 2000), and their appropriate use of possessive language ("My milk", "Mommy's sock") suggests some nascent understanding even earlier than that (Hay, 2006; Tomasello, 1998).

But possession and property are quite different things: while possession can be understood as a natural relation of proximity, physical control, etc., of persons to objects, property is a social, normatively structured institution (Searle, 1995; Snare, 1972). The notion of property thus addresses not the relation of people to things, but rather the

relation of people to people (their "agreements") with respect to things (Rose, 1985; Snare, 1972; for developmental aspects of this, see Kalish, 2005). Property is a status conferred on objects by the collective assignment of some social body who agrees to "respect" property assignments. Regarding its logical structure, "property" is a cluster concept, defined by a network of constitutive rules regulating (i) under which conditions who owns what (call them "conditions of ownership" rules), and (ii) what implications (rights, commitments, entitlements, etc.) owning which objects carries under which conditions (call them "implications of ownership" rules) (Snare, 1972). For example, buying an object, rather than renting it, is a proper condition of ownership, which then implies (entitles) that one may use it, sell it, give it to other people, destroy it, etc.

Some recent studies have begun to look at young children understanding of property as a social institution. Some studies have focused on how they infer ownership from hearing stories or seeing drawings of people acting with things (e.g., Friedman & Neary, 2008; Neary, Friedman, & Burnstein, 2009). These studies have focused on such things as first possession (e.g., who begins the story holding an object) or control of permission (e.g., who says whether others can use an object) as cues of ownership. Other studies have focused on children's ability to track

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and understand transfers of ownership (that is, “conditions of ownership”) (e.g., Blake & Harris, 2009; Kim & Kalish, 2009). In most studies, children were told stories in which the ownership of some object changed (e.g., someone bought it) or physical possession changed from one individual to another without a change of ownership (e.g., someone borrowed or stole an object) and were then asked who the owner was in the end. From around 5 years of age, children have been found to deploy some understanding of ownership transfers, distinguishing for example, gift-giving from stealing (Blake & Harris, 2009; for children’s moral evaluation of theft, see e.g., Tisak & Turiel, 1984). Similarly, in one recent study children directly participated in a situation pertaining to ownership (manipulations of objects by different actors), rather than hearing stories and seeing pictures about it (Kangasser, Gjersoe, & Hood, 2010). It was found that according to 3- and 4-year-olds, some manipulations of objects (investment of creative labor in somebody else’s property) would lead to a transfer of the ownership of the object.

Relatively little work has looked at children’s understanding of “implications of ownership” rules. Through observational data recorded in families’ homes, Ross (1996) documented that in conflict among siblings (2 and 4 year old respectively), older children often invoke ownership rights during their disputes to justify their claims. Earlier work using a verbal interview methodology has focused on children’s moral evaluation of actions on objects depending on their property status (Hook, 1993). This work failed to find competence in children before the age of around 10: Younger children did not differentiate in their normative evaluation between, e.g., destroying one’s own object (permitted in terms of property rights) and destroying someone else’s object (a transgression of property rights) (for children’s moral evaluation of destruction of someone else’s property, see also Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011).

More recent work has not directly asked children to normatively evaluate different acts with objects depending on their property status, but has investigated children’s understanding of “implications of ownership” rules by asking them questions as to what different people “should get to decide” with regard to different objects (e.g., how to use them, whether to destroy them etc.) as a function of their property status (Kim & Kalish, 2009). Again, from around 5 years of age, children showed some understanding by privileging owners over non-owners in deciding about the fate of objects. What remains unclear from this study, however, is what, if anything, children understand about the normative structure and implications of “implications of ownership” rules. Do they understand that deviations from the rules are not only surprising but mistakes?

A different line of recent work has documented a nascent understanding of the normative implications of rules and status in another domain, the domain of games (Rakoczy, 2008; Rakoczy & Tomasello, 2009; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008, 2009; Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009). What is novel about these studies is the measure of normative awareness: rather than administering explicit interviews, children were confronted in an interactive paradigm with actions that did or did not

respect the constitutive rules of a game and the status of objects therein. Both in games of pretence and in simple rules games, children from age 2 to 3 not only learned to play games according to their constitutive rules themselves, but spontaneously and actively enforced those rules towards third parties: They protested, criticized, and instructed wrongdoers in the case of actions violating an object’s status in the context of the game. What such behavior clearly indicates is that children understand that the rules of games have *normative force*, and that this force applies in *agent-neutral* ways (e.g., Nagel, 1986) to all participants of the practice alike.

The crucial question for present purposes is now whether with such a new interactive measure of normative awareness, some nascent understanding of the normative implications of property as a status defined by rules can be shown already in early childhood. From a theoretical point of view, this question is interesting not only in its own right, but also in the broader context of children’s developing understanding of institutional reality more generally (Kalish, 2005). It might be that games are special in that they are “non-serious” activities, and so the normative consequences of games only reach as far as the very limited game context. Property’s status, in contrast is very serious, and its normative implications span basically our whole everyday life. Documenting that young children understand the normative structure of property as a normative status would thus amount to showing that their early normative awareness is genuine, not limited to the arguably special case of games.

In the present work, therefore, we adapted the measures previously used to study young children’s understanding of normative issues involving games (spontaneous protest etc.) to issues involving property. We focused especially on children’s understanding of “implications of ownership”. All children thus watched as an actor (a) took possession of, and (b) attempted to dispose of the target object. What we varied was who owned this object: the actor himself, the child subject, or a third party. If children understand the normative structure of property, they should intervene in response to both kinds of actions if and only if the object does not belong to the actor (that is, both when it belongs to themselves and when it belongs to a third party). Such differential intervention would reflect an understanding of the agent-neutral normative structure of property in two ways: first, by not only respecting the rules oneself, but by enforcing them towards third parties; and second, by enforcing them regardless of whose rights are violated (first or third person). Two- to 3-year-old children were tested, as this is the age at which they show some normative awareness in the domain of game rules.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Thirty 3-year-olds (34–38 months, mean age = 36, 18 months; 15 boys, 15 girls) and thirty 2-year-olds (24–28 months, mean age = 26,14 months; 15 boys, 15 girls)

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