

## Letter

## Children's Sense of Fairness: Respect Isn't Everything

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Recent empirical work has provided new insight into the origins of distributive, procedural, and retributive justice. Engelmann and Tomasello [1] offer an overarching framework that attempts to explain these different aspects of fairness as deriving from a single core process – a desire for mutual respect. While we applaud this integrative attempt, we point out two outstanding challenges. First, although collaboration engenders fairness concerns, children still show a self-centered bias in their response to inequality. Second, children are often surprisingly focused on distributional outcomes without much regard to the history of how they came about, calling into question whether equal respect alone can account for children's emerging fairness concerns.

**All Inequalities Aren't Equal**

We agree with the authors that collaboration creates a special context in which fairness can emerge [2]. However, we see one major issue that challenges the idea of equal respect as the sole driver of children's sense of fairness – both children and adults have a stronger dislike of receiving less than they do of receiving more. This asymmetry is evident in windfall contexts as well as after merit-based and collaborative activities. Children as young as 3 years of age show strong negative emotions [3] and verbally communicate their discontent when they receive less than a peer, but not when they receive more [4,5]. In merit-based scenarios, when one child works more than another, the less deserving child tends to favor equal outcomes, but the more deserving child favors proportional outcomes that

(rightfully) benefit them more [6]. Crucially, this biased distribution effect occurs even when children must collaborate to obtain the rewards [4]. If collaboration truly generated equal respect, these asymmetries would not appear.

Indeed, different mechanisms appear to be at work when one faces a disadvantage as opposed to an advantage [7]. This is true even in the context of collaboration. For example, when 3-year-old children collaborate with a peer but receive less, they either reject the allocation, such that neither child receives anything, or steal from the partner [5]. When children receive more, they accept the allocation and are subsequently willing to share with the peer. Giving and stealing both reduce inequality, but these are clearly different mechanisms. It is unclear how the current formulation of the 'fairness as equal respect' account can accommodate the robust evidence that disadvantageous and advantageous inequity aversion are dissociable processes.

**Outcomes Matter**

Engelmann and Tomasello argue that, when children are confronted with inequality, they are more concerned with the source of the inequality than the unequal outcome itself. This view applies to inequalities that arise both in and outside the context of collaboration. If true, it would offer a common mechanism for both distributive and procedural justice. However, we find the fairness as equal respect account difficult to reconcile with evidence suggesting that children and adults react aversively to inequality when respect is not in play. First, children reject disadvantageous, but not advantageous, inequality even when not paired with a partner [8]. In this context, rejections only deprive the child of rewards, but children are nonetheless willing to incur a cost to reject disadvantageous allocations, suggesting that an aversion to getting less may be, at least in part, a nonsocial

process. Second, Ultimatum Game work with adults and children suggests that people reject unfair offers, even when the proposers have no agency, either because the proposer is a computer [9] or because the proposer has no choice in what to offer [10]. Similarly, adults are willing to pay a cost to adjust unequal payoffs when inequalities arise as a result of a random allocation process [11]. Third, in the context of third-party punishment of unfairness, children reject inequality both when it is borne of a selfish motive – an actor gave nothing to a recipient – and when it is borne of a generous motive – an actor gave everything to a recipient [12]. That children would intervene against inequality even when it comes from a place of generosity would seem problematic for the view that the meaning behind the act is what children principally attend to.

The view of Engelmann and Tomasello that fairness equates to equal respect adds to an emerging literature showing that fairness concerns are more contextually and culturally sensitive than was previously thought, and marks an important step towards a unified theory of human fairness. However, if this account is to offer a comprehensive explanation for children's emerging fairness concerns, it needs to take seriously the wealth of evidence showing that people (i) respond differently to advantageous and disadvantageous inequality, and (ii) are opposed to inequality in cases in which respect is not on the table. Respect is undoubtedly important, but is it everything?

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## Letter

## Respect Defended

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When young children are asked to distribute valuable resources, they consider unequal allocations unfair and even pay a personal cost to rectify the inequality. Yet, in situations of procedural fairness, when an unequal distribution results from an impartial procedure, children deem that result fair – even if they end up being personally disadvantaged. What is going on? At first glance, we might conclude that children's sense of fairness consists of a suite of different psychological mechanisms and processes. In our recent *Trends Cogn. Sci.* paper, however, we provided a unifying framework which maintains that one and the same psychological mechanism – a desire for equal respect – underlies these various

phenomena [1]. McAuliffe, Warneken, and Blake [2] doubt that the 'fairness as equal respect' view carries such explanatory power, and highlight two distinctions that, in their interpretation, our view cannot account for. We respond to these in turn.

The first distinction is between being averse to receiving less than others (disadvantageous inequity aversion, DIA) versus being averse to receiving more than others (advantageous inequity aversion, AIA). Using an innovative measure, McAuliffe and colleagues [3] have produced a convincing body of evidence that, in windfall situations, DIA emerges earlier in development than AIA (at around 3 versus 8 years of age, respectively). However, this does not license the inference that different mechanisms, instead of the unifying mechanism we propose, underlie children's sense of fairness. In distributive situations, children's selfish motives – for example, to maximize their rewards relative to their partner [4] – interact with their sense of fairness in complex ways. In contexts where children are disadvantaged relative to their partner (DIA), fairness and selfish motives are aligned: both are expressed in a desire for more resources. In contexts where children are advantaged relative to their partner, on the other hand, fairness and selfish motives pull in opposite directions. This, not a different sense of fairness, explains the delayed developmental emergence of AIA. Indeed, when the fairness motive is strengthened through the collaborative production of rewards, the developmental delay of AIA relative to DIA is erased: both forms of inequity aversion are in place by age 3 [5,6]. Further, when selfish motives are not at work at all – because children distribute resource between third parties – children at this age also distribute equally [7]. Importantly, the fairness as equal respect view can also explain unequal distributions, such as when a child who has worked harder during a collaborative effort receives more resources. In such situations children 'respect' the fact that

their partner has worked harder than them, and thus deserves a larger share. Even this notion of deservingness, however, can only be understood conceptually against a background norm of partner equality: equal resources are allocated for equal units of work contribution.

The second distinction is between distributive and procedural fairness. The fairness as equal respect view questions the widespread intuition that children's responses to unequal distributions are grounded in material concerns, and suggests instead that they are based on interpersonal concerns: children seek equal respect. A main line of support for this view comes from the observation that children accept unequal distributions if the procedure gave everyone an equal chance, that is, respected everyone as equals [8,9]. By contrast, McAuliffe and colleagues maintain that 'outcomes matter' and that children react negatively to unequal distributions even when such distributions do not imply disrespect. Their first argument is that children refuse unequal distributions even when they are not paired with a partner. However, this situation does not speak to fairness at all because fairness necessarily involves social comparison. What is more likely to be going on in these contexts is that children are disappointed with how they are being treated by the experimenter relative to how she could have treated them (a behavior that is also shown by chimpanzees [10]). In addition, McAuliffe and colleagues rightly point out that the fairness as equal respect view predicts that children should accept unequal offers in the ultimatum game if the proposer had no control over the offer since, in such contexts, unequal distributions do not convey disrespect. Their claim that it is not supported rests on a study of children in anonymous and complex settings [11]. However, the prediction is supported if children are tested in a paradigm that involves face-to-face