

# Fair Is Fair, But Not Everywhere

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Imagine this scenario: Two commercial fishermen head out to sea at the break of dawn, and spend the next ten hours hauling in the day's catch. When they wearily return to dock and count their take, one has three times as many fish in his hold. How should the two fishermen be compensated for the long day's work?

Many people consider this a no-brainer. Three times the fish, three times the pay—simple. Reward is based on merit—in this case, successful fishing. In academic jargon, it's called “merit-based distributive justice.”

The alternative—one alternative—is to divide the spoils equally. After all, both fishermen spent ten hours under the hot sun working, and brought back fish that will feed the community. And both need the money, so perhaps this is fairer, more equitable?

The weight of evidence supports merit pay as the fairer approach. Humans are markedly averse to giving workers more than they deserve, and indeed many will settle for less in order to compensate work equitably. What's more, this attitude appears very early in childhood: Children as young as three believe that hard work merits more reward. By the time they enter school, children are like little adults in their commitment to distributive justice.

But is this impulse universal? Perhaps not, says psychological scientist Marie Schäfer of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany. According to Schäfer, nobody has ever looked at how young children from different cultures think about merit when sharing rewards. There is reason to suspect that meritocracy may be more of a Western concept and value, so she and several colleagues decided to put this to the test, studying the behavior of children, four to 11 years old, in three different cultures.

Some of the children were German, of suburban working parents. Another group was from a remote rural area of Namibia, an egalitarian foraging tribe called the Haillom, who gather bush food and occasionally work for wages. The third group was the Samburu, from a remote rural region of Kenya, who live on livestock, gardening and occasional wage work. The children were all studied in their own communities.

The scientists asked the children to, well, go fishing. They fished two at a time, in two adjacent tanks. In this case, the “fish” were metallic objects in the tanks, which the children tried to “catch” with magnetized fishing rods. Only the game was rigged by the scientists in advance: In some cases, the two children would catch exactly the same number of fish, while in other cases, one child would catch three times as many fish. In another condition, the children didn't fish at all, but were simply given unequal catches.

The idea was to test how much the children valued merit. So each child was given a number of sweets equal to the total number of fish in the catch, and was told to distribute the sweets any way he or she wanted—without adults in the room to influence them. If they valued merit, children should distribute the sweets according to shares of the catch. That is, if they had landed the same number of fish, they would choose to reward each one equally, but if one fared much better at fishing, rewards would also be disproportionate. In the case where they were simply given the fish, rewards should be unrelated to catch size—since no effort was involved.

Culture matters. That's the main finding among many from the study, as described in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*. The German children distributed the spoils of the day precisely in proportion to productivity, even when this meant a very unbalanced distribution of rewards. By contrast, children from the two rural African societies barely took merit into consideration at all. These findings suggest that the basic notion of merit and distributive justice is far from universal in our species, and that fairness is culturally defined.

But why? The scientists offer some thoughts on this. It could be that in large-scale societies like Germany, a meritocracy is important for regulating transactions between people who don't know each other and may not interact again. The focus is on equitable interactions, because things won't be "evened out" in the future. In small scale societies, by contrast, most exchanges take place between people who are familiar with one another. It may be more important in such societies to build long-term relationships based on equity—rather than to insist on equity in a single transaction. In egalitarian forager societies, such as the Haillom, sharing is an important leveling mechanism, balancing asymmetries in wealth and increasing harmony. Children may internalize these social values early on, and apply them even when the fishing trip is imaginary.

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