

What's "Fair" Depends on Where You Come From

August 13, 2015

The mentality that “you get what you earn” is widely accepted as what is “fair” in most Western societies. But is this concept of distributive justice universally considered fair, or is it a culture-bound phenomenon?

Marie Sch?fer and colleagues wanted find out. Their research, recently published in *Psychological Science*, examined how children in three different societies made merit distributions. The researchers chose to look at German children as a representation of modern Western culture, children from the Samburu African tribe to represent gerontocratic society (rule by elders), and children from the ?All Hai||om African tribe to represent an egalitarian society.



For the study, the children were divided into same-sex pairs to play a timed fishing game with 12 magnetic cubes. In the game, they used a magnet rod to fish out the cubes and placed the cubes in transparent reward tubes to be counted by the experimenter once the time had elapsed.

Each day, the young participants were assigned one of three conditions: unequal merit, equal merit, or no merit.

In the unequal merit condition, the magnetic cubes were purposefully rigged so that one child would be able to fish out more than their partner. In the equal merit condition, the cubes were all equally magnetic and the children had equal opportunity to fish out the same number of cubes.

For every cube fished out, the experimenter provided one candy. The candies were placed on the table between the participants, so the decision of how to distribute the sweets was left to the children to make.

In the no merit condition, the experimenter fished out the cubes for the children and distributed them unevenly in their reward tubes.

The children experienced each condition over the course of the 3-day experiment, though they played with a different partner each time.

The researchers found that the children distributed rewards differently depending on their cultural upbringing.

As might have been expected from an egalitarian society, the ?All Hai||om children shared the rewards most equitably, even when they fished out unequal numbers of cubes in the unequal-merit condition.

In contrast, the Samburu children did not take merit into account at all. When they had contributed equally in the equal-merit condition, they divided the rewards significantly more unequally than German children and Hai||om children did.

The German children distinguished most between the two merit conditions. They actually tended to behave more equitably than Hai||om children in the equal merit condition, but divided rewards just as inequitably as Samburu children when contributions to the rewards were not equal.

“These results suggested that ideas of distributive justice based on merit are not universal,” the researchers write. “Young children—who are typically not producing or exchanging goods yet on a regular basis—adopt different cultural practices regarding the sharing of jointly earned resources.”

These findings help to illuminate the ways in which morality differs across cultures, even at a young age.

“There remains much to be learned about the many dimensions of human morality and how they may vary in the human species,” the researchers conclude.

Schafer, M., Haun, D., & Tomasello, M. (2015). Fair is not fair everywhere. *Psychological Science*. DOI: [10.1177/0956797615586188](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615586188)