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Judgment of land ownership by young refugee Palestinian and U.S. children

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Abstract

Children's sense and reasoning about territory and land ownership may develop differently in contexts of poverty and where narratives of dispossession are a part of daily life and are of political and historical significance, as is the case in the Palestinian refugee context in Lebanon. In this study we looked at how 3- and 5-year-old refugee Palestinian and American children distribute land among neighbors disputing over an unoccupied piece of land separating their properties. Children were required to make distributive justice decisions about 4 scripted scenarios that involved a pretend conflict between different types of neighbors (rich/poor; ingroup vs. outgroup; neighbors of the same material wealth and neighbors that were either poor or rich as well as ingroup members). Both 5-year-old Palestinian and American children showed inequality aversion, favoring the poor neighbor over the rich in their distributive justice decisions. This first finding suggests that being born into poverty does not make young children more sensitive to material inequity, even if the object of dispute is of particular cultural relevance. However, a second main finding suggests that extreme circumstances potentially translate into enhanced ingroup partialities, above and beyond the universal normative trend toward inequity aversion.

Keywords

American children, land entitlement, Palestinian refugee children, sense of possession

Introduction

Existing literature on children's sense of possession has primarily focused on the developing explicitness of ownership and entitlement for small individuated physical objects (Fasig, 2000), often with strong affective value (i.e., food, objects, or particular toys as substitute for primary care and comfort; e.g., transitional objects, following Winnicott, 1982). Here we consider children's developing sense and reasoning about possession in relation to territory, an object that is more elusive, yet more deeply rooted in animal evolution (Hinde, 1970). Furthermore, we reasoned that across human groups, the relevance and urgency of land entitlement greatly varies depending on political and historical circumstances (Atalla, 1993; Peteet, 2005) and thus it is relevant to question when children begin to develop a sense of possession as it applies to land. We hypothesized that sharp variations in children's sociocultural circumstances (i.e., refugee Palestinian vs. middle-class American) should affect children's developing sense of who should own what and why, particularly their judgment of land ownership as content of possession.

In all human cultures, children develop to enter and participate in a socially constructed (consensual) moral space that sets out some rules and practices about, among other moral principles, "who ought to own what" (Rochat, 2011). As children move into this space between the ages of 3 and 5 years, an alienable (i.e., negotiable) sense of possession emerges, replacing an inalienable (i.e., absolute or nonnegotiable) egocentric sense of possession that is characteristic of younger children. As the alienable sense of possession develops, children begin to be more assertive of their own ethical stance toward others. There is cross-cultural evidence from children growing up in very different social, political, and material contexts suggesting that the progression towards an alienable sense of possession happens between 3 and 5 years of age (Rochat et al., 2009). Also during this time, children develop a sense of distributive justice about who ought to have what (third-person perspective). In this development, particularly from 7 years of age and consistent with progress in overall moral reasoning (Damon, 1994; Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1932; Turiel, 2010), children manifest an increased inequity aversion and a sensitivity to proportion in distribution (McCrink, Bloom, & Santos 2009). Overall, children develop to become more equitable in their distribution of resources, whether they themselves are the recipient (first person) or whether others are the recipients (third-person perspective) (Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Olson & Spelke, 2008). However, if the development toward inequity aversion and fairness in distributive justice in children appears universal, it may vary and find different expressions depending on culture (see also Snarey, 1985, regarding moral reasoning). This is evident, for example, when comparing preschoolers growing up in Western as opposed to non-Western collectivistic contexts in relation to their propensity to share valuable resources with a peer (Pilgrim & Rueda-Riedle, 2002; Rao & Stewart, 1999; Stewart & McBride-Chang, 2000). Children grow up in vastly different ecologies of relative poverty and material wealth, as well as under more or less social and political pressures dictated by the circumstances of their birth. We know that many children can show remarkable resilience (children of the war or collective trauma; Garmezy, 1991), but also debilitating

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susceptibilities (children of neglectful and abusive parents; Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). An enduring question is to what extent highly contrasted local circumstances affect what can be viewed as the natural course of psychological development.

In this study, we probed whether the high political and social pressures surrounding young Palestinian refugee children living in a densely populated and impoverished Lebanese camp, immersed in prolonged tensions (three generations) and political discourses that pertain to the lost ownership of their land, would promote different ways of reasoning about who should own land and why, compared to that of children growing up in much less contentious circumstances (Habashi, 2009; Peteet, 2005; Sayigh, 1993). For comparison, we therefore also tested same-age American middle-class preschoolers growing up in a politically more secure, stable, and materially protected environment. We probed the extent to which the sharply contrasted circumstances of these two groups of young children (3- and 5-year-olds) might affect the development of their early reasoning about possession (i.e., land ownership) and their general sense of distributive justice.

Looking at non-Western contexts showing some similarities to the context of the Palestinian children in our sample, there is some evidence that stressful political situation and impoverished living can shape older children's sense of distributive justice. El-Bedour, Baker, and Charlesworth (1997) compared the moral reasoning of 8- to 13-year-old Palestinian refugees living in the West Bank, Jewish Israelis, and Arab Bedouins living in Israel's Southern District. These groups differed with respect to their exposure to political violence and their level of poverty, with the West Bank group showing the highest exposure to political conflict and poverty while the Israeli group had the least exposure. El-Bedour et al. were concerned with how children in each of these cultures shifted their moral orientation from one focusing on caring or, more specifically, the tendency to take the perspective of others compared to an orientation focused on justice (rights and responsibilities). Moreover, these researchers looked at whether children's solutions involved mutual benefit to both parties or were unilateral or biased. These orientations were hypothesized to shift according to the type of dilemma presented to the child: a hypothetical realistic political dilemma that was allegorically related to the Arab–Israeli context, and a role-taking dilemma. The children in all three groups showed a caring orientation and the ability to take the perspective of each protagonist when reasoning about hypothetical dilemmas. However, when reasoning about more realistic political fables (which were allegorically related to their immediate context, i.e, the Arab–Israeli context) Bedouin and Palestinian children had a justice-based rather than caring orientation and they demonstrated less perspective taking. El-Bedour et al.'s (1997) study suggests that children's sense of distributive justice may not have the same developmental trajectory in different cultural and resource contexts; these differences were observed in children as young as 8 years.

To our knowledge, Wainryb's (1995) is the only other empirical study comparing samples of Arab and non-Arab children. In this study, Wainryb used four nonpolitical scenarios to examine how 8- to 16-year-old Druze[1] and Israeli children prioritized different solutions to conflicts. The question of interest was how children selected among combinations of the following solution types: (a) justice-based solutions, which involved thinking about distributive justice and impartiality; (b) obedience to authority solutions, which involved obeying parental wishes or advice; (c) personal choice solutions, which involved prioritizing one's personal preferences for activities or projects; (d) interpersonal responsibility solutions emphasized the responsibilities which come with social roles. As with the El-Bedour et al. (1997) study, Wainryb found both cultural similarities and differences. Both groups and all age cohorts prioritized justice-based solutions when the alternative was a personal choice solution, or when the alternative involved interpersonal responsibility. Group differences and intragroup variability were also observed. Druze children, in contrast to Israeli children, emphasized obedience over personal choice solutions to conflict. However, despite this finding, there was also a similar developmental trajectory across cultures. As children in both groups got older, personal choice solutions were prioritized over obedience and interpersonal responsibility solutions. The combination of universal and cultural-specific moral judgments suggests that older children in very different sociopolitical and material contexts seem to have some common developmental trajectories, while at the same time specific cultural (and subcultural) beliefs and worldviews can affect what considerations are prioritized and how complex problems can become imbued with particular cultural meanings. Similar findings are reported for older children from different cultural contexts living in political violence (Ardila-Rey, Killen, & Brenick, 2009; Boyden, 2003; Ferguson & Cairns, 1996). We know of no studies that included preschool-aged children (3–5 years), the age at which children crucially develop a sense of possessions that become alienable (Rochat, 2011).

In the present study, we therefore examined whether 3–5-year-old preschoolers living in a context of political unrest and poverty display a different sense of distributive justice compared to middle-class Western children growing up in significantly safer and materially stable circumstances.

To our knowledge, no research exists on children's developing sense of distributive justice as it specifically relates to land. Therefore the current study is driven and informed by previous cross-cultural findings on children's developing sense of fairness and distributive justice for individuated, ''detachable and transportable'' objects with inherent value to the child (Faigenbaum, 2005). Although not detachable and transportable like other individuated objects of possession, land as a possession can be clearly delineated and identified to children, with borders and other physical characteristics that were carefully highlighted in our experiments and the distributive justice questionnaire we used to test children that implied the detection of such physical delineation cues, in some conditions (i.e., ''river condition'') even with such cues naturally delineating two equal parts (see Method section). Assuming a careful presentation and framing of questions to the child, acknowledging the fact that it is probably a more intangible and abstract object of possession (e.g., because of its size and non-transportability), we considered land as equivalent to any other individuated objects of potential possession. We assumed that young children from age 3 could understand land, like any other detachable object, as an object of possession. From at least 3 years, children are explicit about ''my doll,'' ''my car,'' ''my room'' as identifiable objects of possession. In language development, for example, the use of possessives emerges already by the second year as statements of ownership, not just as requests to obtain this or that object (Tomasello, 1998).

In general, two intuitions served as the groundwork for our hypotheses. First, we hypothesized, based on previous cross-cultural research showing a universal shift to an alienable sense of possession, that 3-year-old compared to 5-year-old children, even those that live in radically different material and social contexts, would reason differently and make different judgments about

land ownership. As a general age-related development, we expected that both Palestinian and American 5-year-olds would tend to be more egalitarian and display more signs of inequity aversion compared to their 3-year-old peers. However, we also expected differences linked to the contrasted circumstances of these two groups of children.

Given that the Palestinian children live in poverty and attend a school that has as a central part of its curriculum the reminder of the 1948 Nakba[2]—in which millions of Palestinians were forced from their homes and land (a historical fact that is part of daily public life and the Palestinian consciousness)—with reminders adorning many walls and corners of the camp, commemorated at the preschool for a month each year, we predicted that both poverty and ingroup member status would be particularly salient factors in these children's sense of distributive justice when compared to North American middle-class children.

For our second hypothesis, we predicted that Palestinian children would show more parochialism (ingroup favoritism) and in general more sensitivity to the poverty status of the protagonists in third-party land ownership distribution. Note that an abundant literature exists pointing to the fact that children as young as 3 years have an awareness of the group they belong to and their relative socioeconomic status. From 3 years of age, children display ingroup versus outgroup identification, preference, and favoritism based on ethnicity, gender, accent, or team affiliation (e.g., Bigler, Brown, & Markell, 2001; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Nesdale & Flesser, 2001; see also Brenick et al., 2010, for further evidence of early intergroup moral reasoning by Arab children of various ethnic and political extractions).

To test these two hypotheses we probed Palestinian and American children in games involving puppet protagonists depicted as fighting over a piece of land. Children were probed in relation to five scenarios, each about a land dispute between two neighbors that vary in their wealth status, their physical appearance, or their national "totemic" affiliation that either did or did not correspond to the child's own cultural affiliation (a puppet wrapped in either a Palestinian scarf or an American flag).

In summary, the goal of the study was to assess the extent to which the development of fairness in distributive justice is relatively immune, or on the contrary depends on the particular sociocultural circumstances of the young child. With this question in mind, we compared children that are surrounded or not surrounded by contentious issues regarding who should own what, in particular a piece of land. The question of interest is to what extent the more or less stressful sociocultural circumstances of young children *impact* on the development of their sense of fairness, with (a) more or less bias toward ingroup favoritism (parochialism), (b) more or less sensitivity to the hardship of others, and (c) differential reasoning and judgment about the right to own.

Method

Participants

Palestinian sample. We tested 42 Palestinian children living in Burj El-Barajneh, a Palestinian refugee camp in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon. Twenty of these children were between 36 and 47 months of age, herein referred to as the 3-year-old group. Eleven of these children were females. The other 22 children were between 56 and 78 months of age, herein referred to as the 5-year-old group. Ten of the 5-year-olds were females.

Figure 1. Aerial view of Burj El-Barajneh today

Palestinian context. Burj El-Barajneh refugee camp was established in 1949 following the mass forced exodus of Palestinians from the newly formed state of Israel, most of whom fled from Galilee which is now northern Israel. Since its establishment, Burj El-Barajneh has been subject to several tragic events (Lebanese Civil War; the War of the Camps; 1982–1985 Israeli bombardment of the camp; 1986–1987 siege by Amal, a previous political ally and the air bombardment; and bombardment by Israelis in 2006) which have resulted in displacement and contributed to increased poverty and the deterioration of living conditions, resulting in substandard living conditions.

Today there are at least 16,000 registered residents in the camp, yielding a minimum population density of 50–55 persons/square meter. The original land allocated to the camp has not been extended since its establishment and thus camp residents have been forced to build upwards without safe foundational structures. Unsafe electricity circuits and water supply also continue to compromise health (see Figure 1). According to United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) reports, all 12 official refugee camps in Lebanon suffer from serious problems of poverty, overcrowding, unemployment, poor housing conditions, and unsafe infrastructure (UNRWA, 2011; see also Chaaban et al., 2010). Of all UNRWA fields in the Middle East, Lebanon has the highest percentage of Palestinian refugees living in high poverty and registered with the Agency's social safety net program, which provides food aid and cash subsidies. The problem of poverty is exacerbated because camp residents, considered foreigners in Lebanon, are legally prohibited from working in more than 60 professions and trades. They also have very limited or no access to public health and social services and educational facilities.

The children in this sample lived in Burj El-Barajneh camp and attended a camp-run preschool which was minimally subsided by the UNRWA. The school was founded and is currently administered by a group of camp residents that have a Palestinian nationalistic orientation. Currently, the preschool has an enrolment of approximately 200 students, the majority of whom are Palestinian refugees. A diverse minority of non-Palestinian students whose families are seeking affordable schooling attend the school. However, these children were not included in the research sample.

U.S. sample. We tested a total of 47 U.S. children, 22 ranging in age from 37 to 47 months (3-year-olds, 14 females) and 25 ranging in age from 56 to 80 months (5-year-olds, 11 females).

U.S. context. The U.S. children were from well-off, middle to upper middle class intact and employed families living in green and affluent suburban neighborhoods of Greater Atlanta, Georgia, representative of the ethnic diversity of the area (approximately 15% African American and 10% Asian and Latino, 75% Euro–American children). For testing, children were brought by one of their parents to a university-sponsored child development laboratory, on a voluntary basis, and in exchange of a small gift and a follow-up debriefing to the parent regarding the research and its purpose.

Procedure

Two dolls and a three-dimensional scene with two plots of land, each with one identical house and two small puppets, were used as props to narrate five stories about two neighbors (the puppets) that lived happily alongside one another but fell into dispute because each of them wanted to build on the empty plot that separated their properties.

There were five scenario scripts corresponding to the five conditions of the experiment (see Appendix for the detailed scenario scripts). All scripts were told by an adult female experimenter who was fluent in the child's native language. As a general structure, in all conditions the scripts ended with a dispute over the empty plot desired for exclusive appropriation by both puppet neighbors. Following each script, the child was asked three follow-up questions regarding the contentious piece of land:

1. "Whose land is it?"
2. "Who should have the land?"
3. "Can you put the doll that owns the land on the land?"

The five experimental conditions varied as follows:

1. *Neutral* (Condition 1): The dolls are identical, sitting and living on identical lands.
2. *Stigma* (Condition 2): The dolls are identical but one of them is totally covered with solid white paint. Both are sitting and living on identical plots of land.
3. *Rich/poor* (Condition 3): The dolls are identical but one labeled as rich, sitting on a larger plot of land, the other doll labeled as poor, sitting on a smaller plot of land. Children were asked to compare the plots of lands owned by each doll to ensure they understood that the rich doll had more land than the poor doll.
4. *Rich ingroup* (Condition 4): The dolls are identical sitting on unequal lands as in Condition 3, one covered by either a Palestinian scarf (ingroup totemic symbol for the Palestinian children) or an American flag (ingroup totemic symbol for the U.S. children). The script scenario of Condition 4 was determined by the child's response on the always immediately preceding Rich/Poor Condition 3. If the child chose in Condition 3 the poor doll as the legitimate owner of the disputed land, then the rich doll was draped with the ingroup totemic symbol. If the child chose in Condition 3 the rich doll as the legitimate owner of the disputed land, then the poor doll was draped with the ingroup totemic symbol. The goal was to assess the impact and influence of ingroup affiliation as weight on the child's determination of ownership.
5. *Ingroup–outgroup* (Condition 5): The dolls are identical, sitting on equal lands, one covered with the child's ingroup totemic symbol (Palestinian scarf or U.S. flag depending on the two groups of children).

The order of the five conditions was partially randomized. The *neutral* condition was always administered first as a pretest control and the *rich/poor* and *rich ingroup* conditions were paired such that the rich/poor condition was the first of the pair to be presented. Pairing Conditions 3 and 4 allowed us to test whether children's stance towards the poor is affected by ingroup parochialism. The order of presentation of the *stigma* condition and the *ingroup–outgroup* condition were randomized.

For all children, each of the five conditions were repeated in succession with the additional prop of a river running through the empty plot disputed by the two neighbors. Half of the scenarios included the river prop which served as a visual cue splitting the contentious land in two equal parts. The rationale for this "river" variation was to capture the impact of surface (obvious) perceptual cues (as opposed to deeper, nonobvious moral reasoning and sensitivity) in influencing children to resolve the land dispute. In the "river" condition, we recorded the extent to which children were enticed to split the disputed plot along such a perceived natural feature. Each time, the experimenter drew the child's attention and depicted the river without any further comments.

All sessions were video recorded (approximately 30 minutes per child) for later analysis and reliability testing between independent coders (see the Results section). Palestinian children were tested by one of their preschool teachers in a separate quiet room, with an assistant recording children's live responses on a preestablished coding sheet while also checking on the video recording an overhead view of the child, the display, and the experimenter. U.S. children were tested in similar conditions at a university Child Development Laboratory. The video recordings were subsequently used to establish interrater reliability on 10 randomly selected protocols from Lebanon and the USA. In all cases, Cohen's kappas were .8 and above.

The Palestinian children were tested during the months of December, January, February, and March; significantly, data was collected before the yearly Nakba commemoration, which is typically prepared for in April and commemorated in May. The U.S. children were tested between the months of January and June.

Measurements

As the dependent variable, and to assess the degree of certitude of each child in his/her responses, we calculated a confidence score based on the children's responses to the three questions following each script condition: (a) "Whose plot of land is it?"; (b) "Who should have the plot of land?"; (c) "Can you put the doll that owns the plot of land on it?" The confidence score was meant to provide a more sensitive measure than an all-or-nothing assessment of the children's decision choice. Children received a score of 1 each time they took what was considered a priori a "right stance," either an "egalitarian" or "ethical" stance. This stance varied depending on the condition. In the stigma condition, the putative "ethical" stance was viewed as a choice toward favoring the whited-out, possibly perceived as the "stigmatized," (outcast) doll. The stigma condition was construed as another control in addition to the neutral condition. It displayed an obvious surface characteristic contrast between the dolls but with no obvious moral value attached to it, unlike the ingroup–outgroup or the rich/poor condition that emphasized either the value of social belongingness or the relative

Table 1. The number of children who continued to support the poor in Condition 5 compared to the number that switched to support their ingroup

	Palestinian		American	
	3–4 years	5–6 years	3–4 years	5–6 years
Steadfast support for the poor	8	8	3	12
from entire sample	38%	36.3%	13.6%	48%
from those who chose the poor	66.6%	47.0%	30%	75%
Switched from supporting the poor to supporting the rich ingroup	4	9	7	4
from entire sample	19%	40.9%	31.8%	16%
from those who chose poor	33.3%	52.9%	70%	25%
The number of children who chose the poor in Condition 3	12	17	10	16

endowment of the dolls. Sensitivity to social majority and conformity are indeed already evident in the preschool years, somehow independent of any moral or equity concerns (e.g., Haun & Tomasello, 2011).

In the rich/poor condition, the ''ethical'' stance was viewed as a choice toward favoring the poor doll. In the rich ingroup condition, the ethical stance involved favoring the poor doll despite its outgroup status. In the final ingroup–outgroup condition, the ''ethical or putative'' stance was viewed as a choice toward favoring the ingroup doll. For the neutral condition, selecting the doll on the right side from the child's point of view was *arbitrarily* designated as the ''right'' or ''ethical'' stance.

For each of the three questions, children received a 1 if they made the ''right'' decision, a 0 if they did not make the ''right'' decision and a score of .5 if they were undecided or if they said both neighbors should get the land. The child's confidence score, within a condition, was calculated by adding the scores for each of the three questions, dividing this sum by 3 to obtain a consistency or *confidence score* that ranged from 0 to 1.0. For each child in each condition, the possible confidence score was thus the following: 0 (three decisions without a ''right'' stance), .17, .5, .67, .83, and 1 (three ''right'' stance decisions). Overall, the confidence score expressed the degree of certitude of the child in his or her decision to attribute the disputed land to either one of the protagonists.

From the obtained confidence score, we also established a dichotomous *certainty score* for each child in each condition: Children who had a confidence score of .67 and above received a score of 1, while confidence scores below .67 received a confidence score of 0.

Results

An all-inclusive mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted based on the confidence scores[3] of children across age, cultural context, and gender (between-subjects variable), as well as river condition or the presence or absence of an extrinsic land-dividing cue (within-subjects variable). This analysis was first performed in relation to four of the five experimental conditions (*neutral*, *stigma*, *rich/poor*, and *ingroup–outgroup*). The *rich ingroup* condition was analyzed separately as the results from this condition were dependent on those obtained in the *rich/poor* condition (see Method section). For the latter comparison a nonparametric (chi-square) test was used.

The ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of condition, $F(3, 69) = 4.2$, $p < .008$, $\eta^2 = .15$, power = .840. Simple effect analyses (paired t tests) revealed significant differences between the *neutral* condition and two of the three other conditions: *rich/poor* and *ingroup–outgroup*, respectively $t(86) = -3.6$, $p < .001$ and $t(86) = -2.4$, $p < .01$. No significant differences were found between the neutral and the stigma conditions. No significant main effects were found regarding gender, river, or the cultural context as potential factors.

The mixed ANOVA yielded only a significant Condition × Age interaction, $F(3, 69) = 2.6$, $p = .05$ ($\eta^2 = .10$, power = .630). No other significant interactions were found. Cultural context did not interact with any of our variables (age, condition, gender, or river). Two independent t tests with adjusted p values (.0125) showed that 5-year-olds had significantly higher confidence scores compared to the 3-year-olds in the *rich/poor* condition (siding with the poor, $t[73] = -3.5$, $p < .001$, equality of variance was not assumed). Furthermore, 5-year-olds were not significantly more confident in their stance towards the ingroup in the *ingroup–outgroup* condition. The overall Age × Condition interaction thus appears to be driven by significant age differences in the *rich/poor* condition only. Interestingly, and given the paired t test results above, preference for the ingroup did not vary with age and seemed to be already present in 3-year-olds in both American and Palestinian children.

In further analyses, we looked more closely at the children who had high confidence in their ethical stance towards the poor in the *rich/poor* condition and whether their choice changed in the *rich ingroup* condition. Recall that in this condition we were interested in whether those that choose the poor in the rich/poor condition would switch to choosing a rich member of their ingroup or continue with their moral stance towards the poor (out-group) neighbor. As described in the Methods section, we used the dichotomous certainty score (1 or 0) as the dependent variable. Two chi-square analyses, one for the Palestinian and one for the American group, tested whether age affected their decisions to award the land to the poor or to switch and side with their ingroup. The Pearson chi-square statistics for the Palestinian group was not significant ($\chi^2 = 1.09$, $p > .05$), but significant for the U.S. group ($\chi^2 = 5.1$, $p < .05$). Considering the number of children per cell in the U.S. group (see Table 1), only the 5-year-olds were steadfast in their stance towards the poor even though they had the option of siding with a rich ingroup member. The younger U.S. cohort of 3-year-olds tended to lose confidence in their choice for the poor when there was ingroup interference. No such evidence exists with 3-year-old Palestinians. In comparison to 5-year-old U.S. children, more Palestinian 5-year-olds lost confidence in their stance towards the poor; 47% of Palestinian 5-year-olds shifted their ethical stance to their ingroup, whereas only 25% of the U.S. children made the same shift.

Discussion

Developmental research documents that an explicit sense of ownership is evident from the second birthday (Rochat, 2011), and that the sharing of possessions and distributive justice of ownership develops toward a marked inequity aversion from approximately 5 years of age (Fehr et al., 2008; Olson & Spelke, 2008). In this study we asked whether the development of the sense of ownership is more or less dependent on the context and circumstances of the child as well as the content of ownership, in particular its relative relevance in the child's life and developmental niche. For this, we investigated the sense of land ownership of refugee Palestinian children growing up in a tense sociocultural environment that stresses the loss of their homeland. We compared these children to same-age middle-class North American children growing up in material abundance and overall, a markedly more stress-free, more welcoming, and peaceful environment with no immediate contentions regarding where one belongs and what belongs to whom. We probed and compared these two groups of children in relation to their reasoning and distributive justice decisions in the context of a pretend conflict between two identical puppets fighting over a contentious piece of land. In control conditions (neutral and stigma), the protagonists where either identical or arbitrarily covered with a different coat of paint. In three experimental conditions, the puppets were identified as either rich, poor, ingroup, or outgroup members (wearing either a Palestinian scarf or an American flag). Furthermore, in the last condition, we probed the extent to which ingroup factors might override children's propensity to distribute preferably to the poor rather than the rich doll, that is, their putative expression of an inequity aversion. As a general working hypothesis, we expected that compared to U.S. middle class children, Palestinian children would show more parochialism (ingroup favoritism) and would demonstrate an enhanced sensitivity to the poverty status of the protagonist in third-party land ownership distribution. Our results partially support our hypothesis, confirming an enhanced parochialism in Palestinian children, but no evidence of greater inequity aversion compared to U.S. children.

Remarkably, both groups of children demonstrate the same development toward favoring the poor over the rich doll in their land distribution, not influenced by any obvious perceptual cues splitting the land naturally in two equal parts (i.e., river condition). Palestinian and U.S. children showed an identical age trend in the rich/poor condition only, equally showing greater tendency and confidence between 3 and 5 years of age in their attribution of the land to the poor. This finding confirms our first general age-related development hypothesis and reinforces the idea that the development of inequity aversion is relatively immune to particular contexts, deeply rooted in the development of all children regardless of their highly contrasted circumstances. Analyses yielded only one significant Age × Condition interaction that rests on the age effect found only in the rich/poor condition for both Palestinian and U.S. children. Thus, our results would suggest that to be born poor does not make one more sensitive (at least early on in life) to material inequity, even if the object of dispute is of particular relevance within the child developmental and cultural niche (i.e., land). Inequity aversion and justice distribution based on the relative endowment appear to be a universal developmental outcome that would be immune to highly contrasted socioeconomic circumstances surrounding the child. Confirming what was already reported in a previous research (Rochat et al., 2009), the magnitude of children's inclination to be fair and equitable can vary across sociocultural and economic contexts as well as social classes, but their general development toward more equitable sharing appears universal.

Based on our data, what is significantly different between Palestinian and U.S. children is their relative allegiance to their ingroup. When favoritism towards the poor conflicts with ingroup favoritism, 5-year-old Palestinian children tend to be significantly more prone to being swayed away by ingroup allegiance. They tend to favor more the ingroup protagonist even if it is rich, thus overriding the universal propensity toward an aversion of material inequity. U.S. children show a trend that is significantly different. They persist in their siding with the poor, unswayed even if the rich is portrayed as an ingroup. This could mean two different things. On the one hand, the straightforward interpretation of this finding is that the impact of Palestinian children's extreme sociocultural circumstances translates into enhanced parochialism and ingroup favoritism. Another possibility is that Palestinian children see their ingroup as essentially poor, and therefore continue to express inequity aversion under the appearance of parochialism. Both possibilities are confounding and more research is needed to further untangle these two trends in Palestinian children. Interestingly, however, enhanced ingroup favoritism is marked only for 5-year-olds compared to 3-year-olds in the Palestinian group. The reverse is true for the U.S. group of children: more ingroup favoritism in 3-year-olds compared to 5-year-olds, significantly more inequity aversion and less swaying toward ingroup favoritism in 5-year-olds compared to 3-year-olds (see Table 1). It thus appears that if indeed the socioeconomic circumstances of Palestinian children form a potent factor for enhanced parochialism (i.e., enhanced ingroup favoritism and allegiance), such factor would begin to play a role in children's distributive justice only by 5 years of age and not earlier. Once again, more research is needed to probe further what appears to be a different developmental trajectory regarding the sense of ownership and distributive justice in reference to land by Palestinian children. All in all, our results point to the possibility that such extreme circumstances potentially translate into enhanced ingroup partialities, above and beyond the universal normative trend toward inequity aversion depicted in recent literature on the development of distributive justice (Fehr et al., 2008; Rochat et al., 2009).

In conclusion, we interpret our results as showing that extreme circumstances and relevance of content (i.e., land ownership) can affect the expression of inequity aversion in distributive justice, an expression that is often considered as universal and a defining feature of who we are as a species: the roots of cooperation and of the tendency toward egalitarianism.

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Notes

1. The Druze are a small group of Arab descent who endorse eclectic monotheistic doctrines. They reside mostly in Lebanon and Syria and are integral to the socio-political life in their respective nations.
2. *Nakba* is the Arabic word for the 1948 Palestinian exodus when approximately 725,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from their homes when the new state of Israel was formed. *Nakba* means "catastrophe," or "cataclysm."

3. Given that the confidence score assessed the degree of certitude of each child in her responses to the three questions, we examined various patterns of responding to be certain that the three questions tapped moral certitude rather than other aspects of decision making. Examining children who chose the ethical stance by selecting stigmatized, poor, or ingroup doll at least once, the most frequent pattern of responding (41.3%) involved taking the moral stance for all three questions. The other combinations of responding were very infrequent (i.e., choosing the moral stance for Questions 1 and 3 but not 2, choosing the moral stance for Question 2 only, and other combinations of responding). This suggests that the three questions indeed reflect the degree of moral certainty rather than other aspects of the decision-making process.

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Appendix

Condition 1: Neutral

This doll lives in this house. He has a big family. He has five kids.
This doll lives in this house. He has a big family and has five kids

too. Both of them want to have even more children, but they will need more land. One day the dolls go outside and are playing in their lands, and see this new land that is available. They both run toward the land and they say "This is mine! This is mine! No this is mine! No this is mine! . . . " [back and forth] and they disagree about who should get the land.

The experimenter mimics the scene with the dolls. The experimenter then asks:

"Whose land is it?"

"Who should have the land?"

"Can you put the doll that owns the land on the land?"

Condition 2: Stigma

This doll lives in this house. He has a big family. He has five kids. This doll lives in this house. You see he is all whited out. Isn't that unusual? He has a big family and has five kids too. Both of them want to have even more children, but they will need more land. One day the dolls go outside and are playing in their land, and see this new land that is available. They both run toward the land and they say "This is mine! This is mine! No this is mine! No this is mine! . . . " [back and forth] and they disagree about who should get the land.

The experimenter mimics the scene with the dolls. The experimenter then asks:

"Whose land is it?"

"Who should have the land?"

"Can you put the doll that owns the land on the land?"

Condition 3: Rich/poor

This doll lives in this house. He has a big family. He has five kids. Look he has a very big land and lots of room to move around. This doll lives in this house. He has a big family and has five kids too. But he only has a small land. Look it's very small. Both of them want to have even more children, but they will need more land. One day the dolls go outside and are playing in their lands, and see this new land that is available. They both run toward the land and they say "This is mine! This is mine! No this is mine! No this is mine! . . . " [back and forth] and they disagree about who should get the land.

The experimenter mimics the scene with the dolls. The experimenter then asks:

"Whose land is it?"

"Who should have the land?"

"Can you put the doll that owns the land on the land?"

Condition 4: Rich ingroup (U.S. flag or Palestinian scarf)

This doll lives in this house. Look he has an American flag/Palestinian scarf [the flag/scarf is placed on the doll]. Do you know what this flag/scarf means? It is the flag of the United States, where we both live/This is the scarf that Palestinians wear. Are you American/Palestinian? I am American/Palestinian too. This American/Palestinian doll has a big family. He has five kids. Look he has a very big land and lots of room to move around. This doll lives in this house. He has a big family and has five kids too. But he only has a small land. Look it's very small. Both of them want to have even more children, but they will need more land. One day the dolls go outside and are playing in their land, and see this new land that is available. They both run toward the land and they say "This is mine! This is mine! No this is mine! No this is mine! . . . " [back and forth] and they disagree about who should get the land.

The experimenter mimics the scene with the dolls. The experimenter then asks:

"Whose land is it?"

"Who should have the land?"

"Can you put the doll that owns the land on the yard/land?"

Condition 5: Ingroup–outgroup (U.S. or Palestinian)

This doll lives in this house. Look he has an American flag/Palestinian scarf. Do you know what this flag/scarf means? It is the flag of the United States where we both live/it is the scarf that Palestinians wear. Are you American/Palestinian? I am American too/Palestinian too. This American/Palestinian doll has a big family. He has a big family. He has five kids. This doll lives in this house. He has a big family and has five kids too. Both of them want to have even more children, but they will need more land. One day the dolls go outside and are playing in their land, and see this new land that is available. They both run toward the land and they say "This is mine! This is mine! No this is mine! No this is mine! . . . " [back and forth] and they disagree about who should get the land.

The experimenter mimics the scene with the dolls. The experimenter then asks:

"Whose land is it?"

"Who should have the land?"

"Can you put the doll that owns the land on the land?"