Introduction

An aversion to advantageous inequity (more for me, less for you) emerges late during child development, around 8 years of age. By this age, reputational concerns have been shown to guide aspects of children’s cooperative behavior, such as cheating, sharing, generosity and fairness.

It is currently unclear whether advantageous inequity aversion represents the internalization of a strong norm of fairness or whether it is motivated by reputational concerns.

Research Question

Is advantageous inequity aversion motivated by a desire to build a reputation for fairness and, as such, is its expression influenced by who is watching?

Method

Participants

N = 212 pairs of children in 6-7- and 8-9-year-old age groups were recruited in public parks. Children were assigned to either the “decider” or “recipient” position.

Design

Within-subject variable: Distribution

Between-subject variables: Condition (Public, Recipient Ignorant, Private), Age and Gender.

Procedure

Deciders controlled an apparatus where they could accept (green handle) or reject (red handle) offers. During each trial, the experimenter distributed candies and erected a barrier between participants according to condition.

Results

1. Older children were more likely to reject advantageous offers than younger children ($X^2 = 22.13, p < 0.001$)

2. Across age groups, children rejected advantageous offers in the Public condition but their rejection tendencies varied by age and gender in the Recipient Ignorant and Private conditions.

3. Younger children rejected more unequal offers than equal offers in the Public but not in the Recipient Ignorant or Private conditions ($X^2 = 20.87, p < 0.001$)

4. Older girls rejected advantageous unfairly offers regardless of whether anyone could see their decisions. By contrast, older boys whose decisions were hidden from their partner tended to accept advantageously unfair offers ($X^2 = 7.85, p = 0.019$).

Discussion

Results suggest that by the age of 8, reputational concerns have an important influence on the costly enforcement of fairness norms in boys but not girls.

Our findings suggest that both fairness norms and reputational concerns contribute to the expression of advantageous inequity aversion.

Future work will attempt to explain why older boys, but not girls alter their rejecting behavior when others are watching.

References


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