Chapter 13

Children's Use of Justice Principles in Allocation Situations

FOCUS ON THE NEED PRINCIPLE

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is primarily concerned with the development of distributive justice in children. It will concentrate on the knowledge the child can activate in hypothetical situations and will discuss the child’s organization of this knowledge in the course of his or her development. Discussion will focus on the cognitive developmental model and will draw primarily on the work of Piaget (1932/1973) and Damon (1977). A comparison of Piaget’s and Damon’s models will provide the context for a discussion of allocation research done with children. Research conducted over the past several years at the Technical University at Braunschweig, as well as research on prosocial behavior, suggests that children develop social understanding very early in their lives, and that this development affects their ideas of justice.

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According to Kohlberg (1981), justice is the first virtue of morality. It gives all human beings equal and universal rights. Each individual is under an obligation to respect another person's rights and claims, as he would his own. Thus, justice aims toward a basic pattern of balance and harmony within a group or society. These ideas about justice are not held as opinions or beliefs, but rather are represented as knowledge that relates to others without sacrificing the self (as opposed to altruism, which demands self-sacrifice). This knowledge is manifest as spiritual strength, which, in a philosophical or intuitionist context, takes on a form of ideal virtue. This ideal form does not change, regardless of the differences among cultures or social communities.

Some notion of justice or reciprocity seems present from the very beginning of life; this might have a biological basis that constitutes a necessary, but not yet sufficient, condition for the development of justice. As early as infancy, Piaget (1932/1973) sees the first signs of jealousy and imitation, and the resulting sympathy, as indicating very early reactions of altruism and sharing. Jealousy prevents one from being used by others and the need for company prevents the self from using others. There is a balance between the two. The primitive forms are not to be seen as a kind of instinct or as a product of an individual predisposition; rather they are a cornerstone for the active construction of a concept of justice.

Piaget (1932/1973) attempted to devise a stage model of the child's understanding of distributive justice. He constructed various short stories and then asked children questions about them. In the first of the three stages Piaget distinguished (up to 7-8 years old), the child has no concept of distributive justice. Justice is attributed to the authority of adults. Accordingly, in distribution situations the adult or the older child is entitled to the larger share.

Reciprocal relations are, however, present from the very beginning. The seeds of equality can be found in a child's earliest relationships, for example, in the need for mutual affection. However, this equality is only expressed by small children as long as they are not suppressed by authority (e.g., instructions from parents), or when there is no possibility of a conflict with authority. Even in relationships among children, the authority of the older children wins over equality.

In the second stage (from approximately 8-11 years old), equality predominates against all other elements. The need for equality does not develop in a rigid form, but rather makes way for a more finely shaded understanding of moral conflicts. The development of the notion of