

"Some basic notions of fairness are culturally constructed"

Developmental Psychologist Michael Tomasello talks about children's sense of fairness and explains why fair is not fair everywhere.

Interview by [Gelgia Fetz Fernandes](#)
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Gelgia Fetz Fernandes: One of your most recent papers titled "Fair is not Fair Everywhere" shows that kids from different cultures have very different ideas about fairness. How did you go from doing research on child language, social learning, and cognition to investigating kids' sense of fairness across cultures?

Michael Tomasello: Most of my career I have studied one- to two-year-old children. My research has focused on pre-linguistic communication, language acquisition, cultural learning, and imitation. In one of our first cross-cultural studies with one- and two-year-old children we found what I would have expected, namely that basic communication and the kinds of basic things that all kids require are the same everywhere. A one-year-old is a one-year-old. Culture hasn't had the chance to do anything yet. Basic human skills like joint attention and pointing are not taught to you by culture, they are your tools for learning a culture. They enable you to become a member of your culture.

Over the course of my career, I have started studying slightly older kids, three- to five-year-olds, and became more interested in collaboration, morality, fairness, social norms, and norm enforcement. This is an age where you can't just look at little German children or American children and then assume this is representative of human children everywhere. At this age children become very different from each other, depending on where they grow up. So, that was the start of my cross-cultural research.

GFF: *And then you won the Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize in 2011.*

MT: In 2011 my team and I were just getting started with a new cross-cultural project in Kenya, when I received the news about the Prize. I thought, well, this is perfect. I will use these funds to ramp that up. In Kenya we are now doing a study with the Samburu, semi-nomadic pastoralists living in the rural north of the country. They herd cattle, sheep, goats, and camels. Samburu society is characterized by gerontocracy, that is, a strict age-based hierarchy in which group elders hold most of the wealth and power within communities. They make many decisions about the administration of work and resources autocratically.

Then we are doing a study with another group living in Namibia, the ǀAkhoe Hai||om, or Hai||om for short, an egalitarian forager society relying on gathering bush food for subsistence. Egalitarian forager societies are characterized by a high degree of equality among group members. Equality is actively maintained by social norms that discourage accumulation of wealth and status, for example, by promoting sharing and modesty with regard to acquired resources.

Cross-cultural researchers are particularly interested in the notion of possession. Some people claim in hunter-gatherer societies, such as the Hai||om, there would be no possession. Well, that is not exactly true. It just works differently. The way it works in a modern society is through respect for possession. I don't just take your phone when you are not in the room, right? I respect your possession.

"Some basic notions of fairness and justice are not universal, but rather culturally constructed behavioral norms."

GFF: *How does this notion of possession among children vary across cultures?*

MT: In one of our studies we included a task and rewarded two kids with wooden beads from which one can make a necklace. Imagine the set-up as follows: I have some beads on my side and you have some beads on your side. We never say who the beads belong to. It's just that I generated the beads on my side through my work and you generated those on your side through your work. Then we call away one of the kids and say: "Let's get your beads". And the kid would take only what is hers, that is, what she had produced through her own work. She would generally respect that the other beads belong to the other child.

We did a similar task with four- to eleven-year-old children from three different cultures: German kids, Samburu kids, and Hai||om kids. The German kids were very strict, very normative. They distributed the spoils of a joint enterprise precisely in proportion to productivity. The children from the gerontocratic Samburu society did not take merit into account at all. Of the three cultures, they shared most unequally when they had contributed equally to obtaining the rewards. In contrast, the egalitarian Hai||om kids shared rewards most equally, even if some had not contributed equally to obtaining the rewards. In other words, merit played only a limited role for the Hai||om kids.

Overall, these results suggest some basic notions of fairness and justice are not universal, but rather culturally constructed behavioral norms.

GFF: *What about individual differences among kids from the same culture?*

MT: Cross-cultural researchers have hardly ever looked at individual differences. In strict gerontocratic societies like the Samburu, I would not expect much variability, though, because these children are very inhibited when adults are present. But with the adults gone, the kids do whatever they want. In contrast, we in our modern Western world – as I do to my child and I am sure you do to your child – we "brainwash" our kids. We tell them over and over again "this is the right thing to do" and our kids internalize it. Even if you leave, your kid still self-regulates because of these internalized norms. So that is an example of a cultural difference that plays out fairly clearly.

GFF: *If kids from authoritarian societies tend to behave differently in the presence of adults, one has to assume that an adult experimenter involved in the study design influences the kids' behavior. How do you tackle this methodologically?*

MT: One distinguishing characteristic of our studies is that they are all aimed at peers. The adult experimenter explains the task to the kids, for example to put the rewards from the tube into the cup, and then leaves the room. This set-up is a big part of making the interaction more natural. In addition, since we are working cross-culturally, we take an ethnographic approach. We want to understand children's daily routines.

Let me give you an example: We look at a hunter-gatherer group behaving in a very egalitarian way when the adults are out hunting. But the kids are always at the camp and they never see that. So, you have to think about what the kids actually see. In some cases like the gerontocratic Samburu society where adult males make all the decisions, the kids turn to them to find out how to distribute goods. The cultural learning is right there, it happens all day, every day, right in front of your eyes.

Another dimension critically important for cooperation and morality is peer versus adult experience. Jean Piaget, the pioneer of Cognitive Developmental Psychology, was quite adamant that you don't get morality from adults. What you get from adults are rules. As a kid you might follow these rules, but is it moral to follow rules? According to Piaget it's just prudent and conforming.

In addition, we want to know how much time children spend in adult supervision and how much time peers are on their own. In hunter-gatherer societies the adults go out and leave the kids in camp. There might be a grandmother around, but the older kids, six- to ten-year-olds, are basically unsupervised. So they really have to work things out for themselves cooperatively all day, every day.

"Fairness always has to do with equality, but the question is what is being considered equal."

GFF: *Your research has shown that one- and two-year-olds have an almost reflexive desire to help – without thinking about rules, reputation, or values. At about three years of age, children start to have some sense of what is right or wrong. Do we have a natural human desire to help that gets corrupted over time? Is that why we have to establish rules and morality as social constructs?*

MT: I have tackled these questions in my book *A Natural History of Human Morality*. More importantly to what you have described, there is an emerging sense of fairness, of treating people with respect and treating people fairly. I believe that has some natural bases, too. All kids have some sense of fairness, but in different cultures, different things are perceived as fair.

Since the Enlightenment, we in our Western world have had this ideological change of treating kids much more as equals. We get down on the floor and play with them. In hunter-gatherer societies, adults don't get down on the floor to play with the kids. They are busy, they have stuff to do. We have a notion that kids should be treated equally. If you brought a torte, you would divide it equally between you and the kids. In contrast, a Samburu adult male would take what he wants, then the mother would take what she wants, and the kids would get the leftovers. And they would consider *that* fair, so that's *their* fair.

Fair is not fair everywhere, but everybody *does* have a sense of fairness. Fairness always has to do with equality, but the question is what is being considered equal. If I worked harder than you did, then maybe I deserve more. But then that's equal unit reward for equal unit work, so the concept of equality still holds. If you needed more than I did, then you are getting more to get us to be more equal. Fairness always has some notion of balance.

Prof. Michael Tomasello is a developmental and comparative psychologist. He is a co-director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, and will begin serving as professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University in fall 2016. In his developmental research he has focused on how human children become cooperating members of cultural groups, focusing on uniquely human skills and motivations for shared intentionality: joint attention, collaboration, prosocial motives, and social norms. In 2011, Michael Tomasello was awarded the Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize for his exceptional work.

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