

Children's Perceptions of Unfair Reward and Punishment

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ABSTRACT. Being able to judge the fairness of a personal encounter and having an appreciation of the associated feelings are important components of prosocial development. This study explored a common feature of everyday experience: unfair reward and unfair punishment. Scenarios depicting 4 possible variants of unfairness were read to children aged 9 to 11 years, who then made judgments regarding the degree of unfairness and the nature and strength of the feelings experienced by the characters. Our hypothesis that children with classroom conduct problems would judge the non-receipt of a deserved reward as worse than the receipt of an undeserved punishment was not confirmed. This differentiation, however, did prove to be characteristic of boys in general, but not girls. Being asked to think of unfair things that had actually happened did not appear to influence the children's responses to hypothetical unfair situations, but did reveal that children experience and remember a variety of unfair events in everyday family contexts. This study provides evidence that children actively monitor the receipt of social reward and punishment according to their perception of fairness.

Key words: child development, gender differences, justice, prosocial skills

ANYONE WHO HAS spent time with children—or listened to them grumble—knows that they are acutely sensitive to what they consider fair, especially to the possibility that they are being treated in an unfair way (Evans, Goldberg-Arnold, & Dickson, 1998). One mother in this study wrote on the consent form, "*That's not fair!* is one of my daughter's regular sayings." Not only children are concerned with fairness, though—the strong negative feelings brought on by the perception that one is being treated unfairly seem to be a widespread phenomenon. In New Zealand, for instance, a television program called "Fair Go" reports inci-

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dents in which ordinary people profess vociferously to being victims of unfair practices. Perceptions of what is fair, recognition of the feelings engendered, and fair treatment of other people are important aspects of prosocial development (Bazerman, White, & Loewenstein, 1995).

The limited psychological investigation of this topic sometimes has been cast within the similar concept of children's understanding of justice (Bierhoff, Cohen, & Greenberg, 1986). Distributive justice is based on ideals of equity, equality, and need (e.g., Deutsch, 1985). Such studies, however, tend to be formulated around abstract concepts of resources (e.g., money, prestige, or power) and the grounds on which they are deserved (Sabbagh, Dar, & Resh, 1994) or should be accessed within families (McGillicuddy-De Lisi, Watkins, & Vinchur, 1994; O'Brien, 1995). Although this is interesting and valid research, it does not address perceptions of fairness.

Fairness as a concept is closely related to justice but contains a more personal element: the degree to which justice is seen to be done to oneself and the associated feelings. The importance children attach to fairness can be estimated. For instance, as an element in play situations ("How important is it to make sure everyone plays fair?"), boys ranked fairness below other goals, such as winning, competing, and making the game exciting (Melnick & Hinshaw, 1996). In such judgments, however, it is still the ethical practice that is being considered, not the emotional consequences. In contrast, Thorkildsen's (1989a, 1989b) work on children's perceptions of teachers' classroom practices tapped into feelings about teacher fairness that children had experienced. Fairness is about subjective judgments of receiving just treatment, as opposed to reasoning about dispensing justice. This subjective experience of how one is being treated allows the investigation of children's perceptions of fairness to include important emotional components.

Empirical studies focusing on children's affective responses to unfair experiences are few. Research on emotion in this context has found predominantly negative responses, as expected. Mikula, Scherer, and Athenstaedt (1998) showed that negative emotion elicited in situations involving unfair practice was more intense and lasted longer than situations without this element. What was interesting was the variety of qualitatively different emotions reported: Adults treated unfairly felt a range of emotions, including anger, sadness, or fear. Smetana et al. (1999) observed similar responses in children who judged that victims were likely to feel sad, scared, or angry, and that unfairness would cause more sadness than other types of harm.

Another affective outcome is children's emotional response when they are the beneficiaries of an unfair event. They may, for example, feel guilty. At least some children, but by no means all, do attribute such feelings to others when they themselves have benefited unfairly (Evans, Salisbury, Palombaro, & Goldberg, 1994; Goldberg, 1994). However, Dunn, Brown, and Maguire (1995) reported that most children in their sample drawn from kindergarten and first grade thought that a child who won a game by cheating would feel happy.

In general, therefore, children's perceptions of fairness, their emotional responses to such experiences, and their understanding of their own and others' feelings in these contexts should be significant aspects of adaptive emotional responding and social development. One of the most common experiences of unfairness children are likely to encounter is that of unfair punishment—being punished for something that they did not do or that was not their fault. Similarly, another familiar experience of unfairness is failing to be rewarded for something positive they did do. Two more passive forms of the same unfair contingencies are avoiding punishment for a transgression and being rewarded for something not done. These four conditions represent a matrix of the possible ways in which a child might experience undeserved reward and punishment.

Children's judgments of the fairness of rewards and punishments can be related to a somewhat different set of developmental influences concerning the general effects of consequences on children's behavior. The extent to which any child is motivated by gaining social reward or avoiding punishment is widely regarded as an important facet of socialization (Eisenberg, 1986; Kochanska, 1997) and is therefore a critical mechanism in the development of antisocial behavior (Bear & Rys, 1994; Quay, 1993). Many sources of evidence suggest that children differ in their responsiveness to reward and punishment. Some children appear to expect and value extrinsic reward for their efforts much more than others (Thorkildsen, Nolen, & Fournier, 1994). Children with behavior disorders (such as externalizing conduct problems and delinquency) may be more sensitive to reward than to punishment, which is described as being "reward dominant" (Quay, 1988, 1993).

The positive and negative consequences of our actions represent a fundamental aspect of everyday experience, but in a social context they are rarely consistent or balanced. Thus, children's cognitive judgments of unfair reward and punishment and their feelings evoked by such experiences could provide insight into the shaping of prosocial and antisocial behavior. This study was designed to explore these issues and to evaluate the relation between perceptions of fairness and other aspects of social cognition.

Method

Participants

For this study, we chose children between the ages of 9 and 11 years for a variety of reasons: (a) pre-adolescent children are the most likely to be experiencing adult-dispensed rewards and punishments; (b) teachers have a clearer understanding of the nature of any social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties; and (c) by this age, children's verbal skills are sufficient to allow more complex explanations of events and feelings. The boys and girls were recruited from four elementary schools in Hamilton (population 110,000), a prosperous New Zealand

city serving a large agricultural region. The public schools enroll children from middle- to low-income families in suburban settings.

Two hundred consent forms were distributed by 12 classroom teachers to parents (or legal guardians). All children for whom these consent forms were signed and returned were then eligible to participate. Parents expressed a great deal of interest in the topic, sometimes commenting on the consent form that they thought their child had a well-developed sense of fairness, which they usually attributed to having siblings. Before the procedure began, the children were informed as to what would happen and were asked verbally if they wished to continue; no child expressed reluctance to take part.

Of the 110 children who participated, 60 were girls and 50 were boys; 67% were of European origin, 6% were Maori, 12% were of mixed Maori/European heritage, and the remainder were Asian or Pacific Nation. These ethnic proportions are similar to the proportions of cultural groups within this region of New Zealand. The study was not designed to be cross-cultural and because these schools are relatively homogeneous and integrated, no analyses related to ethnicity or cultural background were undertaken. Two children for whom English was not their home language were excluded from the data analysis, as were 2 children who did not understand the instructions.

Measures and Materials

Four stories were developed that describe lifelike situations involving two children, one of whom is the beneficiary of an unfair situation and the other is the victim. These were piloted on a small group of children of different ages to ensure that they were easily comprehended and represented plausible and common occurrences. Two stories involved a punishment and two involved reward. The unfairness arose from the fact that the recipient of the reward or punishment did not deserve it, and the other child in the story did. The essential themes were as follows:

Story 1 (unfair reward): One child finds a wallet and is about to turn it in but doesn't have time and asks a friend to hand it in to their teacher. The teacher is pleased and rewards the friend with extra recess time for finding the wallet.

Story 2 (unfair reward): A child is mowing neighborhood lawns for cash, but the next-door neighbor is elderly, so the child mows her lawn for free. The child's sibling is also supposed to help the neighbor by putting out the trash, but often forgets. One day the child notices this hasn't been done and takes out the trash. Later, the neighbor mistakenly rewards the sibling.

Story 3 (unfair punishment): Two siblings are asked to put their toys away, so they divide up the task; one does his or her share but the other watches TV instead. When their dad comes home, he trips over a bike left out and hurts himself. He yells at the child who had put the toys away and confiscates the bike.

Story 4 (unfair punishment): Two siblings are playing with the kids next door and have a water fight and they get all wet and dirty. When they go home, one child is careful but the other leaves muddy footprints all over the house. Their mother blames the careful child, sends him or her to his or her room and helps the sibling change into dry clothes.

Each story was accompanied by large, colorful drawings of the events, with two drawings per story. These drawings resembled the illustrations in children's books, and there were male and female versions of each story so that the characters were both boys or both girls, matching the gender of the participant. The names of the children used in the story were varied so that they were characteristic of the major ethnic groups of New Zealand children. Similarly, the apparent ethnicity of the children in the drawings was ambiguous. Except for gender, these feature variations were not matched to the characteristics of the child but merely ensured that each child saw pictures representing cultural diversity.

In order to assist the children in reporting the degree of unfairness or the intensity of a given feeling, we constructed a small paper sliding scale, which ranged from *not at all* (1) to *very very* (10). The children were asked to slide an arrow along the scale to indicate their rating.

In addition, classroom teachers completed the Social Skills Rating System (Gresham & Elliott, 1990), a 40-item questionnaire designed to rate elementary-age children's levels of social skills and problem behavior. The instrument has satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach alphas between .73 and .95 for subscales, and good test-retest reliability coefficients between .84 and .93 (Gresham & Elliott). Subscales of this instrument include self-control, academic and social competence, and internalizing and externalizing behavior.

Procedure

The children were tested in their own schools by two female graduate psychology students. One research assistant went to the classroom and brought the child to the room in which the study was taking place. She then introduced the child to the researcher conducting the testing and recorded the child's answers to questions.

Once the child had given verbal assent and seemed comfortable with the situation, two stories (one involving reward and one involving punishment) were told by means of audiotape, in order to keep the presentations consistent. The assistant pointed to the characters in the pictures as they were being mentioned in the story. After each story, the child was asked a series of questions:

Has anything like this ever happened to you? [If yes] Tell me about it; [if no]

Has anything unfair ever happened to you? Tell me about it.

Is what happened in the story fair or unfair? Why?

How unfair is it?

What do you think _____ (victim) would feel?
 How strongly would he or she feel that?
 What do you think _____ (beneficiary) would feel?
 How strongly would he or she feel that?
 What do you think could be done to make it more fair?

After these questions had been asked and answered, the child was thanked, given a small prize (a sticker), and returned to the classroom.

The children were randomly assigned to one of two groups. In the first group, called mood induction, the question about whether anything like this had happened to them was asked first. The assumption was that by thinking of themselves in a comparable situation, the child would be more likely to have an enhanced affective response to the story. For the second group, the question about their own experience was asked after all the other questions about the story had been posed. This created a 2 (unfair reward/punishment) \times 2 (mood induced/not induced) \times 2 (boy/girl) between-subjects design with unfair reward/punishment as the within-subject variables. Age and ethnicity were stratified equally within this design.

Half of the children heard one of the reward stories and one of the punishment stories (Stories 1 and 3), and the other half heard the alternate set (Stories 2 and 4). The set was randomly selected and the stories were told in counterbalanced order. By asking questions about both characters in the story, the researchers could identify the unfairness related to getting something not deserved, as opposed to not receiving something that was deserved.

The children's answers to the questions were written down verbatim. The sessions were also tape-recorded, and the tapes were coded as a reliability check on the written comments. All children appeared to enjoy the activity, and none asked to stop the procedure.

Results

Basic Judgment of the Stories

Although each story was designed to depict an unambiguously unfair situation, a few children answered that the events in the story were in fact fair. The percentages of children responding this way were Story 1, 18%; Story 2, 0%; Story 3, 5%; and Story 4, 7%. The difference between Story 1 and Story 2 was significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 106) = 10.4, p < .001$. Judging from the children's comments, the reason for this difference was in the nature of the reward that was missed—in Story 1 it was a free period, and in Story 2 it was \$25. This indicated that independent of any other factors, the theme of the story had an impact on children's judgments. Children are influenced by the magnitude of the reward/punishment even though the principle of unfairness remains the same.

Some children who claimed that the events in the story were fair gave for their explanation details of the story that appeared to be immaterial to the judg-

ment of fairness. It seems likely these are circumstances that some parents instill in their children as being relevant. A typical example was when the other child in the story was a sibling who should have been in charge and was held responsible for what happened. Sometimes these details were not part of the story but were added by the children. The same kinds of elaboration were sometimes made by children who did judge the situation as unfair.

Ratings of Unfairness

All of the children who said the scenarios were unfair were then asked how unfair they thought the situations were. The differences between stories within either the reward or punishment condition were not statistically significant, so all subsequent analyses are based on collapsing the data for the two stories in each condition. A t test of the mean ratings of the punishment stories ($M = 6.2$, $SD = 2.3$) and the mean ratings of the reward stories ($M = 7.4$, $SD = 2.0$) showed that these differences were significantly different, $t(1, 92) = -4.0$, $p < .01$, with unfair reward being seen as more unfair than unfair punishment. To consider the joint influence of gender, mood induction, and reward/punishment condition on the fairness ratings, we performed a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA; the means for this analysis are shown in Figure 1. The main effects for reward/punishment condition were significant, $F(1, 89) = 19.4$, $p < .001$, as was the two-way interaction between gender and reward/punishment, $F(1, 89) = 3.9$, $p < .05$. Comparisons between pairs of means (Tukey HSD test) helped clarify the relations depicted in Figure 1. Overall, girls' ratings of reward and of punishment were similar, regardless of mood induction. Boys and girls did not differ in their ratings for reward, but they did differ in their ratings of punishment, with boys rating punishment as significantly less unfair than reward. Like the girls, the boys were not influenced by the mood induction procedure.

Strength of Feelings Concerning the Victim of Unfairness

Is the affective experience of missing out on a deserved reward more negative than receiving a punishment that was not deserved? To answer this question, we used the children's ratings of the feelings of the victims of the story (i.e., How did they feel? How strongly did they feel it?). All negative feelings (such as sad, bad, upset) were analyzed together, and all positive and neutral feelings (such as happy, probably OK, didn't care) were classified together. Only 3 children felt the victim of unfairness would feel positive, and 3 children did not know how the victim would feel. The resultant means for boys and girls for the two types of scenario are shown in Figure 2.

A t test comparing the degree of negative feeling for not receiving a reward deserved with the negative feeling for receiving a punishment not deserved indicated no significant differences between these conditions, $t(1, 87) = -0.7$, $p > .45$.

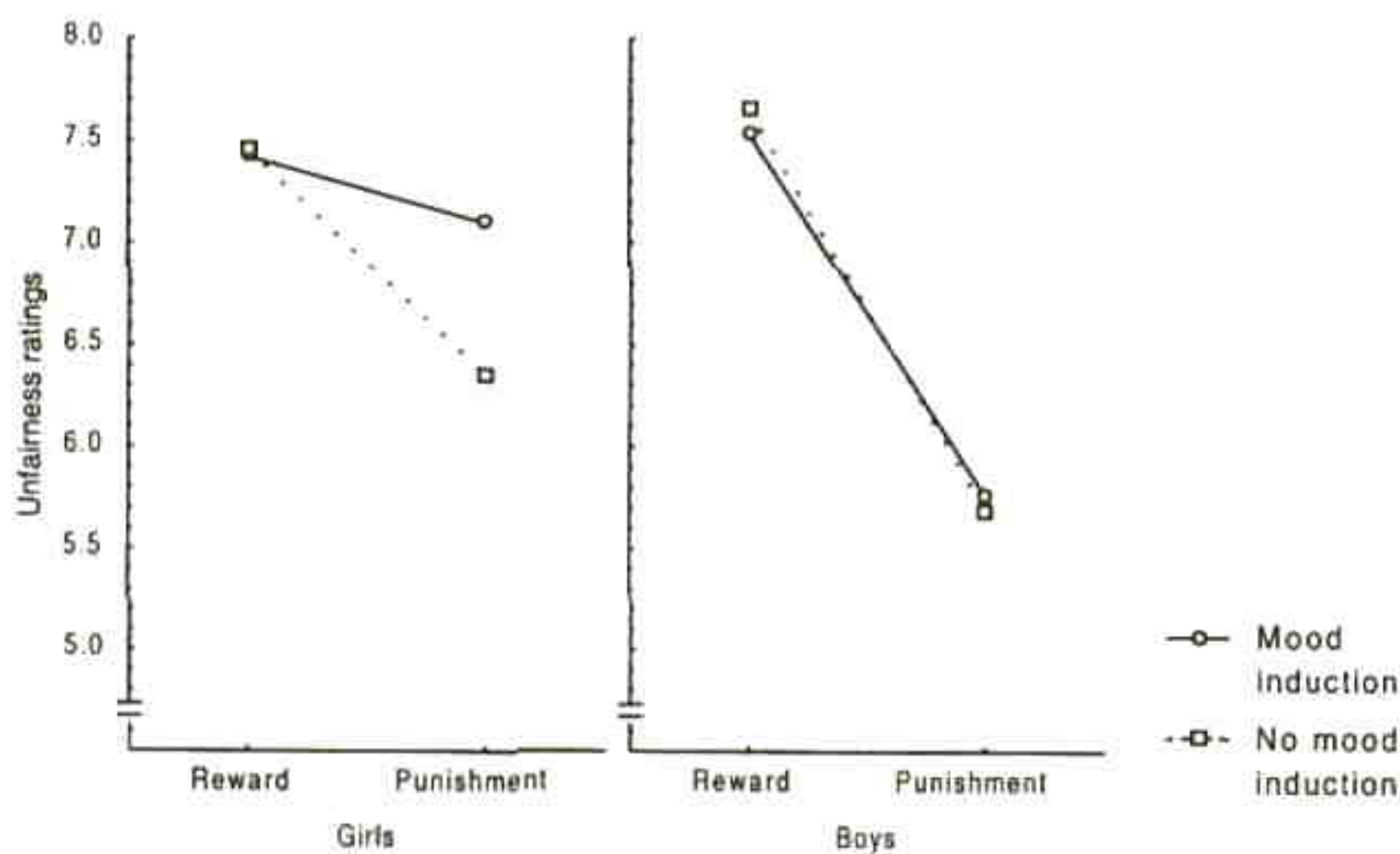


FIGURE 1. Mean ratings of unfairness of reward and punishment stories across mood induction and gender.

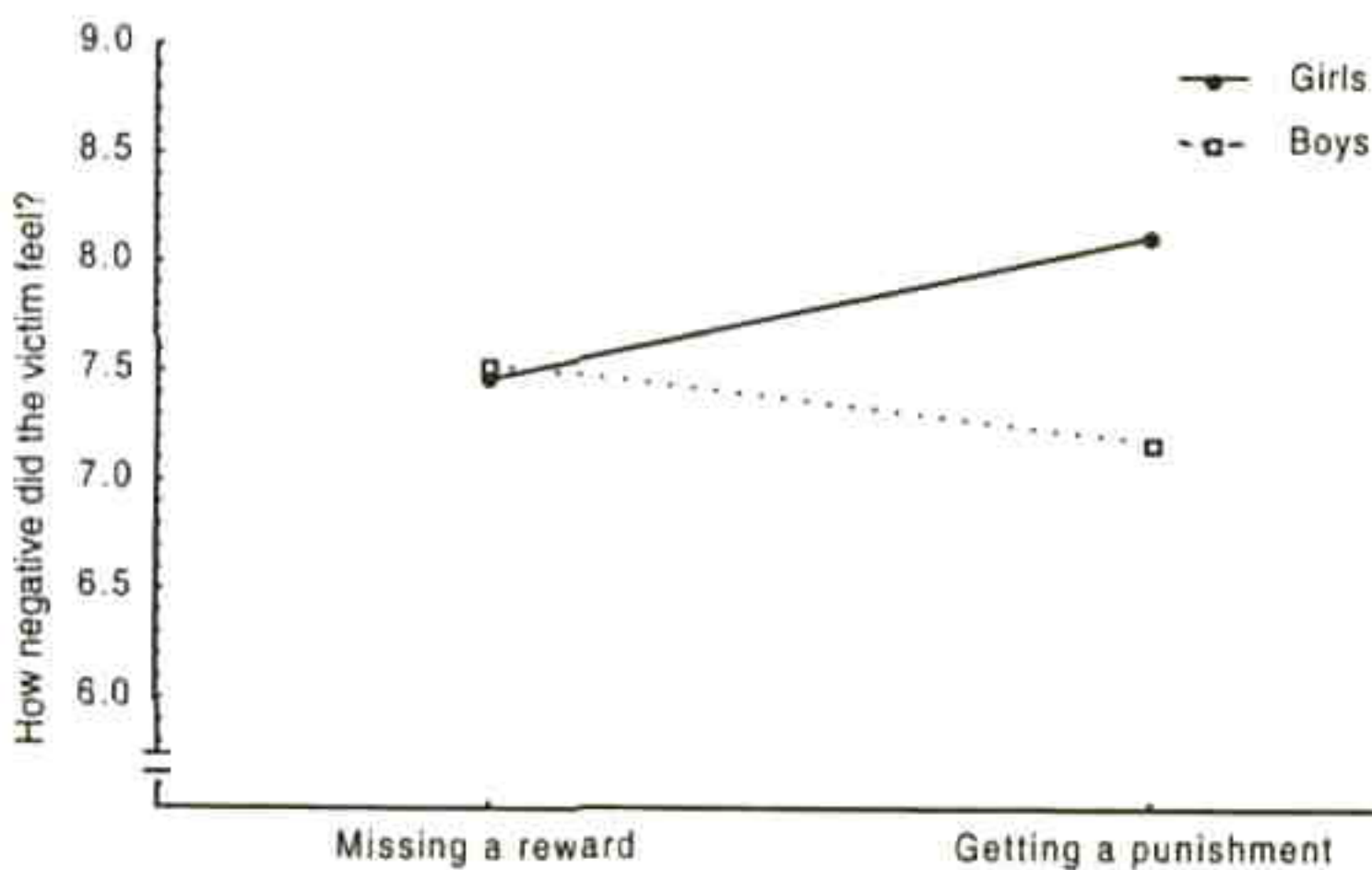


FIGURE 2. Boys' and girls' mean ratings of how negative the victim of unfairness felt.

There were no significant differences in either boys' or girls' ratings. In a *t* test comparing boys' and girls' negative ratings of receiving an undeserved punishment, girls rated this experience as significantly more negative than did boys, $t(1, 85) = 2.0, p < .05$. Boys and girls did not differ significantly in their ratings of missing a deserved reward. The difference in ratings rather than absolute values was calculated to classify the children into those who rated the negative feelings for missing a reward worse than for unfair punishment. There were many more boys (47%) in this category than girls (25%), $\chi^2(2, N = 92) = 7.1, p < .01$.

To consider the impact of particular feelings, we categorized the responses to being a victim in four groups: generally negative, specifically sad, specifically angry, and other. The other category included responses of children who were unsure or thought the victim might feel happy, jealous, or strange. The distribution of these feelings of the victims of the two types of unfairness were similar for missing a reward and gaining a punishment (negative, 25%; sad, 48%; angry, 20%; other, 7%). Gender did not influence the type of feeling likely to be experienced by the unfair reward victim, $\chi^2(3, N = 92) = 1.5, p > .05$, or what the unfair punishment victim was likely to be feeling, $\chi^2(3, N = 92) = 7.39, p > .05$. The intensity of feeling did not differ significantly across feeling categories for unfair reward: negative, $M = 7.9$ (1 is low, 10 is high), $SD = 2.0$; sad, $M = 7.1, SD = 2.6$; angry, $M = 8.2, SD = 1.5$; and other, $M = 5.3, SD = 2.4$. The intensity of feeling did not differ significantly across feeling categories for punishment: negative, $M = 7.8, SD = 2.1$; sad, $M = 7.6, SD = 2.4$; angry, $M = 8.0, SD = 1.5$; and other, $M = 6.5, SD = 3$. Thus, the pattern was similar across unfair reward and unfair punishment, with anger being the emotion most intensely felt.

The type of feeling for the victim made no difference to the overall rating of how unfair the reward or the punishment stories were. There was no relation to mood induction for reward or punishment, nor any relation between affect categories and social skills ratings.

Strength of Feeling for the Beneficiary of Unfairness

Presumably, embarrassment or guilt is the socially appropriate feeling if one is rewarded for something one did not do or if one has avoided punishment for a transgression. However, the strength of this feeling might be related to whether one knew that another individual had not received the reward or had been punished instead. It was clear from the way that the stories were told and illustrated that the beneficiary was aware that there was a victim. Thus, the prosocial feelings of shame, embarrassment, or guilt might have been identified quite strongly. The types of feelings attributed to the beneficiary by the children participating in this study, however, tended not to be in this direction. As one girl commented: "I get in a fight but my brother gets the blame. I feel happy because I miss out on the blame." The children were not explicit regarding the negative feelings they would hypothesize. Only 7 children described the person avoiding

a deserved punishment as feeling guilty; other children who thought this story character might feel negative simply described the emotion as bad or sad.

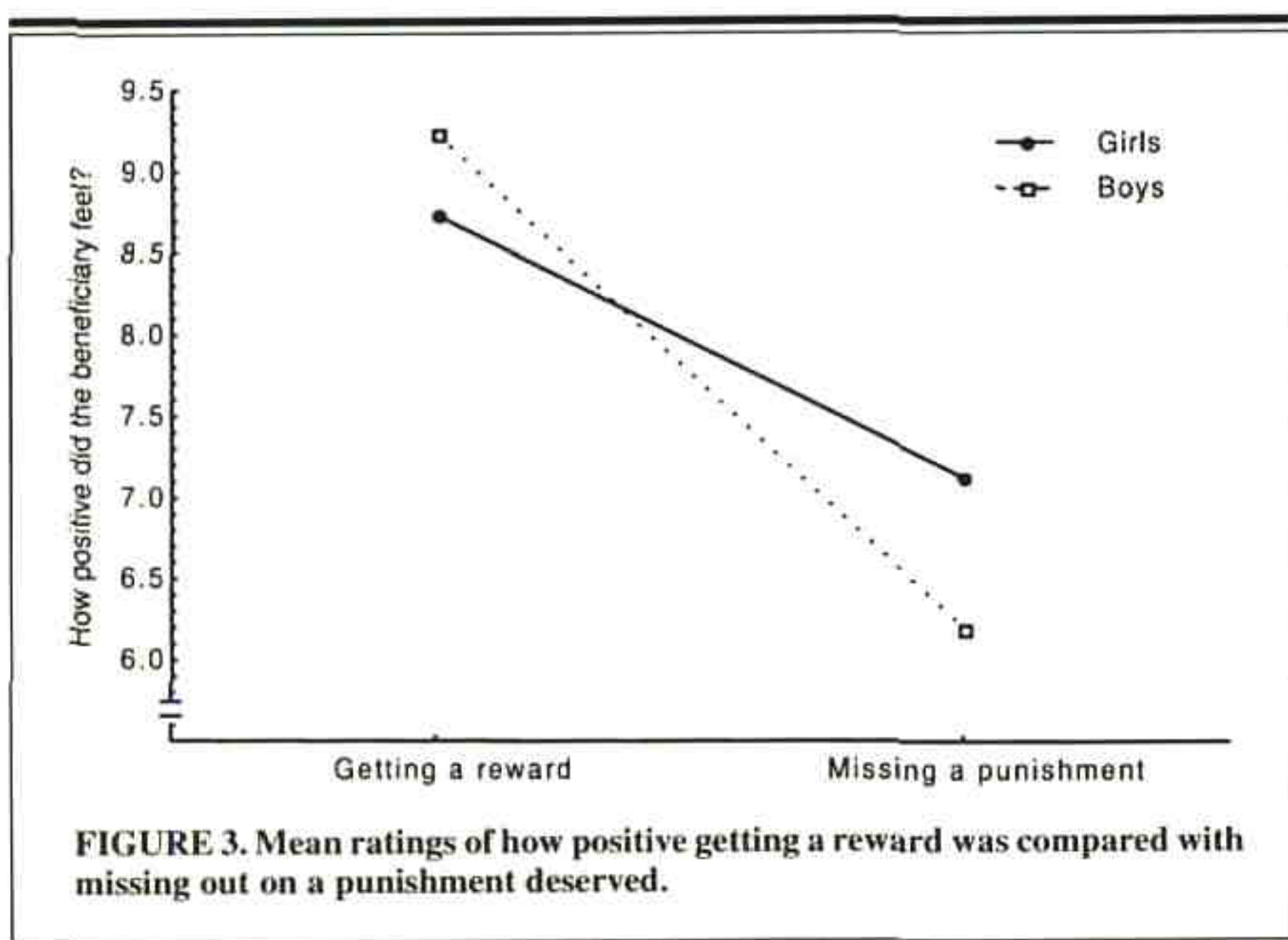
Once again, all negative feelings (sad, bad, upset) were grouped together, and all positive and neutral feelings (happy, didn't care) were grouped together and analyzed. Fifty-five participants (59%) rated the child who did not receive a deserved punishment as feeling positive, 35 (37%) rated the feelings as negative, and 3 (4%) did not know how the person might feel. Eighty-three children (89%) rated the child receiving an undeserved reward as feeling positive, 8 (9%) rated the feelings as negative, and 2 (2%) were not sure how the beneficiary would feel.

Participants were categorized into four groups according to how they rated the feelings of the beneficiaries: (a) judging both reward and punishment beneficiaries as feeling positive (52%); (b) judging reward beneficiaries as feeling positive and punishment beneficiaries as negative (39%); (c) judging reward beneficiaries as feeling negative but punishment beneficiaries as positive (8%); (d) judging both as negative (1%).

A chi-square statistic comparing the distributions of boys and girls in each of these four categories showed no difference in boys' and girls' responses about the feelings of the beneficiary who received an undeserved reward or who avoided a deserved punishment, $\chi^2(3, N = 92) = 1.0, p > .75$. Further analysis of children in Category A revealed that getting an undeserved reward was rated as significantly more positive than missing a deserved punishment, $t(45) = -4.9, p < .01$. The means are shown in Figure 3, which also shows the results for boys and girls separately; although it appears that girls revealed less differentiation between benefiting from unfair reward or from unfair punishment, the gender effect was not significant. The other categories cannot be analyzed in this way because they are qualitatively different answers. Getting an undeserved reward was generally considered more positive than missing a deserved punishment.

Relation to Social Competency Ratings

Social competency scores on the Social Skills Rating Form were converted to percentile norms and analyzed. There was no correlation between children's judgment of how unfair the stories were and teacher ratings of social skills, problem behavior, or academic performance. Social competency also was examined across groups of children who thought the reward story was more unfair, the punishment story was more unfair, and the two story types were equally unfair. There were no significant differences between these groups in terms of teacher ratings of their social skills, $F(2, 84) = 0.7, p > .05$, problem behavior, $F(2, 84) = 3, p > .05$, and academic performance, $F(2, 85) = 1, p > .05$. Using the same components of the prosocial ratings listed earlier, we found no relation between teacher ratings of the children and what the children thought the characters in the story might feel (all F values $> .05$). Social competency scores were not related to the children's responses about how the victim of unfairness in the reward and pun-



ishment stories would feel. Children's responses concerning the feelings of the beneficiaries of unfairness also were unrelated to their social competency scores from teachers.

Children's Verbatim Responses

In response to the question of why what happened in the story was unfair, the children were able to provide simple explanations of the general equality principle that it is the individual who performs the desirable or undesirable act who must be rewarded or punished. In some cases, however, they focused on the unreasonableness of the person doing the rewarding or punishing, thinking that this individual should be more tolerant or take greater care to understand the situation. With respect to the question about what could be done to make the situation more fair, most of the responses involved restitution by compensation for the victim ("Give a reward to the kid who found the wallet"), with much less emphasis on the beneficiary having to surrender undeserved gains ("Make him give the \$25 to the other kid").

The question of whether "anything like this" had happened to them tended to elicit incidents that were similar to the story content, rather than an unfair incident. An example of this category was: "I found a 19-karat gold necklace and it had a pendant on it that was pure silver and there was a police car driving by and I gave it to him. I felt good about it."

A second category was of unequal experiences occurring by chance or through life's circumstances: "When we're playing a game like rounders or baseball or something and everyone gets a turn but then the time runs out and you don't get to bat, I feel not good when that happens." "When I mowed the lawn and never got paid any pocket money because my Dad forgot, I felt sad."

A third and frequent category was the perception that parents favored another sibling, especially one of the opposite gender, or a younger child: "I had to do the dishes when I was sick, but my brother doesn't have to when he's sick." "Nothing like this has really happened to me because I'm the youngest, but my sister sometimes gets away with eating all the biscuits (*cookies*) and I don't, and I feel annoyed."

A subcategory under this general topic was when the siblings themselves do something unpleasant that can only partially be countered in some way: "My baby brother puts all his toys in our room (I share it with my sister) and we have to pick up all his stuff. It makes me feel angry." "My brother does mean things to me when I haven't even done mean things to him. I feel pretty bad but then I hit him really hard."

A fourth and also common category again involved siblings who deliberately get the child concerned into trouble, with the additional perception of parental discrimination: "My brother punches me and then he goes up to Mum and says that I punched him and then I get into trouble. I get really angry." "My younger sister is always doing things like this. She gets stuff out and I get yelled at because I didn't pick it up."

Discussion

Our initial idea that children exhibiting behavior problems in classroom contexts would judge not getting rewarded as worse than getting unfairly punished was not supported. These were, of course, typical schoolchildren, not selected for the presence of serious externalizing behavior. Although there was some spread of scores on the teacher ratings of social competence and behavior, such ratings may simply be too global and fall too frequently in the average range to be correlated with a specific facet of children's social cognition. This might explain why no relation was found between children's prosocial skills, as rated by teachers, and children's judgments of fairness.

The scenarios themselves certainly aroused the children's interest. Virtually all of them could think of similar situations—either directly comparable incidents or parallel examples of feeling upset because of unfair treatment. A particularly salient experience for children with siblings was an occasion in which a brother or sister got them into trouble or received special favors and privileges from parents. Children certainly had ready access to memories of these events and the negative feelings they engendered. However, our attempt to manipulate their mood or current affect by asking them to recount such incidents did not appear to influ-

ence their responses to the stories. By the second story, of course, the general influence of such a manipulation would have been lost, as at this stage it was inevitable that all the children were thinking of unfair situations.

Independent of the attempted mood manipulation, there was a strong gender effect in keeping with our original hypothesis regarding conduct problems. It was boys in general who showed a striking differential response to unfair reward and punishment. For them, it was worse to miss receiving an expected reward than to receive a punishment that was not deserved. Informally, our impressions are that for most adults, being punished without cause is seen as more unjust than not receiving a reward. The boys in this study, however, judged that missing a reward was not only more unfair in the abstract but also would make the character in the story feel worse than one who was unfairly punished. Both ratings of fairness and estimates of the story child's affective response were consistent in this regard: Girls judged the negative feeling of receiving undeserved punishment to be worse than boys did. There were no gender differences with respect to the negative feelings engendered by unfair reward. Independent of the actual levels of the ratings *and considering only children who judged the feelings of unfair reward as worse than the feelings of unfair punishment*, nearly 50% of the boys but only 25% of the girls fell into this category.

In the scenarios, because the wrong child received either reward or punishment, there was always a beneficiary of the unfairness, just as there was a victim. Because it was clear that the beneficiary knew that there was a victim, one would expect the beneficiary to feel guilt or discomfort. Some children in this study made that assumption, but most did not, interpreting instead the beneficiaries as feeling good about what they had gotten away with. In fact, only one child in the *entire sample provided a negative feeling for the beneficiaries of both unfair reward and unfair punishment*, although a substantial number (38%) did infer that a child who has avoided punishment by another child receiving it unfairly would feel negative about that. This general effect was related partly to vocabulary limitations, with the children tending to offer undifferentiated positive ("happy") or negative ("bad") descriptors, instead of more subtle labels such as frustrated, disappointed, relieved, or guilty. But more often it seemed that they did not presume that a beneficiary of an unfair situation might feel discomfort. At this juncture, we cannot tell whether the children themselves projected that this is how they *might feel in this situation or whether they merely had a pessimistic view of human nature and presumed that other children would feel happy for getting away with something*.

A common methodological problem in social cognition (judgment) tasks is that seemingly minor contextual details can be of importance, and some children in this study attended to features of the story that were not immediately obvious or relevant to an adult. Although in principle the concept of fairness should be independent of the actual undeserved reward or punishment, it is reasonable that children would judge a situation at least somewhat according to the magnitude

of the reward and punishment, as these participants did. Thus, it was useful to have two versions of each type of situation to reduce the influence of these contextual details. Harder to control was the possibility that the rewarding or punishing agent influenced the children's judgments, with unfair behavior by parents seemingly more negative than that of teachers or neighbors. It would be interesting to know whether children tend to hold parents to a higher standard of fairness than other adults in their lives. Yet according to their accounts of actual events, they had plenty of experience with what may have been unfair actions by their parents.

The children brought interesting moral arguments to bear on their social judgments of these situations. For example, the scenarios in which the innocent sibling is punished sometimes elicited the reaction that this child bears some responsibility for the behavior of the sibling who transgressed. It is likely that parents impose this sense of morality on their children by holding older children responsible for the actions of younger ones, as we have seen in previous research in which the child experiencing unfairness was the sibling of a child with a disability (Evans, Goldberg-Arnold, & Dickson, 1998). Birth order, however, was not related to any of the dependent variables in this study. In a few instances, it appeared the children were generating a higher-order level of justice. This also may come directly from parental teaching. For example, at least one child believed that if a person does the right thing (returns a lost wallet, for instance), then that should be sufficient reward and whether that person or some other person receives the material reward is less important.

In conclusion, there was evidence for differential judgments regarding the social cognitive appraisal, as well as the affective consequences, of the experience of unfair reward and punishment. However, this was not associated with global teacher ratings of conduct difficulties. There was a tendency for boys to be more sensitive to unfair reward situations than to unfair punishment; girls responded equally negatively to both. A simple manipulation designed to encourage an affective response by increasing the children's personal identity with such situations did not appear to influence the participants. Nevertheless, asking children to relate incidents of unfairness elicited a rich account of such occasions, with memory of associated negative feelings. The most representative experience, as might be expected, is believing that siblings are treated differently by parents and sometimes deliberately try to get each other into trouble. Although parents typically report that they make a special effort to ensure that they treat their children equally, it is likely that subtle differences in how adults interpret fairness, as well as more extreme differences between adults' intentions and their actual practices, result in children's experiences of life sometimes being unfair, which engenders at least some negative affect. It would be interesting to investigate the circumstances under which children then learn to pursue fairness in their own social relationships, as opposed to feeling satisfaction that they have gained social advantage.

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