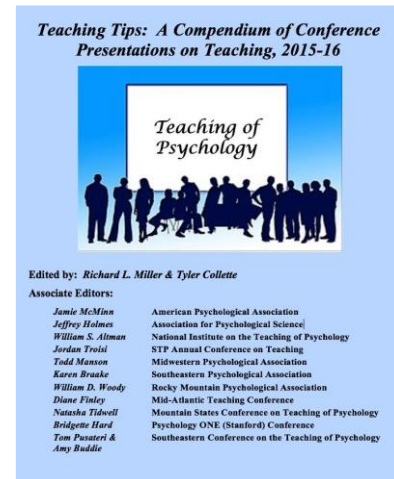


# Distributive justice: Engaging students with a story about scientific research, an appealing activity, and an animated discussion of Psychology's relevance to social justice.

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## Abstract:

Harnessing students' innate interest in morality, educators can deepen their understanding of psychology as a science while engaging them in passionate discussions about real-world issues. Introductory Psychology classes typically cover Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development, which suggests moral reasoning advances through increasingly sophisticated stages. Discussing William Damon's challenges investigating moral development during early childhood development, students gain valuable insights into the scientific method and real-world applications. An interactive classroom activity challenges students to think critically about complexities of fairness when distributing benefits, encouraging them to consider factors like equality, need, and merit. In-class discussions emphasize the relevance of psychology to our social world, covering topics like tax policies, wealth distribution, and affirmative action. Students engage in self-reflection and critical thinking while exploring cross-cultural differences in concepts of fairness. The lesson provided combines vivid storytelling and hands-on experiences, moving beyond rote memorization and fostering appreciation for the interconnectedness of psychological concepts in daily life. Ultimately, integrating distributive justice into the curriculum enriches students' understanding of psychology and its significance in addressing real-world issues.

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# Distributive Justice: Engaging Students with a Story About Scientific Research, an Appealing Activity, and an Animated Discussion of Psychology’s Relevance to Social Justice

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At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and the ensuing concentration of wealth, Catholic Jesuit priest Luigi Taparelli D’Azeglio (1857/2011) coined the term “social justice” to suggest a new moral relationship between nations and persons. How could societal benefits and burdens be distributed fairly? In a thought experiment, political philosopher John Rawls (1971) suggested that when designed behind a “veil of ignorance” everyone’s intrinsic worth is clear. Specifically, if society were designed with each member blind to the future elements of their identities (income, gender, ethnicity), everyone would be motivated to be fair. Practical questions about social justice continue to drive politics, as explicated in the slogan “We are the 99%” (Kain, 2011). But what does an on-going political, religious, and moral drama have to do with teaching psychology, especially for those who emphasize psychology’s scientific core? Here I describe how distributive justice has been studied empirically in psychology. I share an activity to augment curriculum on moral development.

*Figure 1. Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development within Piaget’s Stages of Development*

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development	
Pre-Conventional Moral Level (Pre-Operational Piagetian Reasoning ~ 2-7yr)	
Stage 0	The good is what I like and what I want it to be.
Stage 1	Punishment & Obedience Orientation
Stage 2	Instrumental Hedonism & Concrete Reciprocity
Conventional Moral Level (Concrete-Operational Piagetian Reasoning ~ 8-12yr)	
Stage 3	Orientation to Interpersonal Relations and Mutuality
Stage 4	Maintenance of Social Order, Fixedness of Authority
Post-Conventional Moral Level (Formal-Operational Piagetian Reasoning ~ 13yr+)	
Stage 5a	Social Contract, Utilitarian Law-Making Perspective
Stage 5b	Higher Law and Conscience Orientation
Stage 6	Universal Ethical Principal Orientation

Adapted from Colby et al., 1983

Introductory Psychology classes typically cover Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development, which proposes that moral reasoning advances through increasingly sophisticated stages (e.g., Colby et al., 1983). To parallel advances through Piaget's stages, Kohlberg typically studied individuals from 10 years of age into early adulthood (Figure 1). When William Damon (1977a) began studying pre-operational children using Kohlberg's vignettes, he faced his own dilemma and I share the vivid story with my students. Not one child under six years answered in a manner that could be scored, and not one under 10 reasoned beyond stage 1 (Damon, 1977a). How could he study the origins of children's moral reasoning and its relationship to other aspects of development? Considering Kohlberg's Heinz dilemma, he stepped back and contemplated:

Why, after all, should we expect an elementary school child to have rich or organized thoughts on the problems of a man deciding whether to steal a life-saving drug for his wife? At this point I began my research from a different direction, asking first of all what are the central features of a young child's social life, and then designing problems and dilemmas accordingly (Damon, 1977b, pg. 13).

Damon turned Rawls's thought experiment into a child-friendly measure. A school in need of supplies has a fair to sell children's artwork. It is so successful that the art teacher gets to decide how to divide the extra money (or ice cream) among her students. To begin class discussion, I created a quantitative version for high school or college students to consider prior to class (Figure 2).

*Figure 2. Quantitative Adaptation of Damon's Distributive Justice Task*

The art budget was cut in a school district and four enthusiastic high school seniors, along with their art teacher Dr. Smith, decide to raise money for the elementary school's art supplies. They make artwork to sell at a fair in town. It's a wonderful success! The elementary school children will have more art supplies than ever. The four students are off to four different colleges and Dr. Smith prepares to send them thank you notes. Dr. Smith realizes there's still \$72 left in the budget and it could be used to provide thank you gifts too, like gift cards for things students could use for college.

How much should Dr. Smith give to each student as a thank you gift?

Bay comes from the middle class side of town. Bay produced some artwork that raised some money.

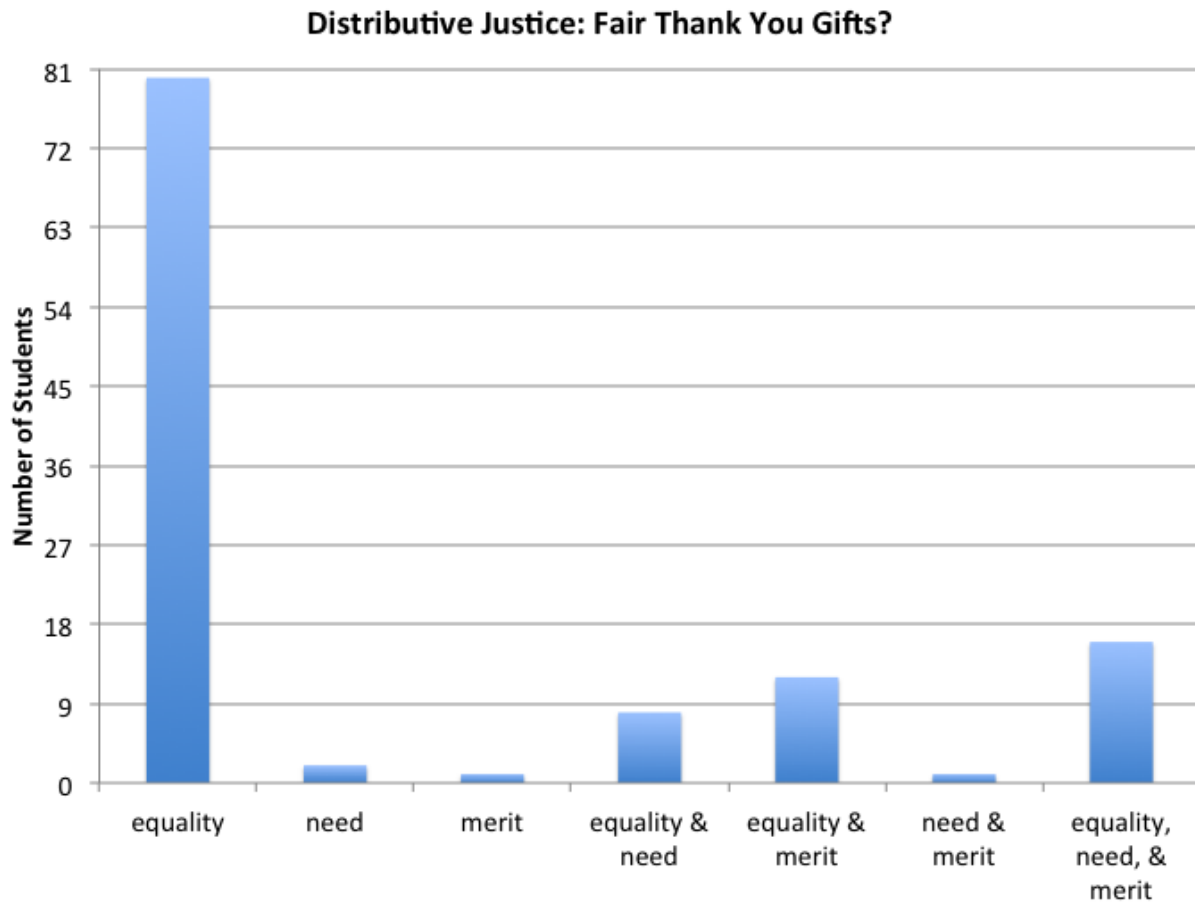
Dale comes from the very poor side of town and doesn't have much money. Dale produced some artwork that raised some money.

Hayden comes from the middle class side of town. Hayden produced a lot of especially good artwork that raised a very large amount of money.

Riley comes from the very poor side of town and doesn't have much money. Riley produced a lot of especially good artwork that raised a very large amount of money.

What is the fairest way to divide up the extra money among students? Though characters differ in their need and merit, most of my students divide the money equally (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Classification of Student's Strategies for Distributive Justice



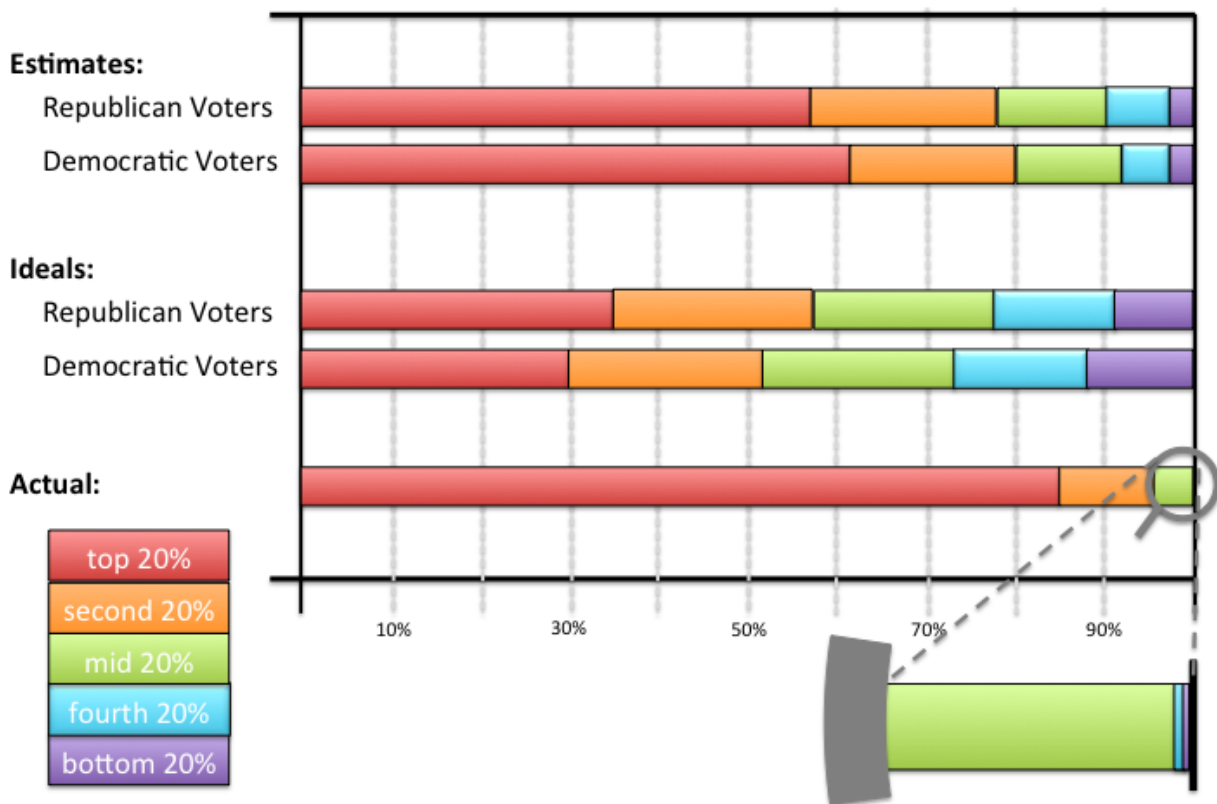
Damon examined children's reasoning further by asking questions like, "How much should the child who worked the hardest get?" He scored a progression of six developmental stages where four-year-olds typically consider a single dimension, and eight-year-olds wrestle with multiple dimensions (Damon, 1994). Four- to five-year-old children's reasoning in Damon's task is strikingly correlated ( $r = .71$ ) with their sharing behavior in naturalistic observations (McNamee & Peterson, 2001).

Is equality always the fairest basis for distributing benefits (or costs)? A real-world example I discuss in class is tax policy; what is the fairest way for Americans to pay taxes? Should we each pay *equally* (as we do with sales taxes)? Should those with greater *need* pay less (as we do with income taxes)? Should those who engage in conduct with less *merit* pay more (as we do with sin taxes)?

I also ask students to estimate the wealth of different quintiles of the US population along with their ideal distribution of wealth. During the discussion, I show students the estimated and idealized distributions of wealth by democratic and republican voters, along with the actual distribution of wealth (Figure 4). Though the figure shows expected differences between voter orientations (e.g., democrats prefer more equality than republicans), both democrats and republicans dramatically err in their estimates of American society, and both consider the ideal distribution of wealth far more equal than it is in reality. Discussions of distributive justice can go beyond money. For example, is affirmative action inherently unfair because of unequal treatment in the present, or is it a moral remedy for a need created through historical injustice?

Figure 4. Estimated & Ideal Distribution of Wealth by Voter Orientation

## Percent of Wealth Owned by Each Quintile in United States



Note. Adapted from Norton & Ariely, 2011.

Equality as fairness in considering moral dilemmas seems to be a cross-cultural universal, but how to incorporate merit varies. Children in Germany distributed rewards based on merit more often than children in an African hunter-gatherer culture (Schafer et al., 2015). When forced to choose between equality or merit, 37% of college students from the most prestigious Japanese universities distributed by merit, whereas only 17% from less prestigious universities did so (Kameda et al., 2010).

A quick addition of distributive justice to the introductory psychology curriculum provides many opportunities for students. Through vivid storytelling, we can enhance student learning (Grobman, 2015). Students understand the scientific method from the perspective of a researcher's struggles, experience an engaging activity, and have animated discussions about the relevance of psychology to the social world. Rather than memorizing isolated concepts, students experience the best of the science of psychology.

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