

No one likes a copycat, no matter where you live

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Even very young children understand what it means to steal a physical object, yet it appears to take them another couple of years to understand what it means to steal an idea.

University of Washington psychologist Kristina Olson and colleagues from Yale and the University of Pennsylvania discovered that preschoolers often don't view a copycat negatively, but they do by the age of 5 or 6. And that holds true even across [cultures](#) that typically view [intellectual property rights](#) in different ways.

"Physical property is something that can be seen, but intellectual property is something that can't be seen, and it's hard to understand, let alone place a value on that," Olson said. "So it's not surprising that it's so hard for younger kids to understand intellectual property rights."

The results are published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

The researchers wanted to know whether young [children](#) in different cultures placed more value on unique artwork or copies of someone else's work. They evaluated 3- to 6-year-old children in the United States, Mexico and China – chosen by the researchers based on the different emphasis each country places on the protection of intellectual property and ideas.

Researchers had children watch videos of puppets producing a unique

drawing or plagiarizing another character's drawing. The videos were in the children's native language (English, Mandarin or Spanish).

Each child watched three 30-second videos. At the beginning of each video, one puppet looked at what the other puppet was drawing. In one video, the puppet that peeked then created an identical drawing. In the second video, he created a similar drawing with the same theme but different colors and shape elements. In the third, the puppet that looked at the other's drawing drew a completely different picture.

After watching each video, the children rated how good or bad the puppets were.

Five- and 6-year-olds from all three cultures rated the [puppet](#) who copied the others' work negatively. However, 3- and 4-year-olds evaluated plagiarism much differently than the older children, as well as differently across cultures. Mexican preschoolers rated unique drawers more positively than the plagiarizers, but, American and Chinese 3- and 4-year-olds didn't distinguish much between characters who created original drawings and plagiarized ones. And Chinese preschoolers rated copycats more positively than those who drew something similar.

"Sometimes copying is good; for example, when we learn to write, we all learn this is how you make an A, so that's not considered plagiarism," Olson said. "That may be confusing to children, because sometimes we tell them to come up with novel ideas but other times they're supposed to copy. It's interesting to think about how kids are sorting that out."

The researchers chose to study children in the U.S., which has strong protections in place for intellectual property, and China, which did not until very recently (establishing its first patent law in 1984, more than 150 years after the U.S. and most of Europe). They also chose Mexico because it is in the middle of the spectrum in protecting [intellectual](#)

[property](#).

"This is a nice example of how we often think there are huge differences across cultures and that a lot of everyday judgments are colored by our culture. But, this study shows that even in very different cultures, the underlying psychology is sometimes quite similar," Olson said. "By age 5 or 6 across all of these cultures you find that kids think being a copycat is bad."

More information: www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0022096513002452

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